



Foreword from **The State Role in School Turnaround: Emerging Best Practices**

Bryan Hassel

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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

The State Role in School Turnaround Emerging Best Practices

Lauren Morando Rhim & Sam Redding
Editors

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Foreword

Bryan Hassel, Co-Director of Public Impact

One does not have to look past the table of contents of this volume to grasp the enormity of the task facing state leaders when it comes to school turnaround. In recent years, states have taken center stage in the effort to address chronic low achievement in the nation's schools. In part, this move has come from state leaders themselves, as governors, chief state school officers, and legislators have sought to accelerate change in these schools. Federal policy and funding streams have also elevated the state's role in successive waves. From No Child Left Behind's requirements around "restructuring" to the inclusion of low-achieving schools as one of four "assurance areas" in programs such as Race to the Top, federal policymakers have asked states to play an increasing role in addressing persistent school failure.

The book's chapters delve into the state's role in a wide range of specific topics related to school turnaround, and state leaders can find a great deal of guidance on all of the specific challenges. In this foreword, the editors asked me to take a step back and look at an overarching state role: **making policy that guides turnaround work within the state.**¹ Every state has a set of policies on school turnaround. These typically begin with a section of state statutes describing how schools are identified as low-achieving and outlining the consequences. State boards of education and state education agencies take these statutory provisions and build out a more detailed set of processes and strategies that guide state action. Altogether, these laws and guiding documents make up the state's policy on school turnaround.

¹This foreword draws heavily on Public Impact's prior work on school turnaround and "Opportunity Culture" staffing designs by Emily Ayscue Hassel and other teammates. It draws on remarks made by Dr. Hassel at the September 2013 convening of states by the Center on School Turnaround and the U.S. Department of Education's Office of School Turnaround.

Why Focus on Policy?

The obvious reason is that policy is what gives states the leverage to change what happens in districts and schools so that the millions of students in low-achieving schools can have a better future. State officials are a long way away from the real action in the classrooms and teachers' lounges of the schools they are seeking to influence through turnaround strategies. Policy is the main tool states have to make a difference from that relatively remote position.

But policy is also important because it is the formal embodiment of the states' message to parents, educators, and citizens about the states' priorities, in this case, the priority states place on addressing the tragedy of chronically failing schools. The states' turnaround policies express the states' commitment to strategies that have the potential to flip the odds for kids who attend those schools. Of course, state leaders have other ways of communicating these messages. As Rhim and Redding write in their chapter entitled "Leveraging the Bully Pulpit": "When it comes to school turnaround efforts, chiefs can use the position to catalyze, support, enable, and sustain school turnaround efforts. Given limited resources at their disposal, effectively optimizing the bully pulpit is a key tool in a state chief's toolbox" (p. 32). Yet actions, as they say, speak louder than words. Effectively messaging the states' intent when it comes to turnaround ideally includes a vigorous use of the bully pulpit—backed up by the hard policies that put those words into action.

Policy is also the key to sustainability. When I look at the work states are doing, it is often inspiring. But I quickly start to worry that it is temporary. In part, this worry stems from the fact that much of the funding states are using is temporary, flowing from Race to the Top dollars or School Improvement Grant funds that may not persist. I also worry because the vigorous action I see often depends on the robust leadership of state officials: state chiefs, governors, and other leaders within states. What will keep all of this good work going when funding streams turn into a trickle, the champion governor leaves office, or when critical SEA officials retire or take the revolving door into the private sector? Policies are a states' main chance of sustaining gains over time by putting into law and agency policies the key elements of the states' strategy so they can last.

Policy related to school turnaround is complex and multifaceted. Instead of trying to cover the full range of important policies comprehensively, I will focus in this foreword on five policy levers that share two characteristics. First, they are of vital importance to states' success as leaders of the school turnaround effort. Second, very few states have put all five of these policies in place. Almost every state, possibly all, would benefit from holding up their policies against these five points and asking where there is room for improvement.

