Setting District-Level Conditions for Successful Turnarounds

What does it really take to turn around chronically underperforming schools?

Analysis and Recommendations from the report produced by Mass Insight Education & Research Institute, Inc.

— Developed under a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation —
What do leaders of turnaround schools need in order to succeed?
The Turnaround Challenge

Why America’s best opportunity to dramatically improve student achievement lies in our worst-performing schools

New Research, Recommendations, and a Partnership Framework for States and School Districts

Prepared through a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
The story of school turnaround to date: *marginal change = marginal results*

The Protracted Tale of Massachusetts' First Chronically Under-Performing School

- **1998 and 1999:** Critically low MCAS scores
- **Spring 2000:** Referred for State panel review
  - **May:** Review decision deferred; $25K for planning
- **October:** School declared Under-Performing
- **1998:** 4% Proficient
- **2005:** 8% Proficient
- **January 2001:** State fact-finding review
- **July:** BOE approves improvement plan
- **May 2003:** Two-year follow-up review: decision on status deferred
- **October 2004:** School declared Chronically Under-Performing
- **February 2005:** Assessment of district or school capacity to implement improvement plan
- **Fall 2005:** America’s Choice begins working in Kuss Middle School and 3 feeder elementary schools

THE GRAPH: 8th grade math scores on Massachusetts MCAS exam for Kuss Middle School, Fall River, MA. Students in the Proficient and Advanced categories were 4% in 1998 and failed to rise above 8% by 2005.
Every state’s challenge: breaking the seemingly unbreakable connection between poverty and underperformance.
What makes it seem possible: some schools dramatically beat the odds
The key intervention question:

How do we take the DNA of high-performing, high-poverty schools and distribute it successfully at scale?
Task 1: Learn from schools that are proving \textit{it can be done}…

…and from reform strategies that are proving to be \textit{conclusively inadequate}
The “What’s Being Taught?” schooling model: *keep up with the curricular conveyer belt*

The “What’s Being Learned?” schooling model in high-performing, high-poverty schools: *we commit to helping each of you succeed*
How do high-performing, high-poverty schools do it? They foster students’ *readiness to learn*; focus staff’s *readiness to teach*; and expand their *readiness to act*.
Effective schools serving disadvantaged students show these characteristics:

A clear understanding of student needs:
- Preparedness: skill levels of entering students
- Relationships: from “us/them” and “my grade/your grade” to “we/all”
- Relevance: making the learning incentive real
- Environment: social support and community connectedness

Well-integrated strategies and the capacity to deliver them:
- Rigor: higher-expectation curriculum linked to standards
- Assessment: focusing on what’s being learned, not taught
- Differentiation: structured support tuned to student needs
- Instructional capacity: professional culture of teaching & learning
- Leadership capacity: team-based management of improvement

Conditions and incentives that support the work:
- Freedom to act: authority over money, time, people, program
- Professional HR norms & mission-driven incentives
But our current intervention strategies are failing: nearly 5,000 schools in “Restructuring” by 2010

Figure 1B  Nearly 5,000 Schools Are Projected to Be in Restructuring by 2010

Projections are based on actual 2005-2006 data for schools in Restructuring Status under NCLB with the assumption that the rate of schools leaving that status will remain constant over the next four years. Source of 2005-06 data: Center on Education Policy (2006).
Task 2:

*Probe the root causes* behind the failure of our current intervention policies and strategies
What’s Stopping You?
Create a map of the design challenges in your way

**Human capacity**
- Adequacy of teacher workforce
- Adequacy of top and distributed team leadership
- Adequacy of outside support system

**Operating conditions**
- Freedom to act: authority over key resources (money, time, people, programming) to make mission- and data-driven decisions
- Freedom from unproductive or overlapping compliance burdens
- Incentives that drive adult (and student) behavior

**Resources**
- Adequacy of time for learning
- Adequacy of time for teacher planning, collaboration, PD
- Adequacy of resource support in general (class size, facilities, etc.)
The challenge: virtually no high-performance work is being done in high-poverty settings at scale.
Instead: Most scaled-up reform has been limited to providing help for incremental *program change*.
Some interventions have also focused on *changing people* as well as programming.
New experiments in some districts are requiring changes in operating conditions as well.
Where we should all be aiming: comprehensive, “new-world” turnaround that includes program, people, and conditions change.
Wasn’t NCLB supposed to change all of this? Why are we still doing small-change reform even in schools crying out for major change?

