
School Turnaround Strategies That Have Failed

How to avoid past mistakes in addressing the needs of low-performing schools

Historically, states and districts have attempted to help low-performing schools by providing “light-touch” strategies that failed over time because they focused on only one aspect of the problem rather than addressing underlying systems and operating conditions. Innovation Fund and Race to the Top applications should not rely on these partial or incremental reforms. States and districts may also need to clear the “underbrush” of such approaches already in existence, or rigorously re-align them, in order to focus turnaround effort and dollars on the intensive support of effective intervention targeted by the US ED in its federal stimulus guidelines. Common turnaround approaches to avoid include:

1. Layering Multiple, Overlapping School Partner Organizations

Over time, many low-performing schools have been inundated by organizations providing an array of services including tutoring, technical assistance, and leadership training. Often the activities of the various partner organizations are poorly aligned, involve multiple assessment frameworks, and lead to confusion and additional burdens on a school campus.

2. Requiring Additional Improvement Plans

In the past, low-performing schools have been required to complete multiple school improvement plans for NCLB reporting, state accountability and funding requirements, and, in many cases, district-mandated plans. For many schools, writing such plans has become simply an act of compliance; the proliferation of plans leads to a fragmentation of effort, and school leadership must manage the competing accountability frameworks on top of their other work.

3. Sending in External Improvement Teams

Often, states and districts have brought in external improvement teams to help schools in need of improvement. The teams are comprised of experts who, in a week or two, complete a superficial needs assessment of a school and a proposed plan of action, leaving the school site staff to implement their plan. Such a process does not help to build buy-in among school site staff or improve capacity to address needs.

4. Creating Additional Categorical Funding Streams

In an effort to help low-performing schools, many states pass legislation providing restricted categorical funding for particular programs or interventions. While additional funding is welcome, the restrictions do not allow the budget flexibility required to align available resources with needs. School budgeting becomes an allocation balancing act rather than a performance-driven exercise focusing on identified school needs.

5. Mentoring/Coaching from Retired Administrators and Teachers

Districts and states often hire retired administrators, teachers, and other experts to help mentor and assist principals and staff at low-performing schools on an on-going basis, but only for a few hours each week or month. If not adequately screened or trained, such mentors may provide little value to the school.

6. Creating Large “School Improvement” Offices With Inadequate Authority and Accountability

Some districts or states create central or regionalized offices charged with helping dozens of low-performing schools. Because staff at such offices are often disconnected from the activities of schools, and do not have the capacity to support so many schools at once or alter the fundamental conditions under which they work, their activities become cursory and, at times, burdensome, for schools.

7. Relying Solely on School Choice or SES for Schools Not Meeting AYP

No Child Left Behind requires that schools failing to make AYP provide school choice options and Supplemental Education Services (SES). In many cases, parents choose not to take advantage of the choice provisions in the law. After-school SES providers, while helpful in some cases, are often disconnected from school instructional programs and do little to improve student achievement.

The Way Forward for School Turnaround

Turnaround zones with conditions change, lead partners & clusters

A more successful and sustainable approach focuses on creating **turnaround zones with flexible operating conditions** in order to provide schools with sufficient authority over school resources. Rather than working with a myriad of partner organizations, districts need to align accountability and responsibility in a **new turnaround “lead partner,” who will manage small clusters of schools and be held accountable for student achievement** through clear, externally benchmarked performance indicators. In exchange for accountability, school leaders and their cluster lead partners will have authority over:

- **People**—Who is recruited, hired, and fired
- **Time**—The length of the school day and year
- **Money**—How school budgets are allocated
- **Program**—The implementation of a rigorous, standards-based curriculum

Lead partners should sign three to five year performance contracts in order to create the sustainability needed for turnaround. The turnaround zone approach is evidence-based, integrated, and designed for the scale-up needed to meet President Obama’s and Secretary Duncan’s turnaround target of 5,000 schools in five years.

