



Introduction to the State Role in School Turnaround: Emerging Best Practice from *The State Role in School Turnaround: Emerging Best Practices*

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RECOMMENDED CITATION:

Rhim, L. M., & Redding, S. (2014). Introduction to the state role in school turnaround: Emerging best practice. In L. M. Rhim & S. Redding (Eds.), *The state role in school turnaround: Emerging best practices* (pp. 13-18). San Francisco, CA: WestEd. Retrieved from http://centeronschoolturnaround.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Introduction_to_State_Role1.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

Introduction to the State Role in School Turnaround: Emerging Best Practice

Lauren Morando Rhim and Sam Redding

The Center on School Turnaround (CST) was created to provide technical assistance and identify, synthesize, and disseminate research-based practices and emerging promising practices for the purpose of increasing state education agency (SEA) capacity to support districts and schools to turn around their lowest performing schools and contribute to our collective knowledge of effective and sustainable school turnaround strategies. Four objectives that reflect the key levers SEA's are using to drive, support, and sustain effective district and turnaround efforts guide the Center's work:

- Advocating and building support for schools and districts as they work to turn around the lowest performing schools
- Creating a pro-turnaround statutory and regulatory environment
- Administering and managing turnaround efforts effectively
- Providing targeted and timely technical assistance to schools and districts

As the first major publication of the CST, this book is organized according to these four objectives that guide our work. The research base on effective school turnarounds, and specifically the critical role of the SEA, is evolving and arguably not fully developed. We have yet to witness large-scale research on the potential impact of individual SEAs or isolate specific actions to discern their quantifiable impact on targeted change efforts focused on changing both districts and schools. The chapter authors represent a portfolio of practitioners and scholars actively engaged in these efforts. Building on existing research, their experiences and observation of trends provide the emerging outlines of best practice and are therefore worth documenting and discussing.

Advocating and Building Support for Schools and Districts as They Work to Turn Around the Lowest Performing Schools

School turnaround differs substantially from school improvement in that it calls for urgent and often disruptive change efforts. This is in contrast to incremental or continuous improvement that has been characteristic of change efforts for the last 20 years. Simply put, school turnaround is *not* more school improvement or school improvement plus. School turnaround efforts greatly challenge the status quo and significantly impact a wide variety of audiences, including school administrators, teachers, families, and community members. To ensure the success of turnaround efforts across their respective states, SEAs need to cultivate buy-in for the reforms, continuously advocate for tough changes, and communicate early and often to a wide range of stakeholders.

The key actors responsible for advocating and building support for school turnaround work are the state board of education, chief state school officer, and local school boards. While state boards create the pro-turnaround statutory and regulatory environment, the state chief and local school boards are highly visible actors who are uniquely positioned to encourage or, conversely, to impede focused turnaround efforts. The two chapters in this section explore the roles and responsibilities of state chiefs and local school boards. In *The Chief: Leveraging the Bully Pulpit to Drive Turnaround*, Rhim and Redding explore the political context state chiefs must navigate, and they identify key strategies chiefs can use to optimize their bully pulpit to instill a sense of urgency for districts and schools to embark upon turnaround and articulate specific strategies. Building on prior research regarding the role of school boards in school turnaround efforts, in *Engaging Local School Boards to Drive, Support, and Sustain Effective Turnaround Efforts*, Rhim outlines the roles and responsibilities of local boards and describes specific actions SEAs can take to build local board capacity to foster a meaningful role in district turnaround efforts. Absent intentional efforts to engage these key stakeholders, superintendents and building leaders may encounter resistance from local boards that are unclear about the need or potential value of disruptive change efforts.

Creating a Pro-Turnaround Statutory and Regulatory Environment

When working to implement dramatic changes to successfully turn around low-performing schools, school and district staff need to work within the context of state laws, regulations, policies, and procedures. Some of these foster practices that support effective school turnaround while others prohibit or inhibit them. In supporting 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 districts to take the dramatic action necessary to turn around chronically low performers—and work to eliminate them or grant waivers for certain requirements when possible.

In the *Evolution of Turnaround*, Redding and Rhim review the progression of school improvement efforts and programs, such as comprehensive school reform, school restructuring, and most recently, school improvement grants (SIG) and the ever-morphing role of the SEA in these efforts. The chapter reviews the U.S. Department of Education's seven research-based turnaround principles and wraps up with a discussion about how the current strategy differs from prior efforts and identifies emerging indicators of success.