- **Lack of leverage:** No real help from NCLB; incremental reforms remain the common choice
- **Lack of capacity:** In state agencies, districts, schools, partners
- **Lack of exemplars:** No successful models at scale, no real consensus even on definitions
- **Lack of public will:** Failing schools have no constituency; hence, insufficient funding to date
Understanding NCLB’s options…

*Increasing comprehensiveness of change* →

**CONDITIONS CHANGE**

**GOVERNANCE CHANGE**

**MANAGEMENT CHANGE**

**PEOPLE CHANGE**

**PROGRAM CHANGE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Revision</td>
<td>Theory: program needs improvement</td>
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<td>NCLB OPTION 2</td>
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<td>Theory: best to circumvent entire system</td>
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<td>NCLB OPTION 1</td>
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Although these are two of NCLB’s restructuring options, our research shows they are insufficient to produce effective turnaround.

Research found Conditions Change to be a crucial element for effective turnaround.
... and the choices being made in the field

*Increasing comprehensiveness of change* →

- **Conditions Change**
  - Governance Change
  - Management Change
  - People Change
  - Program Change

**Revision**
- Theory: program needs improvement
  - NCLB Option 5

**Reconstitution**
- Theory: staff is insufficiently skilled
  - NCLB Option 2

**Contract Management**
- Theory: change school management, along with program, people, conditions
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**Charter Conversion**
- Theory: best to circumvent entire system
  - NCLB Option 1

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*Popularity of choice is inversely proportional to the comprehensiveness of change*

- CA: 93%
- MI: 76%
- MI: 28%
- CA: 61%
- MI: 14%
- MI: 2%
- CA: 0%
- MI: 0%

Each option applies to schools retained and restructured, as well as schools closed and reopened.

- Research found Conditions Change to be a crucial element for effective turnaround

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Intervention Taxonomy #2
These gaps have led to state strategies that are insufficient to meet the challenge:

**Insufficient incentives for educators to choose major change**
- Too few *positive incentives*: reasons to opt into real transformation
- No *negative incentives*: unattractive consequences for inaction
- Lack of aggressive, clear performance targets

**Insufficient comprehensiveness, intensity, and sustainability**
- No state engagement in changing *conditions* – rules for adults
- No overall “people strategy” – developing *capacity* for turnaround
- No school *clustering*: limits effectiveness and scale
- All “loose,” no “tight”: e.g., more systematic on curriculum, PD
- Limited partner support: “light touch,” small scale, fragmented
- Limited district connection to school improvement effort

**Insufficient commitment from the state**
- Lack of high-visibility public and private sector commitment
- SEA lacks sufficient flexibility, authority, resources
Task 3: Operationalizing the Readiness Triangle

Drawing from all of this analysis – identify the non-negotiables for effective turnaround of failing schools at scale
The 3 ‘C’s of a comprehensive, coherent state turnaround initiative

1. **Conditions**
   - Change the rules and incentives governing people, time, money, & program

2. **Capacity**
   - Build turnaround resources & human capacity in schools and lead partners

3. **Clustering**
   - Organize in clusters by region, need, or type -- where new conditions apply and states/districts create special capacity
Conditions Change:
Outside-the-system approaches, applied inside the system
Key elements in turnaround zones, triggered by the conditions changes:

1. **More time:** for student learning and teacher collaboration
2. **More flexibility to shape school staff and lead the turnaround:** for principals and school leadership teams
3. **More pay and professional incentives:** for teachers and administrators
Capacity-Building/Internal (school leadership): Improving turnaround skills among school leaders

A state effort to recruit and train school leaders who can:

1. Concentrate on a few changes with big, fast payoffs
2. Implement proven practices first; ask forgiveness later
3. Communicate a clear, positive vision
4. Collect, personally analyze, use data well
5. Enlist key influencers to support major change
6. Build culture of disclosure in open-air meetings
7. Require all staff to adopt changes – not optional
8. Act in relentless pursuit of goals, touting progress only as a passing way-station

Adapted from Kowal and Hassel, *Turnarounds with New Leaders and Staff*, Learning Point Associates, 2005,
Capacity-Building/External (integrated partners): Addressing the “projectitis” afflicting school reform

"Old World" Intervention Capacity & Roles: Fragmented, Competing Improvement Projects

