



## Evolution of School Turnaround from The State Role in School Turnaround: Emerging Best Practices

Sam Redding and Lauren Morando Rhim

- ▶ [Jump to document](#)
- ▶ [Purchase the full publication](#)
- ▶ [Visit CenteronSchoolTurnaround.org](http://CenteronSchoolTurnaround.org)
- ▶ [Browse the WestEd bookstore](#)

### RECOMMENDED CITATION:

Redding, S., & Rhim, L. M. (2014). Evolution of school turnaround. In L. M. Rhim & S. Redding (Eds.), *The state role in school turnaround: Emerging best practices* (pp. 19–28). San Francisco, CA: WestEd. Retrieved from [http://centeronschoolturnaround.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Evolution\\_of\\_School\\_Turnaround1.pdf](http://centeronschoolturnaround.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Evolution_of_School_Turnaround1.pdf)

## About the Center on School Turnaround

The national Center on School Turnaround focuses on providing technical assistance to, as well as building the capacity of, states to support districts and schools in turning around their lowest-performing schools. The Center is led by WestEd in partnership with the Academic Development Institute, the National Implementation Research Network, and the Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education at the University of Virginia.

## Focus Areas

- Developing SEA Staff Capacity and SEA Organizational Structures
- Building District Capacity
- Creating Policies, Incentives, and Partnerships to Ensure a Pipeline of Turnaround Leaders
- Promoting Cooperative Labor-Management Relations
- Promoting the Use of Expanded Learning Time
- Creating Systems and Processes to Ensure a Pool of High-Quality Turnaround Partners
- Ensuring the Availability and Use of Data Systems at the SEA Level
- Supporting Schools and Districts in Establishing a Positive School Climate
- Monitoring and Evaluating School Turnaround Efforts
- Improving Capacity of School Boards to Support Turnarounds
- Engaging Families and Communities
- Building Political Will for Dramatic Change

## Evolution of School Turnaround

*Sam Redding and Lauren Morando Rhim*

School turnaround in the United States is a recent policy initiative that follows two decades of efforts to apply substantial interventions to sharply elevate the performance trajectory of persistently low-achieving schools. Unlike prior school improvement efforts that sought to implement change over three to five years, the focus of turnaround is rapid and dramatic improvement for the lowest performing schools—schools that had not responded to prior incremental efforts. School turnaround arrived fully at center stage in 2009 when newly appointed Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced the U.S. Department of Education goal of turning around the nation’s lowest performing 5% of schools. The revamped School Improvement Grant (SIG) program, fueled by funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), provided states with criteria for identifying eligible schools and enabled states to establish competitions for LEAs to seek the SIG funding. At the same time, the U.S. Department of Education made turnaround a key component of its Race to the Top (RTTT) competition for states (and later for LEAs). The U.S. Department of Education also established a new Office of School Turnaround. The following chronology of national efforts to improve our schools provides background context that is essential to understanding the current strategies being promoted at both the federal and state level; the current approach to turning around the lowest performing schools is largely driven by the shortcomings of prior efforts.

### **School Performance as a National Issue**

**A matter of national defense.** As the historians of American education tell the story, the tradition of public education as a matter of local interest was shaken when Sputnik, the Soviet Union’s unmanned satellite, appeared in the clear night sky, orbiting earth in October of 1957. Average Americans may not

have drawn a connection between this technological master feat by a feared enemy nation and their children's cozy neighborhood school, but governmental officials did. We were falling behind in the race to space because our schools were not preparing the scientists, engineers, and mathematicians who would enable us to keep pace with the communist adversaries. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, in the National Defense Education Act of 1958, found common ground among divergent critiques of root causes of inadequate school performance in proposing both increased federal financial assistance and higher standards in science, math, and language as a matter of national defense (Jeynes, 2007).

