

Frequently Asked Questions
about
Michigan's Priority Schools

General Questions

What is a Priority school?

Priority schools are those schools in the bottom 5% of a complete “top-to-bottom” list of schools that are now published every August. This placement is often indicative of minimal student outcomes in a number of subject areas over time, poor achievement coupled with dramatic declines in student performance or substantial achievement gaps, or all of these factors. As a result, Priority school districts need to develop a reform/redesign plan for the school that focuses on rapid turnaround as a way to dramatically improve student achievement.

How does this vary from a PLA (Persistently Low Achieving) school?

“Priority schools” replaces the previous designation of Persistently Low Achieving, based on the ESEA Flexibility Request. This new designation applies to the same group – the bottom 5% of schools in the state. However, the PLA list required a complex set of tiers and pools of schools to draw from, whereas the Priority school designation is based on the Top-to-Bottom listing of schools.

What does it mean to be a Priority school?

Priority schools are required to develop and implement a reform/redesign plan based on one of four intervention models, as a means for rapid turnaround in student achievement. These schools are given a number of supports to result in such a turnaround, and are placed under the supervision of Michigan's School Reform/Redesign Officer to affect such results. Priority schools are also required to utilize set-aside Title I funds, if they are a Title I school, to support the implementation of this plan and provide quality offerings to students.

Why do we have a Priority school list? Is it required by legislation?

MCL 380.1280.c requires that the Superintendent of Public Instruction publish a list of the lowest achieving 5% of all public schools in the state, and that these schools be placed under the supervision of the State School reform/Redesign Officer. Further, the ESEA Flexibility Request outlines federal requirements for these schools, and details a system of support intended to help these schools improve outcomes for students. Both of these documents also outline the timeline and governance considerations for schools that do not effectively implement their reform plans in a way that results in dramatic improvements in student performance.

Can a district have both Priority and Focus schools?

Yes, if individual schools are facing different kinds of improvement tasks. See the Supports and Requirements sections for specifics, and plan to treat each school according to its designation.

Identification of Priority Schools

How were Priority schools identified?

Based on Michigan's ESEA Flexibility Request, a school may be identified as a Priority school for the following reasons:

1. A school is among the bottom 5% of the Top-to-Bottom list. The official metric requires that Michigan include the bottom 5% of Title I schools. If the bottom 5% overall does not include 5% of the state's Title I schools (i.e. there are too few Title I schools in that group), the cutoff is set within the Top-to-Bottom list to a level that includes 5% of the total Title I schools.
2. A school was a SIG (School Improvement Grant) recipient in 2010 or 2011.
3. A school was identified as a PLA school in 2010 or 2011 (i.e. all previous PLA schools are classified as Priority schools while they are developing or implementing a reform plan per their original placement on the PLA list. Schools stay in this category for four years.

What are the components of the Top-to-Bottom ranking that identify Priority schools?

The calculation methodology is explained in detail in documents on the website for MDE's Bureau of Assessment and Accountability (BAA). In summary, the Top-to-Bottom uses achievement scores (scale scores, not proficiency rates); growth or improvement scores based on two-year growth for students in grades 3-8, and four-year analysis of scores at the high school level; and achievement gaps, based on the composite variation of individual students in each subject. Five subject areas are rated using these factors (math, reading, writing, science, and social studies), and these are averaged together to determine an overall standardized score for a school. For high schools, graduation rate is also factored into the overall score along with these subject areas.

How have the metrics for the Top to Bottom list changed from 2012 to 2013?

Based upon feedback from the field, it was determined that it was desirable to modify the Top-to-Bottom metrics to blunt the impact of outliers on the identification of focus schools. There were both statistical and policy rationales for blunting the impact of outliers on both ends. The statistical rationale was that there is more measurement error (or noise) in both the positive and negative ends of student score distributions. The policy rationale was that focus identification may inappropriately influence school configuration decisions. Based on consultations with stakeholders, it was recommended that the Top-to-Bottom metric be modified in the following ways:

1. Normalizing student z-score distributions.
2. Capping student z-score distributions at -2 on the lower end and at 2 on the upper end.
3. Exempting from focus designation any school whose bottom 30 group scores at or above the state average in at least two subject areas.

