

North Carolina's Proposed ASD

Achievement School Districts comprise low-performing schools that are seized from local education administrators (LEAs) and taken over by the state, which appoints a superintendent to run the virtual district. He or she then selects a private entity like a charter school operator to run each school. The schools are not necessarily geographically close but all are deemed low-performing by the state.

North Carolina began issuing letter grades to schools in 2014. In 2015, the NC House included language [creating an ASD](#) in a legislative measure ([SB95](#)) that was left in the House Rules committee at the end of the 2015 session. The newly created [Select Committee on Achievement School Districts](#) began meeting in January 2016 to review ever-changing drafts of the [ASD proposal](#). In April 2016, the select committee voted to present the last draft to the full House Education Committee for consideration during the General Assembly's short session that began April 25, 2016.

Under the proposal, the state would use school grades to determine eligibility for inclusion in a new ASD of five elementary schools from around the state, and a committee headed by the lieutenant governor would choose the district's superintendent. The superintendent would then select the schools' operators, which would operate them under five-year contracts. Two new provisions included in the final ASD proposal draft created opportunities for innovation in districts that lose schools to the ASD, although there is no offer of state support for those plans.

One new provision allows districts that have a school taken over by the ASD to create an Innovation Zone for three of their other struggling schools. Innovation Zones will offer districts charter-like flexibility in order to improve student outcomes at those schools, but, crucially, the bill offers no funding for programs the districts deem necessary for underserved schools. The second new provision allows districts with schools qualified for ASD takeover but not included in the ASD to institute a "principal turnaround" model, which would require them to fire school principals and replace them after consulting with the ASD superintendent. The new turnaround principals would have five-year contracts, "significant compensation," and the authority to run their schools with charter-like flexibility regarding staffing and hours.

Concerns about ASDs

ASDs are troubling because the state is proposing to take over five locally controlled public institutions and place them under the control of unknown private, possibly even for-profit, entities.

Although improving under-achieving elementary schools is a worthy and imperative goal, forcing a district to either give up or close such a school could have negative outcomes for students and the community. There are many reasons schools earn poor grades from the state, so using a one-size approach for five schools that could be failing for completely different reasons is not likely to help. Handing funding to a "district" with no publicly elected or accountable local officials does not guarantee improvement and neglects North Carolina's constitutional promise that all students in these schools will have equal opportunity for a sound basic education.



Quick Facts: Achievement School Districts

Concerns about ASDs, which currently exist without particular success in Tennessee and New Orleans, are many:

- Charter school operators don't have experience taking over and running existing schools with geographic attendance zones since they typically start their own schools and select their own students.
- The success of charters themselves vary widely. This year, the state gave charters a higher percentage of A's and B's than public schools, but also a higher percentage of D's and F's.
- Many education experts believe that lower-performing schools are better served by keeping them in their local school systems and giving them more local flexibility and more resources for innovative education methods and family support services.
- Giving a private entity control of existing public schools, including the ability to fire staff, will introduce more uncertainty and less stability to our most vulnerable elementary schools.

Persistently failing schools must have remedies that positively affect student outcomes, and research has shown what it takes to successful in terms of at-risk students' achievement. Proven methods for helping struggling students include:

- Universal Pre-K;
- Access to health care (including vision and dental care) for at-risk students;
- Smaller classroom size and more one-on-one instruction;
- Experienced teachers trained in working with at-risk students especially in reading skills; and
- Access to strong instructional materials.

Child advocates, parents, and educators worry that children who already struggle academically could be at even greater risk of school failure in this drastic school takeover approach.

For more information and resources, visit our website.

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