Set Sights High

One critical aspect of state policy is establishing a set of specific, ambitious goals for eliminating chronic low performance within a reasonable timeline. Let me unpack this concept a little. One level of this goal-set is a clear definition of success at the school level. If a school is low-achieving, what does it mean to “turn around”? Ideally, it means something more than just going from “very low” to “low.” Tennessee’s Achievement School District (ASD), for example, says it wants to move schools from the bottom 5% to the top 25%. Is that too ambitious? Reasonable people might disagree. What states want to avoid is a policy that declares “mission accomplished” based on, say, a 10 percentage point rise in proficiency rates from 30% to 40%.

A second level is the statewide view. Taking a state’s set of persistently low-achieving schools as a group, what does success look like over the next year, three years, and five years? Not all schools will meet an ambitious target the first time around. In fact, 30% on the first try would be on par with cross-sector experience and quite good relative to the abysmal success rate of many school turnaround initiatives. That does not mean, though, that states need to settle for 30% as their long-term ambition. As my colleagues and I have written in *Try Try Again*, detecting efforts that are off track early and redirecting can shift some initial missteps into successes, sending long-term success rates over 80%, even if only 20% or 30% of initial attempts work well.

What is important here, therefore, is for the state to select and communicate a sense of trajectory. After one year, we are aiming for, say, 25% of our turn-around schools to have crossed the success threshold. Then we expect that percentage to rise steadily so that after five years, 80% of the schools are over the mark. This kind of trajectory allows state officials and others to watch progress and then make adjustments. This communicates an ambitious target over time but also a realistic path to get there.

Of course, goals are just goals. They only come to life if they drive a performance management system that also includes:

- A **theory of action** that spells out how the state’s strategies will achieve its goals;
- **Alignment of resources** to support those strategies;
- **Collection of data** and ongoing assessment of results and leading indicators;
- **Accountability for results**, which involves taking action based on the achievement or non-achievement of goals; and
- **Communicating actively** to the public about how the schools and the state are progressing along the trajectory.

But this all starts with setting sights high.

Clear Policy Barriers

Turning around a failing organization is challenging even if leaders have all the running room they could ever want. But in public education, numerous policy constraints make it even more difficult to turn around schools and succeed.

Here, I zero in on two categories of constraint that are most significant. One is constraints related to staffing turnaround schools. The effectiveness of the school leadership and teaching force is what we all know makes the most difference in schools and especially turnaround schools. Yet state and local policies often make it hard to staff turnaround schools well. Examples include: ineffective evaluation systems, restrictive certification rules, rigid seniority-based placement, hurdles to dismissing ineffective performers, salary scales that make it difficult to reward great leaders and teachers for taking on a challenge and succeeding, and rules that limit the number of students a great teacher can have. These all make the already hard task of turnaround even harder.

The same goes for the second category: resource use. Policy constraints include rigid line-item budgets that require, for example, using a certain staffing model within a school, which gets in the way of schools redesigning their operations and using teachers and new teaching roles to give more kids access to great teachers. Other policies may limit schools' and districts' ability to carry funds over from one year to the next, making it impossible for them to "save" and "invest" in activities that might well pay off for the long-term, such as building leadership pipelines.

States can act on this set of constraints in two ways. First, they can inventory their own state policies and make a plan for eliminating or creating exceptions for those that hinder turnarounds. Second, states can use the "strings" they attach to funding and their accountability policies to insist that districts remove barriers as well, because many of these constraints are embodied in local policies and agreements. By clearing state-caused barriers directly and by inducing local officials to drop their own shackles, state leaders can do a great deal to pave the way for successful school turnarounds.

Get Serious About Talent

By "talent," I mean especially the teachers, leaders, and organizations that operate turnaround schools. I say "get serious" because, in my view, there has been a lot of effort on this front, but it generally has not led to a dramatic talent shift that is needed in turnaround schools.

As we think about talent, we tend to think first about how to "push" talent into failing schools—by creating pipelines. This is critical work that we can keep doing better.

But I would urge equal attention to "pulling" talent by making target schools dramatically better places to work in and lead. Part of this is clearing the barriers I just mentioned. Top-notch leaders will not be attracted to organizations in

which they cannot build and shape their teams and allocate resources in ways that support their strategic leadership.