**A matter of equity and opportunity.** In the 1960s and 1970s, education ascended further as a focus of national interest, now riding the crest of concern for equity for minorities, as a remedy for poverty, and as just treatment for children with disabilities. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 brought the federal government to the stage as a significant player in what had been primarily a state and local enterprise. Federal courts oversaw school desegregation across the country. The 1970s enlarged the scope of national attention to inequalities with the Title IX (1972) prohibition of unequal allocation of resources and program opportunities between the sexes and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975), the precursor to the Individuals with Disability Education Act, which sought greater educational opportunity for children with disabilities (Jeynes, 2007).

**A matter of international competition.** In 1980, Congress, at the urging of President Jimmy Carter, authorized the formation of the U.S. Department of Education. President Ronald W. Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education asserted in *A Nation at Risk* (1983) that America's pursuit of equity in education must be matched with regard for quality. *A Nation at Risk* showed that our students' academic performance was unfavorably contrasted with students in other nations.

The effective schools research (see, for example, Edmonds, 1979) that emerged in the years just prior to *A Nation at Risk* had already demonstrated that school practices varied, and that some schools did a better job than others in achieving satisfactory results with similar populations of children. The scores on college entrance exams had declined steadily since the mid-1960s; SAT results descended during those years to their low point in 1980. Scores on most national and state tests fell similarly during this same span of years (Ravitch, 2000).

**State initiative with federal encouragement for standards and research-based models.** In the 1990s, the states' governors looked ahead to the new century and set national goals for education (National Education Goals Panel, 1995). These goals were codified in 1994 in Congress's Goals 2000: Educate America Act, which endorsed learning standards and standards-based assessments as ways to measure progress toward national goals. The reauthorization of the

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Improving America's Schools) in the same year called upon states to build systems of standards and assessments and to provide support for schools to improve. President Clinton, in 1996, signaled a return to basics with his recommendation to end social promotion and advance students based on the merits of their accomplishments. In 1998, the Reading Excellence Act emphasized the importance of direct instruction and phonics in reading instruction, presaging the recommendations of the National Reading Panel (2000). The 1990s closed with comprehensive school reform spreading research-based models of effective school practice across the country. Fueled by federal dollars, the states erected standards-based curricula and assessments (Redding, 2007).

**Strong accountability for school performance for all student groups.** By 2002 when the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was reauthorized as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) under the new administration of President George W. Bush, America was determined to achieve both equity and quality in public education. Achieved learning varied too widely from group to group and from school to school, indicating that opportunity was not equal for all. Standards and their concomitant assessments provided a measure of progress, and under NCLB progress would be measured for each group of students. NCLB sought to close the achievement gap between ethnic groups, between rich and poor, between children with disabilities and those without, and between English language natives and English language learners.

**Focus on the lowest-achieving schools, world-class standards, and innovation.** When Arne Duncan, the superintendent of the Chicago Public Schools took the helm as U.S. Secretary of Education under newly elected President Barack Obama in 2009, the nation was reeling from a serious economic downturn. With a surge of federal funding to stimulate the economy, Duncan laid out an aggressive agenda for K-12 education. The nation would rid itself of pockets of low achievement by turning around its lowest-performing 5,000 schools. New standards would apply world-class rigor to ensure that all students graduated ready for college and career. Innovation and technology would usher in a new era of high expectation and high accomplishment. America's schools were the vehicle for renewed economic prosperity.

## **Improving Low-Achieving Schools**

### **Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program**

In 1997, Congress authorized the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program (CSRDP) to provide three years of funding to schools that adopted research-based improvement models. The CSRDP was not targeted to the lowest performing schools but was channeled to Title I schools (schools with significant levels of student poverty) that were generally performing below expectations. More than 6,000 schools participated in the CSRDP, implementing

more than 500 models. Evaluation of the results was inconsistent, with some models investing in significant evaluations and others not. One study found positive results early in the CSRDP implementation, concluding that the effects of the CSRDP were stronger than other initiatives in similar schools (Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2003). An analysis by the Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center (CSRQC) at the American Institutes for Research (2006), however, found only two elementary school models, both instructionally focused and prescriptive, to show moderate strength of effect. CSRQC found no middle school or high school models with evaluations that showed moderate strength of effect. No models at any grade level demonstrated a strong effect.