More Effective Approaches Possible Within a Turnaround Zone

Listed below are recommendations for how the less successful historical approaches to turnaround can be tackled more effectively within a comprehensive turnaround framework:

Layering Multiple, Overlapping School Partner Organizations

...A more successful approach: One turnaround lead partner should sign a three to five year agreement with the district that holds them accountable for the results of a small cluster of schools with common challenges or goals. The turnaround lead partner may contract with other supporting partners but all organizations working with the school must work through the lead partner.

Requiring Additional Improvement Plans

...A more successful approach: All plans should be consolidated into a single school plan that is strategic, concise, and action-oriented. School leaders can draw upon zone or cluster best practice models developed by the lead partner, while spending their time carefully aligning specific action items and school budgets with school-level data analysis in order to ensure programs are based on school need. Those creating the plans should be responsible for their implementation. These single plans should be easily accessible on-line.

Sending in External Improvement Teams

...A more successful approach: Effective action comes from the alignment of responsibility and accountability, and the presence of sustained support. Within turnaround zones, schools can form internal improvement teams comprised of a diverse group of school stakeholders, under the leadership of the principal. Lead partners can facilitate internal teams visiting other exemplar schools, help provide recommendations for the school’s strategic plan, and provide on-going support for the achievement of performance standards on which they are also being measured.

Creating Additional Categorical Funding Streams

...A more successful approach: States can provide greater flexibility in the use of categorical funding in exchange for greater accountability for results (following the recent federal lead in proposing waivers for specific 1003g allocations). Funding from existing and new restrictive categorical programs

can be consolidated into block grants (similar to charter school allocations). States should withhold funding if significant progress is not made within three years. In exchange for greater flexibility, states and districts should hold schools accountable for results.

Mentoring/Coaching from Retired Administrators and Teachers

...A more successful approach: “Turnaround specialists” may work, but only if they are part of or coordinated by a lead partner organization that provides on-going, comprehensive support to a failing school. Alternatively, if schools are provided with control over budget and staffing, they can develop internal coaching mechanisms such as identifying “master” teachers and paying them an additional stipend to assist other teachers over a sustained period of time. Within well-designed school clusters principals can also meet regularly to share practices, provide support, monitor progress, and mutually ensure results.

Creating Large “School Improvement” Offices With Inadequate Authority or Accountability

...A more successful approach: States and districts should give clusters of 3-4 schools under lead partners greater authority over school resources -- in exchange for significantly greater accountability and performance contracts. The role of the central district office would then be to manage the performance contracts, removing partners where necessary, and encouraging lead partners with successful clusters to replicate the results with a small number of additional clusters.

Relying Solely on School Choice or SES for Schools Not Meeting AYP

...A more successful approach: After-school programming can be a valuable part of successful school transformation, but only as part of a more comprehensive and integrated system of accountability for results like a turnaround zone. While outside providers should be integrated by the zone lead partner, school site staff should also be eligible to apply for competitive funding to create after-school tutoring programs that are completely aligned with the instruction provided during the day. Such instruction should be tracked through the school’s individualized student data system.

For the research on how school intervention to date has generally fallen short of what’s needed for transformation, and for more on Mass Insight Education’s proposed framework for more successful and scalable turnaround, see:

- our 2007 Gates-funded report *The Turnaround Challenge: Why America’s best opportunity to dramatically improve student achievement lies in our worst-performing schools* www.massinsight.org/turnaround/challenge.aspx
- the 2009 follow up *Meeting the Turnaround Challenge* -- an integrated set of reports and tools to help states and districts “operationalize” *The Turnaround Challenge* framework www.massinsight.org/turnaround/reports.aspx

Mass Insight is an independent non-profit that organizes public schools, higher education, businesses, and state governments to significantly improve student achievement, with a focus on closing achievement gaps. The work of the Institute’s School Turnaround Strategy Group is defined by two convictions: that change at scale depends on the practical integration of research, policy, and practice; and that only dramatic and comprehensive change in high-poverty schools will produce significant achievement gains. The Group is working with states, districts, the developing partner marketplace, and national reform players to help them respond to US ED’s challenge to turn around the nation’s lowest performing schools.

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