These changes were applied to the 2012-2013 Top-to-Bottom metric following the approval by USED in the amended February, 2013 ESEA Flexibility Request

(http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/ESEA_Flexibility_Request_FINAL_377829_7.pdf?20130726102936). The section that specifically details this modification is in Attachment 13.C and begins on page 521 of the document.

I want to see the data that took my Priority school through those steps.

A “lookup tool” is available at <http://mi.gov/ttb>. This downloadable Excel worksheet allows you to enter the name of a school, enter its school code and see the results of each of the steps above.

A worksheet is available at <http://mi.gov/prioritieschools/> that will lead you through the diagnostic steps that use these relative rankings to see where the school is doing better and worse than other schools at:

- **achievement** in each of the five tested areas (math, reading, writing, science and social studies)
- **improvement** in each of the tested areas, and
- **achievement gap** in each tested area. [This will be the area in which Focus Schools are well below the state average]

For questions that remain, please contact the Bureau of Assessment and Accountability help desk for individual help in walking through calculations. You can reach this office via email at mde-accountability@michigan.gov, or via phone at (toll free) 877-560-8378, select option 6 or at 517-373-8393.

How does the recent change in cut scores affect the Priority school calculation?

Because the calculations for achievement are based on scale scores (which compare a student/school’s performance to the state average) rather than percent proficient (which counts performance above a particular point – the “cut score”), the cut score is not used in the calculation for student achievement. The determination of the improvement score is, however, weighted for each student in the school based on changes in proficiency level from year to year. In order to fairly utilize this metric, the weighting applies the new cut scores to scale scores for previous years, so the change is relative, and effectively has little impact on this metric.

What years’ scores were used as the basis for student achievement in the Top-to-Bottom list?

For elementary and middle schools (who test in the fall) this year’s Top-to-Bottom list is based on averaging data from the last available school years: SY 2009-10 (tested Fall 2010) and SY 2010-11 (tested Fall 2011). For high schools (who test in the spring) this year’s list uses data from SY 2011-2 (tested Spring 2012) and SY 2010-11 (tested Spring 2011).

Are all schools included in the list?

Any school that has at least 30 Full Academic Year (FAY) students in each of the last two years in at least two tested content areas is ranked if it is open at the time the list is generated.

What if a school has been reconfigured?

CEPI receives and reviews requests for new school building entity codes on a regular basis. CEPI has adapted guidelines developed by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) of the U.S. Department of Education for making decisions about reconfiguration of schools and mergers of schools. CEPI also guards against closing a school code and opening a new code to serve the same student population and grade configuration.

Are all students included in the school’s calculations?

A student’s scores are “pointed” toward the school where his/her learning took place during the year in question. For instance, sixth graders who tested in a middle school in Fall 2011 but attended fifth grade at an elementary during 2010-11 would have their scores count for the elementary school for the Fall 2011 test results.

Students are included for accountability purposes in a school’s data only if they were Full Academic Year (FAY) students – present during 3 count days – during the year in question.

Requirements for Priority Schools

What are the consequences of being identified as a Priority school?

The consequences of being identified are deliberately formative and supportive rather than punitive; this is because Michigan’s waiver request builds its alternate accountability system on four premises:

- All means all; students are innate learners and all can be helped to learn
- Michigan learners must be College and Career Ready
- Our teachers and administrators are equal to the task
- Careful diagnosis, professional dialogue and differentiated support for struggling schools will make the needed difference

Our resulting theory of action is that careful diagnosis (consisting of data coupled with professional dialogue) will lead to customized interventions that support adult learning about (and use of) new ways of teaching and learning that will increase student achievement among our lowest performing students.

During the first year in which one or more of its schools is identified as a Priority school, a district is required to work with the school to develop a reform/redesign plan for the school, with a goal of rapid turnaround in student outcomes and achievement. The reform plan is based on the premise that changes in school policies and practices based on research and data analysis can affect the actions and practices of all stakeholders in the school, and can refocus instruction in a way that improves student learning and achievement. During the plan development process, a school engages in a facilitated, diagnostic “data dialogue” to identify major changes in teaching and learning practice capable of moving achievement levels among the lowest-performing students, and changes in school or district policies that affect the climate and culture of a school.