### **Restructuring Under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act**

The 2002 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) outlined a progression of sanctions that states and districts were to apply for Title I schools making inadequate yearly progress. Restructuring, for schools that had not achieved adequate yearly progress (AYP) for six years, was the most severe intervention. At this point, the district was to apply one of four remedies:

1. State take-over of the school from the district
2. Turnaround—usually change in leadership and other significant changes
3. Reopen the school as a charter school
4. Contract to an Education Management Organization (EMO) to operate the school
5. Other—akin to comprehensive school reform, as determined by the district

The Center on Education Policy (CEP, 2009) found that in the five states it studied, 89% to 96% of the restructuring schools (varying by state) had chosen the “other” option, and positive results were scarce. By 2009, more than 5,000 schools (10% of Title I schools) were subject to restructuring (CEP, 2009). Only 19% of the restructuring schools in the states studied made AYP. Some schools remained in restructuring status for many years.

### **The Advent of Turnaround Literature and Programs**

In 2004, under the leadership of then Governor Mark Warner, the Virginia Department of Education (VA DOE) began to develop a school turnaround specialist program. The VA DOE sponsored the two-year program through which districts with low-performing schools sent principals and district central office staff members to the University of Virginia (UVA) in Charlottesville to obtain executive education and related skills to assist them in turning around low-performing schools. Across the first two cohorts of participants, the majority of the schools demonstrated notable gains leading to expansion of the program outside of Virginia (Rhim, 2013). Thus was born the UVA Darden/Curry Partnership for

Leaders in Education (PLE) program that has led turnaround leadership initiatives across the country.

In 2007, the Academic Development Institute's Center on Innovation & Improvement (CII) published a synthesis of research across sectors identifying key leader actions in successful turnaround efforts and made recommendations for districts embarking upon focused turnaround efforts. Also in 2007, Mass Insight published *The Turnaround Challenge* (Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash), a call-to-action report that highlighted the need for intervention in America's lowest-performing schools. The report outlined structures within states and districts to focus on school turnaround and advocated the engagement of lead partners (external service providers) to bring special expertise to the work.

In 2008, the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) released a practice guide, prepared by an expert panel, titled *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools* (Herman et al.). The report stated that no well-designed, control studies were available and based its conclusions on case studies. From these case studies and the analysis by the panel, the report suggested four interrelated turnaround practices:

- Signal the need for dramatic change with strong leadership
- Maintain a consistent focus on improving instruction
- Make visible improvements early in the turnaround process (quick wins)
- Build a committed staff

In the wake of the IES report, other studies emerged, including cross-sector studies that looked at turnaround in the business sector and public (government) sectors other than education. CII, for example, published six reports from 2007 to 2009, covering evidence of turnarounds, turnaround leader actions, performance-based dismissals, school closure, and the district's role in rapid improvement. In 2010, CII published the *Handbook on Effective Implementation of School Improvement Grants* (Perlman & Redding; revised in 2011) to provide guidance for states and districts in utilizing the new federal grant initiative.

### **School Improvement Grants**

In the spring of 2009, Arne Duncan, the new Secretary of Education, announced his intention to focus on the lowest achieving 5% of schools, with new guidelines and funding through Title I's School Improvement Grant program. The program was also revised to include more high schools than had previously been eligible for School Improvement Grants, aimed at reversing low graduation rates as well as poor test performance. Half of the dropouts from American high schools come from just 15% of its high schools (i.e., the "dropout factories"; Balfanz & Legters, 2004). In the fall of 2009, the revamped SIG program was unveiled, and the "other" option in ESEA's restructuring menu was strengthened as a "transformation" intervention with the replacement of the principal and significant re-design of instruction and other high-leverage areas

of school practice. Under SIG, eligible districts competed for large grants fueled by \$3.5 billion in initial funding, an amount that grew to \$5 billion over the next few years. In addition to the transformation model, districts could adopt a turnaround model (replacement of at least half of the current personnel), restart as a charter school, restart as a school governed by an EMO, or close the school.

