Center for American Progress

the broad foundation education

AP PHOTO/JEAN-MARC BOUJU

Turning Around the Nation's Lowest-Performing Schools

Five Steps Districts Can Take to Improve Their Chances of Success

Karen Baroody January 2011

Center for American Progress

the broad foundation education

Turning Around the Nation's Lowest-Performing Schools

Five Steps Districts Can Take to Improve Their Chances of Success

Karen Baroody January 2011

Front cover: First-graders give a thumbs up during a phonics exercise at the Kelso Elementary School in Inglewood, California. Kelso ranks as one of the highest performing schools in the state of California.

Contents

Introduction and summary

Across the country, states and school districts are focusing on turning around the nation's lowest-performing schools. Unprecedented federal Race to the Top and School Improvement Grant funding accompanied by a more prescriptive approach for using the funds has raised the profile of turnaround efforts. This focus on school turnaround, while welcome, is not new. State, district, and school leaders have been trying for years to turn around persistently low-performing schools. But while some schools have made significant gains in student achievement, results overall are decidedly mixed.[1]

Why is this the case?

One of the overarching reasons for the uneven results is that districts generally have failed to recognize that persistently low-performing schools face unique challenges that require aggressive, customized, and sustained interventions. Instead, districts create one-size-fits-all intervention programs providing each target school with the same dollars, instructional coaches, or other support, regardless of differences in individual school needs. These resources are often layered on top of existing policies, programs, staffing, and schedules, without addressing underlying flaws in those structures. The result is often a standalone, add-on approach that neither addresses the needs of each individual school nor fixes the district-level conditions that allowed the school to fail in the first place.

For more than a decade, Education Resource Strategies, Inc., or ERS, has worked with urban districts to transform the use of people, time, money, and technology so that all students receive the support they need to succeed. Based on this work ERS believes that successful school turnaround also requires district turnaround—fundamental changes in the way that districts think about and provide support for schools. ERS has identified five steps that districts can take in designing and implementing their school improvement programs that will increase the probability that their efforts will achieve lasting improvement:

1. **Understand what each school needs.** Districts must develop a comprehensive, systematic, and ongoing approach to identify the needs of schools, students, and teachers. Districts must evaluate the needs of current and incoming students, examine whether the principal and the teachers in the school have the skills required to address student needs, and assess school practices.

2. **Quantify what each school gets and how it is used.** Districts must identify all resources currently available to each school and understand how effectively schools are using those resources to improve instructional quality and meet individual student needs, through such strategies as teacher assignment and support, student grouping, and daily scheduling.

3. **Invest in the most important changes first.** Districts must aggressively target those challenges that make persistently low-performing schools different from other schools and provide the additional resources and support that each school needs to overcome the challenges. Key priorities, in order of importance, are to ensure each school has a strong school leader and teachers who collectively have the skills to meet student needs; to make sure that at-risk students receive basic health, social, and emotional support; to implement school designs that organize teaching expertise, time, and attention to match student needs; and to provide each school with the necessary central office support.

4. **Customize the strategy to the school.** Each school faces its own unique challenges--the needs of its particular students, the quality and skills of its leader and teachers, and the resources it currently receives. Districts must be thoughtful in tailoring the intervention strategy to each school's most pressing and critical needs.

5. **Change the district, not just the schools.** Strategies that focus only on changes at individual schools, without addressing the underlying systemwide structures that allowed these schools to fail in the first place, will not achieve lasting improvement. Districts must ensure these schools have the resources and support they need to succeed even after intervention efforts are over, and leverage the lessons learned from turnaround schools to implement broader reforms that support the ongoing improvement of other low-performing schools in the district.

There is no silver bullet—no single solution for how to turn a failing school around. But by taking these five steps district leaders can improve their probability for sustainable and scalable success.

Let's examine those steps in more detail.