During the following three school years, the Priority school is required to implement its reform plan in a way that results in rapid turnaround of student achievement. Schools are monitored during this period for implementation of the plan, and provided technical assistance and other supports during this time to support the various components of the plan.

What are the intervention models that a Priority school can select for the reform plan?

Schools can select from one of the four following Intervention models identified by the U.S. Department of Education. These are specifically mentioned in legislation.

1. **Transformation Model** – Districts would address four specific areas:
 - a. Developing teacher and school leader effectiveness, which includes ensuring that the school has a principal with school turnaround competencies;
 - b. Implementing comprehensive instructional reform strategies;
 - c. Extending or repurposing time for instruction and teacher planning time and creating community-oriented schools; and
 - d. Providing operational flexibility and sustained support.
2. **Turnaround Model** – This would address similar issues to those mentioned above in the transformation model, and include other actions such as:
 - a. Ensure the school has a principal with demonstrated school turnaround competencies and replace at least 50 percent of the school’s staff;
 - b. Adopting a new governance structure; and
 - c. Implementing a new or revised instructional program.
3. **Restart Model** – Districts would close the school and reopen it under the management of a charter school operator, charter management organization, or educational management organization selected through a rigorous review process. A restart school would be required to enroll, within the grades it serves, any former student who wishes to attend.
4. **Closure Model** – Districts would close the low-achieving school and enroll the students who attended that school in other high-achieving schools in the district.

More information about the models can be found on the School Reform Office website.

How does our school go about selecting a model?

Schools and districts should dedicate an early period of the reform planning process to gathering and reviewing data to weigh against the various models. In addition to reading resources on the four models, as provided on the School Reform Office web site, Priority school district personnel should attend the August 13-14 Technical Assistance meetings, which will address these models and their requirements in detail.

Another school in our district had to create a reform plan last year. Can we just use their reform plan?

No. While some components of the reform plan may be similar, especially if practices can be implemented district-wide, such as teacher and leader evaluation practices, other aspects of the plan should be uniquely developed for the school based on data and practices observed in that school. The leadership, professional learning needs, school and classroom policies, and learning environment of any school are a unique reflection of the people and context of the school. As such, the reform plan should be tailored to those needs based on a range of data specific to the school.

How is the School Improvement Plan similar or different to the reform plan?

Both plans are written for multiple years and are considered “living” documents used to guide initiatives related to instruction, learning, and school culture and climate, and operational systems. The goal the school improvement process is incremental improvement over time. School improvement plans (SIPs) are used by schools to move from one stage to another with the goal of gradually shifting teacher practice and improving student achievement, as examples.

The goal of the reform plan is to bring about rapid school turnaround. The implementation of the school reform plan occurs in quick cycles and is a defining characteristic of school turnaround. Successful implementation of school reform plans requires that schools focus on a few high-priority goals to launch the turnaround process.

Do Priority schools have to address all of the requirements of the model?

Yes. The requirements within each model must all be addressed in the reform plan. The timeline for addressing these requirements should be appropriate to lead to rapid turnaround, but do not require every aspect of the plan to be implemented at the same time.

What are the “implementation indicators”?

Each requirement of the reform plan models has a set of associated implementation indicators. These indicators are outcomes-based statements derived from the intervention model requirements that would illustrate effective implementation of the plan, no matter what details the school and district choose to include in their plan. The School Reform Office will monitor the implementation of approved reform plans.

Questions about the Models and Requirements

Can we choose which model we wish to use?

Yes. However, the model should be appropriate to your school’s needs. More information about selecting a reform model, including a decision tool from the Center for Improvement and Innovation, can be found at the School Reform Office website at <http://mi.gov/mde-reform>.

What is the definition of increased learning time? Does this include before and after-school time?

Increased learning time” means using a longer school day, week, or year schedule to significantly increase the total number of school hours to include additional time for (a) instruction in core academic subjects including English, reading or language arts, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography; (b) instruction in other subjects and enrichment activities that contribute to a well-rounded education, including, for example, physical education, service learning, and experiential and work-based learning opportunities that are provided by partnering, as appropriate, with other organizations; and (c) teachers to collaborate, plan, and engage in professional development within and across grades and subjects.

