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Four Tacoma middle schools identified among lowest-performing 5 percent of state schools, targeted for federal improvement program

The state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction has tentatively identified four Tacoma middle schools – Giandrone, Hunt, Jason Lee and Stewart – among the lowest-performing schools in Washington based on student reading and math scores on standardized tests over the last three years.

As a result, all four schools qualify for a federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) program that will dramatically alter their staffing and learning environments and bring federal funds to help with the transitions.

Based on the federal guidelines, the Tacoma School Board must choose one of the following school improvement options for each school:

- **Turnaround.** Replace the principal and at least 50 percent of the staff.
- **Restart.** Open the school under a third-party education management organization, such as a charter school. (Note: Since Washington state doesn't allow charter schools, this isn't an option for Tacoma.)
- **Closure.** Transfer students to other high-performing schools in the district.
- **Transformation.** Reform the entire instructional environment, develop teacher and school leader effectiveness, reward teachers based on student performance, increase community engagement and extend learning time.

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To qualify for a share of the \$17 million pool of federal funds allocated to Washington schools, Tacoma Public Schools must decide on an improvement model for each school and submit a grant application by March 5. The grants, which OSPI will begin disbursing April 1, range from \$50,000 to \$2 million per school.

Superintendent Art Jarvis will recommend to the school board that the district match each of the four middle schools with the following models:

- **Hunt: Closure.** Decreasing enrollment over time has given Hunt the smallest enrollment of all middle schools. This model allows the district to shift students (roughly 300) to surrounding schools with higher performance. Then it allows for the construction of a new Hunt, as recently approved by voters, so the school can reopen with a new educational program, new leadership and new staff.
- **Giaudrone & Stewart: Turnaround.** This model allows both middle schools to transition to new programs of enhanced academic rigor that require more teachers with specialized training. Giaudrone would shift to an International Baccalaureate program, which follows a global curriculum built around real-world applications. Stewart would shift toward a curriculum based on Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM).
- **Jason Lee: Transformation.** The school has already embarked on academic and program transformations with a new principal this school year. This model allows the district to enhance the work already being done by encouraging community partnerships and an extended learning day without replacing the staff.

Public Involvement

- The school board will host a study session on the School Improvement Grant process at 5 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 25. Immediately following, as part of its regular meeting, the board will take public comment on the issue.
- On Monday, March 1, the district will host an open house on this process from 5 to 7 p.m. at Lincoln High School. The open house will feature four separate stations – one for each of the middle schools – so members of the public can get their questions answered. The district will collect written comment cards from attendees to provide to the school board.
- The school board will conduct a special meeting Thursday, March 4, to vote on the final model for each school.

“Clearly the concept behind this federal initiative is to create improvement from what U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan describes as ‘disruptive change,’” Jarvis said. “Although we might have designed a different process, we recognize that sometimes disruptive change is necessary. We are committed to the changes even though they are disruptive to students, parents, teachers, staff and the district.”

Test scores from the four middle schools indicate poor performance in math contributed significantly to their overall identification on the OSPI list. In addition, the four schools represent some of Tacoma’s lowest-income areas.

“Even before OSPI informed us of the school rankings – based on our own analysis and the analysis of outside experts we brought in to conduct independent reviews – we’ve known we had specific issues with math and the achievement gap,” Jarvis said.

The Tacoma Public Schools new administrative team Jarvis assembled late last year already had three district-wide initiatives under development – Achievement Gap Plan, Math Curriculum Upgrade, Curriculum & Instruction Reorganization. These initiatives aim to improve the education quality at not just these four schools but for students throughout the district.

The professional development associated with the Curriculum & Instruction Reorganization, under the leadership of Carla Santorno, deputy superintendent for teaching and learning, will result in improvements far beyond the four schools, Jarvis said.

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For more information

- Tacoma Public Schools: www.tacomaschools.org
- The Department of Education’s Title I School Improvement Grants program: <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/factsheet.html>
- The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act: <http://www.recovery.gov/Pages/home.aspx>
- Elementary and Secondary Education Act (No Child Left Behind): <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html>
- Adequate Yearly Progress: <http://www.k12.wa.us/ESEA/AdequateYearlyProgress.aspx>
- The State Board of Education’s accountability program: <http://www.sbe.wa.gov/documents/2010.01.04%20Final%20Accountability%20Memo.pdf>