State Consultants

District Mandates

One School

Many Providers & Partners
A new model: deeply embedded lead turnaround partners, integrating the work of other providers

"New World" Capacity & Roles within a Comprehensive Turnaround Framework

- State
- District
- School
- Lead Turnaround Partner
- Supporting Providers

State & District Turnaround Support
# Building partner capacity: A typology of current roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comprehensive Partners</th>
<th>“Point Solution” Partners</th>
<th>School Support Organizations (SSOs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SMOs</strong></td>
<td><strong>RSOs</strong></td>
<td><strong>Curriculum, Academic Support, and Intervention</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Management Organizations</strong></td>
<td><strong>Reform Support Organizations</strong></td>
<td><strong>Student and Community Support</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMOs, EMOs, or other partners with charter-like authority that manage existing or replacement turnaround schools</td>
<td>Technical assistance partner with a more comprehensive approach working closely with districts and individual schools</td>
<td>Partner creates methodology around: - Content / curriculum - Assessment - Professional Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant control over implementation of the model, conditions, and operation of the school(s)</td>
<td>Given some authority based on “non-negotiables” specified by their model</td>
<td>Little-to-no accountability for outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Held accountable for results</td>
<td>Accountability for results either shared or remains entirely with district</td>
<td>Partner supports school(s) and students by providing wraparound services including: - Student support services (e.g., guidance, behavioral counseling, etc.) - Help engaging parents and the community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Functional Support**

- Partner responsible for implementing systems for streamlining efficiency in district(s) and school(s) including:
  - Information technology
  - Human resources and hiring support
  - Finance (budgeting, finance, payroll)
Districts, not states, are taking the lead in developing a base of turnaround partners

- Chicago: University of Chicago, AUSL, Chicago RISE
- New York City: Partnership Support Organizations (PSOs)
- Philadelphia: Mastery Schools

A portfolio strategy with a mix of SMOs, charters, and RSO/lead turnaround partners
THE WAY FORWARD

Clustering:
For effectiveness, efficiency, and scale
Task 4: Apply the non-negotiable strategies within a new, comprehensive set of structures and supports
A Partnership Framework for School Turnaround
The vision for turnaround: Five steps towards a new state and local partnership

1. Create protected space and an attractive choice for fundamental change through school turnaround zones and special collective bargaining/contractual agreements

2. Focus resources on cohorts (e.g., 25 per year in three to five regional clusters) to produce success

3. Internal capacity: Create a recruiting and developing effort for teachers, leadership teams in partnership with higher education, districts; make these efforts “clubs good educators want to join”

4. External capacity – lead turnaround partners: Create coherent, integrated support for school clusters by building state-based turnaround partner organizations

5. Create or anoint an entrepreneurial agency, with leverage and resources, to establish the partnerships, integrate state initiatives, and lead the turnaround effort
### Benchmark Indicator at the School Level

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<th>Priority Schools</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ability</td>
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#### Necessary School-Level Operating Conditions

**People**
- Can the turnaround leadership team staff the school as needed? (Hiring/removal/placement, roles)

**Money**
- Does the school receive sufficient additional resources to achieve the turnaround plan? (Depending on school size and level: $250K-$1M per year, sustained for 3 years, new or reallocated funding)
- Is extra compensation provided to pay staff for extra time, responsibilities, and leadership roles?
- Does the turnaround leadership team have flexibility over how resources are spent?

**Time**
- Is the day and year significantly extended to allow for more time for learning and collaborating?
- Does the turnaround leadership have the ability to adjust the school schedule as needed?

**Program**
- Does the school enhance students’ readiness to learn by providing significant social supports, such as advisories, counselors, after-school programs, targeted remediation, home outreach, etc?
- Does the leadership team have authority to adjust programming to support the turnaround plan, and to make choices and respond to crises with a minimum of compliance-driven oversight?

#### Necessary School-Level Capacity

- Do the school’s principal and turnaround leadership team have the skills necessary for success?
- Is a lead partner organization deeply embedded with school/district leadership to plan and execute turnaround design, make best use of the operating conditions, and align other partners? Is that lead partner present in the school on an intensive basis, and is it contractually accountable for student performance?

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“Instead of helping some kids beat the odds…

…why don’t we just change the odds?

Geoffrey Canada, Founder, Harlem Children’s Zone, 2004
For more information and resources on school turnaround:

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