Previously, priority schools who selected the Transformation or Turnaround Intervention Models were required to increase learning time. This meant that schools must add additional time to the school day, week, or year to significantly increase the total number of instructional hours. On March 5, 2013 the United States Department of Education (USDOE) released an addendum that revises the previous August 3, 2012 *ESEA Flexibility Frequently Asked Questions* document. **The revised ESEA Flexibility now allows schools to redesign their current schedule/calendar and repurpose time as a way to increase instructional time.** Redesigning the school day may include reducing transition time between classes or reducing a four section lunch period to three, resulting in an additional 20-30 minutes of instructional time each day.

The option to redesign the school day is not an option for schools receiving School Improvement Grant (SIG) funds. A school that receives SIG funds to implement a Transformation or Turnaround model must continue to meet the requirement for providing increased learning time and may not simply redesign its school day. If a Priority School applies

for and is awarded a School Improvement Grant in the future, they will be required to add additional time to the school day, week, or year to increase the total number of instructional hours.

Does the selection of one of the models void the union contract?

No. It is recognized that negotiations may be required to implement all or portions of a given model. Recent legislation passed in Michigan June 2011 has eliminated from collective bargaining the following topics: 1) policies governing teacher placement or impact of personnel decisions; 2) an employer’s performance evaluation system; decision about a policy for discharging or disciplining employees subject to the tenure law, and the discharge or discipline of an employee; 3) classroom observation decisions; 4) a performance-based method of compensation; and 5) decisions about parental notification of ineffective teachers. (For further discussion of this topic, please see question F-7 of the Federal SIG Grant Frequently Asked Questions document at <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/faq.html>.)

Timelines for Planning and Implementation

When does the school have to submit the reform plan?

Schools must submit the reform plan within 90 days of being placed under the supervision of the School Reform Officer by the Superintendent for Public Instruction. On August 26, 2013, newly identified priority schools will be placed under the supervision of the State Reform Office. The school has 90 days to submit a reform/redesign plan to the School Reform Office. For 2013 Priority schools, the reform/redesign plan must be submitted by November 25, 2013.

If a reform plan is not approved, the school has an additional 30 days from the notice of the disapproval to revise and resubmit the plan.

Can a school revise its plan? If so, how long does a school have to revise its plan?

There are two ways a school may revise their plan. If the plan is not approved after the initial review, schools will have 30 days from the date of announcement of the disapproval from MDE to revise the plan. Schools in this situation will have until January 30, 2014 to submit their revised plan.

Once a plan is approved, a school can request a change in the plan at any point during the implementation of the plan. However, schools cannot waive any of the reform requirements. Any modifications to the plan need to be based upon a changed context or situation, and will need to work with the School Reform Office to come to consensus on the revisions

The School Reform Office may also request a change in the plan if a plan component cannot effectively be implemented by the school, or if the implementation of the plan is not leading to the desired outcome in a reasonable timeframe.

How long is a school supervised by the School Reform Officer?

The School Reform Officer supervises the development and implementation of the reform plan for up to four including the first year of planning. The School Reform Officer does not oversee day-to-day operations, but does provide guidance and require implementation of the reform plan per the initial submission and to address the reform model requirements. If the School Reform Officer notes substantial progress and multiple years of improved student achievement, including no longer being among the bottom 5% of the Top-to-Bottom list, the SRO may elect to

monitor progress less frequently for the remainder of the reform plan implementation.

Supports for Priority Schools

What supports are available for Priority schools?

Priority schools receive a wide variety of supports to assist with the development and implementation of the reform plan. The range of services and supports varies depending on the Title I status of the school, and the number of years the school is identified as a Priority school.

All Priority schools must develop a reform plan in accordance with MCL 380.1280c and the provisions of the ESEA Flexibility Request. Schools receive support in the development of this plan through technical assistance provisions of the School Reform Office (SRO). These include meetings, webinars, and access to technical information and SRO staff to provide specific guidance and feedback in the development of the plan. This support addresses both the specific requirement components as well as support for the quality of the plan and the ability to effectively implement the plan to turnaround student achievement.