State policies and district structures represent the context that shapes school turnaround, but personnel are the key drivers that make or break turnaround initiatives. Reflecting on the central role of teachers and leaders in turnaround, Woodruff and Clark share knowledge emerging from their work to apply lessons from the private sector to public education efforts to build effective human resources practices in *Human Capital Pipelines: Examining the Role of the SEA*. The chapter highlights the SEAs' roles in developing both policies and programs to recruit and retain high-quality leaders and instructional personnel that can benefit districts statewide. Building on the critical importance of personnel in school turnaround, Futernick and Urbanski examine steps SEAs can take to foster labor-management relationships that are more productive. The chapter, *Successful School Turnaround Through Labor-Management Partnerships*, introduces SEAs to key findings from case study research on the impact of labor-management collaboration on school policy and practice and shows how this collaboration is breaking down the fierce resistance to change that has hampered so many turnaround efforts. The chapter also offers specific recommendations to SEAs based on the success several have had promoting a climate of trust, innovation, and collaboration among local stakeholders in their states.

In *Building, Providing, and Supporting Functional Data Systems*, members of the University of Virginia's Partnership for Leaders in Education turnaround program present the case that monitoring and data are the critical building blocks of any effective school turnaround. The authors outline the potential for comprehensive data use at all levels and share practical advice for states and districts on how to use performance and behavioral data to improve decisions in a variety of contexts. Drawing on expertise gleaned from working with over 200 schools in dozens of school districts across the country, the chapter explores the type of data systems districts and schools engaged in school turnaround require and what states can do to create state-level data systems that work for school turnaround.

Administering and Managing Turnaround Efforts Effectively

With the infusion of unprecedented levels of funding under the revamped SIG program in 2010, SEA responsibilities related to administering turnaround programs significantly increased. This infusion has further stretched already lean state agencies traditionally focused on compliance and monitoring. SEAs

have approached their expanded responsibilities by creating a variety of internal structures and programs and leveraging external expertise. The third section of the book explores the various approaches and structures states are using to manage effective turnaround in districts across their respective states.

Cohen and Segal's chapter, *The State of the State: New SEA Structures for a New Approach to Turnaround*, examines existing literature on SEA organizations and how those organizations provide support for schools and districts. While there are a range of approaches and organizational structures, the authors pay particular attention to shifting SEA practices and culture to better support districts, attending to the SEA's reorganization, and the variety of SEA structures and activities being implemented to support turnaround.

In light of delays in the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act and growing concerns about the majority of schools across the nation being identified as not meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), in 2011, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) extended SEAs the option to request flexibility from specific aspects of the law. The flexibility was offered in exchange for rigorous and comprehensive state-developed plans designed to improve educational outcomes for all students, close achievement gaps, increase equity, and improve the quality of instruction. States have designed their accountability and support systems in a variety of ways that reflect their unique circumstances. Hane's and Perlman's chapter on *The State Process for Turnaround* describes how several states addressed the turnaround process in their ESEA Flexibility Requests.

The use of technology is as indelibly linked to the thought of schooling as the one-room schoolhouse was a century ago. As part of a comprehensive initiative to advance the transformation of American education, the Obama administration and the USDE are encouraging a culture of learning powered by technology. In *How the SEA Leverages Technology to Accelerate Turnaround*, Twyman focuses on how technology—assuming adequate leadership, resources, and supports—can accelerate improved student outcomes in an SEA-driven school improvement or school turnaround endeavor. The use of technology across seven areas (i.e., learning and instruction, motivation, access, data, teacher training, systems and processes, learning analytics) is described and supported by examples of research or exemplary programs.

In *Evaluating the State Turnaround Strategy*, Aladjem outlines steps states are taking to track and evaluate their turnaround work in order to make mid-course corrections and assess impact. Rather than explore how to evaluate SIG efforts per se, this chapter provides examples of how SEAs evaluate their own work to implement SIG. The object of evaluation for this chapter is not the schools, teachers, or students who ultimately benefit from SIG, but rather, the work of states that impacts schools, teachers, and students. The central questions driving this chapter are: "How can states be reflective about their own practice?" and "What lessons can states learn from other states?"