The first cohort of more than 1,300 schools began implementing their SIG grants in 2010. Of that group, 45% were high schools. Seventy-four percent of all the SIG schools chose the transformation model; 20% chose the turnaround model; 5% chose the restart model; and 1% chose school closure. Seventy-eight percent of the students in these schools received free or reduced lunch, a measure of poverty. Forty-four percent of the students were African-American and 33% were Hispanic.

A study of the 82 California SIG schools in cohort 1 (Dee, 2012) found after a year of implementation the schools had closed 23% of their achievement gap (gap between the school's performance and the state's performance target). Most of the gains were attributed to the schools that chose the turnaround model.

In an April 2012 press release, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said: A new and important study of school turnarounds by University of Virginia economist Thomas Dee provides the first rigorous evidence that the Department's revamped School Improvement Grant (SIG) program is having a substantial impact on student achievement in struggling schools in California in just the first year of the program. . . . Educators and school leaders cannot give up on making far-reaching improvements in student learning in our lowest-performing schools. Children only get one shot at a good education. And Dee's new study reminds us that poverty is not destiny.

Between 2010 and 2013, states launched additional cohorts of SIG schools and planned to sustain the efforts with declining grant awards. States and districts began internal restructuring to make turnaround an area of emphasis.

### **U.S. Department of Education Turnaround Principles**

Late in 2011, the U.S. Department of Education released guidelines for states to submit "flexibility requests" to amend their ESEA programs. The guidelines included the following set of Turnaround Principles, applicable especially to all schools in the bottom 5% in performance (standards-based assessments and graduation rates) but also useful for other schools in need of rapid improvement.

- **Leadership.** Providing strong leadership by reviewing the performance of the current principal, replacing the current principal, or ensuring the principal is a change leader and providing the principal with operational flexibility;
- **Effective Teachers.** Ensuring that teachers are effective and able to improve instruction by reviewing all staff and retaining those determined to be effective, carefully selecting new teachers including transfers, and

providing job-embedded professional development informed by teacher evaluations;

- **Extended Learning Time.** Redesigning the school day, week, or year to include additional time for student learning and teacher collaboration;
- **Strong Instruction.** Strengthening the school’s instructional program based on student needs and ensuring that the instructional program is research-based, rigorous, and aligned with state academic content standards;
- **Use of Data.** Using data to inform instruction and for continuous improvement, including providing time for collaboration on the use of data;
- **School Culture.** Establishing a school environment that improves safety and discipline and addresses students’ social, emotional, and physical health needs; and
- **Family and Community Engagement.** Providing ongoing mechanisms for family and community engagement (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

### **Elementary and Secondary Education Act: Flexibility Waivers**

As Congress struggled to reauthorize NCLB, and states faced the dooming reality that most of their schools would be deemed “failing” under existing NLCB accountability standards, the USED sought to create opportunities for states to revise their accountability structures in a manner that sustained accountability while acknowledging some of the practical challenges inherent to NCLB’s goal for all students to be proficient by 2014. In 2011, President Obama announced that states could apply for waivers for specific aspects of NLCB if they developed appropriate means to hold schools and districts accountable for robust academic standards, including specific strategies to turn around the lowest performing schools (i.e., priority schools). To date 43 states have successfully applied for and been granted waivers. While shifting the structure of accountability systems developed under NCLB, the waiver provisions require all states to continue to devote significant resources to developing systems to support and sustain effective turnaround efforts.

### **Center on School Turnaround**

In reorienting the national system of content centers in 2012, the U.S. Department of Education created a Center on School Turnaround and awarded a five-year grant and cooperative agreement to WestEd to administer the new center. WestEd’s partners in the center are the Academic Development Institute, the University of Virginia’s Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education, the National Implementation Research Network, Public Impact, the National Center on Time and Learning, and Education Northwest.

The CST’s objectives are aligned with each of the following four roles the SEAs play relative to school turnaround:

### **1. Advocating and Leading to Build Support for Local Turnaround Efforts**

To ensure the success of turnaround efforts across their respective states, SEAs need to cultivate buy-in for reforms, continuously advocate for tough changes, and communicate early and often to a wide range of stakeholders.