In addition, Priority schools receive a number of additional supports free of cost during plan development and implementation over a four-year period, including the following:

- Access to online professional learning resources specific to school turnaround and improvement,
- Participation in technical assistance professional learning events and conferences, including networking meetings, leadership academies, and targeted resources,
- Access to the Surveys of Enacted Curriculum for all core teachers in the school,
- Participation in the Superintendent’s Dropout Challenge,
- Access to data tools and supports to analyze progress,
- Access to district resources such as the District Toolkit and Educational Resource Survey

Title I eligible Priority schools are also able to receive additional supports, including:

- An Intervention Specialist from Michigan State University, who can facilitate various aspects of plan development, as well as provide technical assistance using customized data tools provided to the school,
- Access to the Statewide System of Support, which includes supports from MDE and ISDs, including School Improvement Facilitators, to help guide instructional and school-wide components of the reform plan,
- Data packets on school achievement outcomes, demographics, and other data resources to support the school in consideration of the various reform efforts,
- Access to Title I specific events such as networking meetings, the School Improvement Conference, and other supports.

Who is the intervention specialist, and what does this person do for a Priority school?

Priority schools that are eligible for Title I funds may choose to receive the support of an Intervention Specialist. This individual is provided to the school and district free of charge through a collaborative effort between the Michigan Department of Education and Michigan State University (MSU). The Intervention Specialist is trained and supervised by MSU to provide technical assistance to Priority schools and districts. After a school is identified as a Priority school, the Intervention Specialist is assigned to the school to facilitate a “data dialogue” to explore the strengths and needs of the priority school, and to use this process to assist the school

in the development of the reform plan.

Following the approval of the reform plan, the Intervention Specialist continues working with the Priority school during the implementation of the plan, continuing to provide technical assistance and support regarding the implementation of the plan. The Intervention Specialist also acts as a coordinator and liaison with the school and district, as well as other organizational entities, such as MDE and the local ISD. The Intervention Specialist will also work with the school to document the implementation of the plan, providing evidence that is required for review of the school's efforts by the School Reform Office.

Exit Criteria

If a school is no longer in the bottom 5% of the Top-to-Bottom list, does it get “released” from implementing the reform plan?

No. The placement in the bottom 5% of the Top-to-Bottom list is only used to identify new Priority schools each year. Once identified at first, a school is required to develop the reform plan in the first year, and implement that plan for the next three years, regardless of status. However, if a school is off the bottom 5% for two years in a row, the frequency of monitoring by SRO is reduced.

Priority schools are required to demonstrate growth and improvement. How will these be determined and measured?

Priority school improvement is measured in both reform plan implementation and related leading indicators of rapid school turnaround. The determination of such growth, as well as the decisions regarding school oversight related to this growth, vary as a school progresses through the reform plan process, as listed below:

- Year 1 (planning) – Because of the nature of the planning focus and possible timeline for testing in schools, no growth indicators are applied during this year. However, schools use this time to gather metrics for baseline levels for leading indicators and other relevant data to be used in plan implementation. Improvement in achievement is helpful, but not required.
- Year 2 (implementation) – Schools identify target values for ten leading indicators (instructional time, participation in standardized assessment, dropout rate, course completion / retention, student attendance, number and percent of students completing advanced courses, discipline incidents, truancy rate, distribution of teachers by performance level, and teacher attendance) that are measured by the school over the course of the year to determine progress. Schools will also implement components of their approved reform plan over three years. Evidence of implementation is gathered by both school personnel and SRO monitors, as well as through any other documentation or information gathering efforts of intervention specialists or ISD school improvement facilitators that are working with the school on reform efforts. Data on leading indicators and plan implementation are combined and weighted (20% for leading indicators and 80% for implementation indicators) to determine a school's overall progress.
- Year 3 (implementation) – Similar to above, schools will update target values for leading indicators and identify appropriate implementation indicators for this year, which count for 20% of the overall progress score. However, implementation is weighted as only

55% of the overall progress indicator with the remaining 25% being applied to lagging indicators and student achievement outcomes. In addition, an overall improvement in student achievement in all subjects needs to be met toward moving the school to the statewide 85% proficiency target in 2022. If these are not progressing at this level, schools may achieve “safe harbor” for this metric.