Providing Targeted and Timely Technical Assistance to Schools and Districts

In addition to their traditional compliance-related functions, SEAs need to embrace their support and technical assistance-related responsibilities to foster effective and sustainable turnaround efforts across their states. Just as Comprehensive Centers are charged with building SEAs' capacity, SEAs are charged with building the capacity of their local educational agencies (LEAs) and individual schools. LEAs and schools embarking upon bold turnaround efforts need access to research and emerging promising practices. To provide effective and meaningful technical assistance, SEAs need to identify, leverage, and repurpose existing resources, as well as those of other agencies and groups, on topics that are critical to turnaround success. SEAs also need to institute statewide system of supports and assistance through which they can effectively share these resources. The fourth and final section of the book focuses on the role of SEAs in providing technical assistance to districts and schools to drive, enable, and support successful turnaround efforts.

The responsibility of SEAs to directly support school turnaround has expanded under No Child Left Behind, while at the same time, budget cuts and consequent staff reductions have decreased the resources available for SEAs to engage in direct technical assistance to districts and schools. In light of these contextual realities, SEAs must explore possible collaboration with external entities to build local capacity to support school turnaround. In *Engaging State Intermediate Agencies to Support School Turnaround*, Reed and Partridge draw from their experience in Texas to describe the role of education service agencies (ESAs) to influence the interpretation and implementation of policies and practices to turn around low-performing schools and districts. The chapter describes a successful partnership between an SEA, an ESA, local school districts, and an external provider as an example of what is possible when an SEA and an ESA engage in creative collaboration to address the needs of a state's lowest performing schools.

Schools, districts, and states utilize private companies to provide a variety of educational, capital, and operational services. The engagement of external partners for the purpose of turning around schools accelerated in 2010 under the revised federal school improvement grant program that encouraged the use of external partners in a more comprehensive way. In *External Partners: Navigating the Marketing: SEA Role in Helping Districts Develop Productive Relationships with External Providers*, Corbett explores the role of the SEA in assisting districts to develop capacity to select providers and negotiate strong performance contracts.

With an eye toward leveraging internal expertise, Communities of Practice (CoPs) can be an important component of a state's turnaround-focused technical assistance efforts through peer-to-peer, face-to-face, and online collaborative

activities within states, districts, and schools. Coupled with existing state systems of support, CoPs have the potential to transform how states support their turnaround LEAs by increasing the SEA's capacity to deliver technical assistance, disseminate key resources, develop networks, and foster collaborative relationships. In *Turnaround Communities of Practice and Sharing Best Practices*, Stuart, Hale, and Duffield highlight the use of CoPs by states to collaborate with multiple stakeholders to strengthen technical assistance, curate best practices, and support the implementation of these practices within local district and school contexts.

Shifting from general technical assistance to focused efforts for the benefit of specific populations, in the final section of the book, the authors explore issues unique to English language learners and small and rural communities that have promise to accelerate turnaround efforts. Linquanti's chapter explores issues involved with *Fostering Success for English Language Learners in Turnaround Initiatives*. This chapter lays out a framework of fundamental considerations with respect to English learners that fosters a greater understanding of their strengths and needs. It examines the opportunities and risks for improving English language instruction and learning in the current context of next-generation standards and assessments and provides examples of innovative SEA practices for supporting local district and school improvement.

In *Building Rural District Capacity for Turnaround*, Redding and Walberg outline the distinct responsibility SEAs have to intentionally build the capacity of rural school districts. Whereas large urban districts can have more resources and capacity than their respective SEAs, rural districts must rely more heavily on SEAs to access resources and build capacity. State Superintendent of Public Instruction Denise Juneau and her colleagues outline strategies to turnaround low-performing rural schools—including structured efforts to build rural school board capacity—in their chapter, *In Big Sky Hope, How Montana's SEA Supports Turnaround in American Indian Schools*. Building on themes presented in the chapter on turnaround efforts in Montana, Sheley's chapter on *Building Leadership Capacity in Native American Schools* introduces the Bureau of Indian Education's Rapid Improvement Leader Project that entailed providing targeted professional development and mentorship to school-level leaders charged with turning around schools located in Native American reservations.

As SEA leaders strive to optimize their authority and resources to drive robust school turnaround efforts that will generate sustainable improvements, intentionally constructing an environment that is conducive to change is imperative. Introducing the structures required to manage the effort and providing targeted supports to build essential capacity are critical to long-term success.