### **2. Creating a Pro-Turnaround Statutory and Regulatory Environment**

To support districts as they work to turn around struggling schools, SEAs need to review policies, procedures, and regulatory structures to identify those that limit the flexibility of schools to take the dramatic action necessary to turn around chronically low performers.

### **3. Administering and Managing Turnaround Efforts Effectively**

To ensure successful administration and management support to schools and districts, SEAs need designed applications that encourage thoughtful exploration of alternative approaches, administrative procedures that award grants in a timely manner, clear expectations for progress leading to grant renewal, and minimally intrusive compliance monitoring.

### **4. Providing Targeted and Timely Technical Assistance to LEAs and Schools**

To provide effective technical assistance, SEAs need to access, leverage, and repurpose technical assistance resources on topics that are critical to turnaround success; SEAs also need to institute a statewide system of support and technical assistance through which they can effectively share these resources.

## **Conclusion**

The SIG program, unlike previous efforts at elevating the performance trajectory of low-achieving schools, targets the very lowest performing schools, includes a large proportion of high schools, requires high-leverage interventions, and provides substantial amounts of funding. The SIG program and provisions of state ESEA flexibility waivers related to priority schools engage each level of the education system, from a Turnaround Office in the U.S. Department of Education, to similar structures in state education agencies, to a strong district role, and finally to the school. SIGs also enlist the expertise of external partners, organizations with experience and track records with significant school improvement. The SIG program is being closely monitored and evaluated at each level. The evaluative research that emerges from the SIG program may prove to be its greatest contribution to the renewal of American education.

## References

- Balfanz, R., & Legters, N. (2004). Locating the dropout crisis: Which high schools produce the nation's dropouts? In G. Orfield (Ed.), *Dropouts in America: Confronting the graduation rate crisis* (pp. 57–84). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Borman, G., Hughes, G., Overman, L., & Brown, S. (2003). Comprehensive school reform and achievement: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research, 73*, 125–230.
- Calkins, A., Guenther, W., Belfiore, G., & Lash, D. (2007). *The turnaround challenge*. Boston, MA: Mass Insight.
- Center on Education Policy. (2009). *A call to restructure restructuring*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center. (2006). *Report on elementary school comprehensive school reform models*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center. (2006). *Report on middle and high school comprehensive school reform models*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Dee, T. (2012, April). *School turnarounds: Evidence from the 2009 stimulus*. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Edmonds, R. (1979, October). Effective schools for the urban poor. *Educational Leadership, 37*(1), 15–24.
- Herman, R., Dawson, P., Dee, T., Greene, J., Maynard, R., Redding, S., & Darwin, M. (2008). *Turning around chronically low-performing schools: A practice guide* (NCEE #2008-4020). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/practiceguides>
- Jeynes, W. H. (2007). *American educational history: School, society, and the common good*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- National Education Goals Panel. (1995). *The national education goals report: Building a nation of learners*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Perlman, C. L., & Redding, S. (Eds.). (2011). *Handbook on effective implementation of school improvement grants*. Lincoln, IL: Academic Development Institute, Center on Innovation & Improvement.
- Ravitch, D. (2000). *Left behind: A century of failed school reform*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Redding, S. (2007). An evolution in American education. In S. Redding & H. J. Walberg (Eds.), *Handbook on statewide systems of support* (pp. 57–76). Lincoln, IL: Academic Development Institute, Center on Innovation & Improvement.
- Rhim, L. M. (2013). *State-initiated school turnaround strategies: Leveraging the state education agency to drive meaningful change*. Charlottesville, VA; Sacramento, CA; Lincoln, IL: University of Virginia's Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education; Center on School Turnaround; Academic Development Institute. Retrieved from <http://centeronschoolturnaround.org/new-monograph-state-initiated-school-turnaround-strategies-leveraging-the-state-education-agency-to-drive-meaningful-change-rhim/>

## ***The State Role in School Turnaround***

U.S. Department of Education. (2011, September 23). *ESEA flexibility*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/esea/flexibility/documents/esea-flexibility.doc>