- Year 4 (implementation) – Same as year 3, however, a final decision regarding oversight will take place after student achievement scores are available at the end of the school year. Schools making satisfactory progress on implementation and necessary progress toward 85% proficiency in 2022 will be released to their local district to continue reform and improvement efforts without oversight of the SRO. Those not making adequate progress will be placed in the State School Reform Redesign District.

What happens if a school is not making satisfactory progress on plan implementation?

MCL 380.1280c states that if a school is not making satisfactory progress or is unable to produce an approval plan, MDE shall issue an order placing the school in the State School Reform/Redesign District.

Funding Considerations

Are Priority schools eligible for School Improvement Grants (SIG)?

Only Title 1 and Title 1 eligible schools can apply for school improvement grants. Currently all federal school improvement funds received by Michigan have been granted to schools. However, Michigan is in the process of filing an amendment in order make SIG funds available to schools that will begin another three-year SIG implementation in the 2013-2014 school year.

Can a school be designated as a Priority school if they are not a Title I school?

Yes. MCL380.1280c requires MDE to publish a list yearly identifying lowest achieving 5% of public schools in the state by September 1. The schools are designated as Priority schools and are required to develop and implement a school redesign plan

How does Priority school designation affect Title I funding for our school or district?

Districts with schools that are identified as Priority schools are required to set aside 20 percent of their Title I funds to support the students in need within their Priority schools. Uses of these funds could include:

- Support of increased learning time
- Implementation of rapid turnaround strategies to accelerate whole-building performance
- Professional learning aligned with needs
- District-level process improvement consultation

All regular Title I rules apply for set-aside

In addition to the district set-aside, a 10 percent building level set-aside is also required for Priority schools. This funding must be used to support one or more school-level interventions that are identified in the reform/redesign plan.

When do we have to set aside funds for reform related efforts? How can a school change Title I funding plans if identified as a Priority school?

After a school is identified as a Priority school (in August 2013 for new schools), the school needs to set aside funds at the local level to accommodate the set-aside requirements for the upcoming school year (and each subsequent year). The Office of Field Services will open access to the consolidated funding application through the grant management tools in early September, so that schools can make the necessary adjustments to the budget at that time. It is encouraged that schools that are in the lowest 15% of the Top-to-Bottom list any given year address this set-aside within their consolidated application before it is submitted. Because of the set-aside nature, schools can then apply the funds elsewhere as needed if they are not identified as Priority schools when announced in the summer.

How do the plans submitted for Title I relate to the reform/redesign plans?

As mentioned above for set-asides, schools and districts should apply these Title I funds to efforts specified in the reform plans. Subsequent budgets should utilize Title I funding in appropriate ways that supports the implementation of the school's reform plan.

How can we implement a plan without additional funding?

Several Michigan's Priority schools are improving significantly despite receiving no additional funding. Schools should reallocated existing funds to support the implementation of redesign plans.

My school has a SIG grant and is on the 2013 list. What part of the Priority School requirements and supports apply to us?

If your school receives Title I funds, you are required to set-aside annual percentages of both district and school-level allocations to implement the required activities for priority schools. One activity must be chosen to implement at the district level, and another must be chosen to implement at the school level. Please visit www.michigan.gov/prioritieschools for more information on the set asides.

My school has a SIG grant but is NOT on the 2013 list. Priority School requirements and supports don't apply to us, right?

Your SIG plan continues in effect for its full three years, and you should continue to work with MDE's SIG monitoring and oversight process. Once you became SIG-eligible, by being named to the Persistently Low Achieving list, your school fell under the oversight and supervision of the State Reform Office for the full four years provided in law. At the end of your 3 year SIG grant, The State Reform Office will continue to monitor progress in order to make an exit decision at the end of the four year period. Neither set-aside requirements nor MI-Excel support apply to you, unless you choose to purchase MI-Excel services with your SIG funds.