Another part of pulling talent in is creating real career paths for both teachers and leaders that enable advancement without leaving the work they love doing. For excellent teachers, that means being able to sign up to work in a turnaround school and not face a career of just teaching a single class or normal load of classes forever, without any way to advance. Instead, it means offering great teachers the chance to lead teams of other teachers, to direct on-the-job professional learning from their peers, and to have an effect on more students, without becoming an administrator. These are roles my colleagues and I have written about in our *Opportunity Culture* series of publications. When a set of Charlotte, North Carolina-based schools created 19 such positions in turnaround schools in early 2013, over 700 people applied from the around the country, including many who had moved out of teaching into administration and were eager for the chance to come back to teaching. In schools that traditionally had trouble filling vacancies, these new roles created a dramatic influx of talent.

For leaders, it means enabling successful turnaround principals to take the next challenge, such as leading a small network of schools, like a feeder pattern, and helping the building-level school principals become the next great turnaround leaders. For both, it means getting serious about compensation. In my view, great teachers and leaders in public education generally earn far below what they contribute to their students' long-term fortunes. The deficit is especially acute in turnaround schools, where the challenges are intense and the hours are, or need to be, longer. Though I would support devoting more resources to raising pay in turnaround schools, states need not wait for that. A top priority for turnaround schools should be thinking of ways to reorganize their operations to free money to make their schools as attractive as possible to teachers and leaders they need.

Creating a Real “Or Else”

Today, most states lack a viable course of action if schools and districts do not improve. Exceptions exist. Several states now have authority to take over individual schools and operate them or, more likely, partner with external organizations, and in extreme cases of district-wide failure, the authority to take over and operate districts. But these powers—and their effective use—are still rare.

Yet, an “or else” would be a valuable instrument in the hands of states for two reasons. First, the threat of state takeover might induce some districts to do what they need to do to improve persistently low-achieving schools. Second, when districts and schools still fall short despite the threat, a state with an “or else” does not have to settle for that. It can take action on its own to improve school performance.

A real “or else” has three components:

- **Authority**—the legal green light to act, likely in the form of a state statute authorizing the state to take certain actions in cases of schools or districts that chronically fall below some performance level and have not improved sufficiently despite other interventions.
- **Theory of action**—spelling out what the state will do once it assumes control of a school or district. Will it operate schools directly? Find outside operators to manage the schools? In either case, what role will the state agency play and for how long?
- **Capacity to execute**—Taking over and operating failing schools and districts is new territory for almost every state. It requires different staffing, different partners, and different ways rather than trying to operate the schools in the traditional way, only better. Building that capacity is an essential ingredient to having a real “or else” at the state level.

Demand Sustainability

With funding streams such as school improvement grants, Race to the Top, and special state appropriations, one of the phenomena we see far too often is the tendency to flow money into costs that are recurring—in the sense that they will not go away. Even if a turnaround succeeds, most turnaround schools will still be operating in very challenging environments, such as high-poverty neighborhoods. They will continue to need to deploy strategies like extended school days and years, higher compensation to attract and keep great teachers and leaders, and access to the growing array of learning technology.

Since these costs will not go away, states need to insist that districts and schools find ways to fund them beyond the temporary streams. Fortunately, there is a growing set of tools and models to help with this, from Education Resource Strategies tools to help districts analyze their resource use to Public Impact’s tools on reallocating money to pay teachers more.

This does not mean special state and federal funds have no role. Rather, the point is that states need the discipline to focus 100% of special and temporary money on what I would call “investments”: spending that somehow increases the capacity of schools and the system to operate successfully and sustainably without continued funding.

For example:

- Pipelines that produce teachers, leaders, and school operators who then “pay off” for years;
- Up-front spending and redesigning school operations, leading to more sustainable models;
- Investing in technology and facilities changes necessitated by the new design.

- Other transition costs—such as paying contractual obligations incurred under old systems in order to make way for new.

If turnaround schools put all temporary funding into such “investments” and paid for recurring costs with recurring funds, their long-term chance of success would be greatly enhanced.

Conclusion

I realize that these five policy priorities are relatively easy to write up in a foreword, but having these policies enacted in real states is quite another matter. This is why these five items are still on the “to do list” after several years of hard policy work in most states. I also realize that many of these policies lie outside the purview of state education agencies, resting instead with state legislatures. Yet, these challenges are nothing new for state agency leaders. Policy change is their best chance to make dramatic, lasting improvements for the millions of students who attend persistently low-achieving schools.