Five steps for effective school improvement programs

Step 1: Understand what each school needs

A systematic assessment of the unique needs of every school in the district is an important first step in developing a sustainable school improvement program. This information will help district leaders identify which schools should qualify as "turnaround" schools—the lowest-performing schools with the highest level of need. Once these schools have been identified, a robust needs assessment is critical for providing each school with the specific resources and support it requires. But focusing only on a handful of the lowest-performing schools is not enough. School turnaround efforts should be part of an ongoing districtwide approach to hold all schools accountable for clearly defined results and to provide them with the support they need to succeed. In most large urban districts there are significant numbers of schools that require improvement, even if they do not officially qualify as "turnaround" schools. Districts need to understand the needs of these schools as well, in order to support their ongoing improvement efforts.

The federal School Improvement Grant, or SIG, program provides an excellent example of the previous point. Although SIG targets the 5,000 lowest-performing schools in the country, there are still thousands of struggling schools that do not qualify for this program, yet still need district intervention. Each state establishes the criteria for schools applying for program funds and determines the recipient schools, funding levels, and administration of the grant money. Still, even in the largest districts, only a handful of schools actually receive SIG funding, with many other schools just missing the cutoff.

In the case of Boston, the state of Massachusetts identified 12 schools as SIG-eligible, using an algorithm that considered a wide variety of factors.[2] An additional four schools were closed or consolidated.[3] These schools all scored less than 59 on the state's composite performance index, or CPI. Twenty-eight other schools, however, had a CPI of less than 65, only six points higher (on a 100-point scale) than the turnaround schools.[4] While these schools may not have been low

performing enough to attract SIG funding on a relative scale, they certainly merit attention and additional support from the district.

In order for districts to achieve sustainable improvement for all of their students, they need to develop school improvement programs that will benefit not just the lowest-performing, but all struggling schools. Districts can build these improvement programs by assessing three areas in detail: each school's specific student needs; staff capacity; and ability to meet established practice standards.

Student needs

Many turnaround strategies begin by looking at student needs. In fact, the School Improvement Grant application requires a needs assessment—a look at student performance and the incidence of special populations, such as free and reduced-price lunch students, special-education students, and English-language learners, or ELLs. This may be enough to identify turnaround schools. Yet in order to determine what support each of those schools needs, districts must drill down to understand student needs in more detail.

This detailed assessment should include: actual performance level for students scoring below proficient on state tests; disability level, and whether students are resource or self-contained for special education; the concentration of students across languages; and the level of English proficiency for ELLs. In addition, student mobility and the number of students in various risk categories, including extreme poverty and foster care, must be taken into account. Struggling schools that on the surface appear to have similar student populations may look very different when viewed through this detailed lens. Two schools, for instance, may have a similar percentage of students scoring below proficient on state exams, but in one school most of these students just miss proficiency, while the students in another school fall below proficient by several grade levels. These two schools require fundamentally different instructional strategies to get their students on track and this distinction is lost when looking only at overall measures.

Staff capacity

An in-depth look at student needs is only one piece of the puzzle. Districts must ensure that the principals and teachers at turnaround schools have the skills and capacity to create a culture of change and meet the considerable needs of their

students. Chronically underperforming schools are notoriously difficult to staff, a situation sometimes related to a lack of basic order and safety. Because of seniority transfer provisions in many districts, more experienced and effective principals and teachers may choose to move to higher-performing schools.

Further, principals and teachers in low-performing schools do not always receive the support they need and are quick to leave when the opportunity arises. As a result, many low-performing schools are led by novice principals, with an unstable teaching staff that includes a disproportionate number of teachers that are new to the school or new to teaching. In one large, urban district, for example, we found that more than 53 percent of teachers in schools in the lowest performance quartile of proficiency on state math and English language arts, or ELA, tests were new to the school within the past three years—and almost half of those were novice teachers who had been teaching fewer than three years—compared with only 40 percent in this highest performance quartile.[5] This situation is just the opposite of what is required to support the student populations at most struggling schools—they need a visionary leader and staff who believe that all students can achieve, organized into teams with the right mix of experience, content knowledge, and specialty expertise to address the significant needs of these students. Districts need to understand the experience level, skills, and capacity of the leaders and teachers at all schools within the district in order to assess both what changes are required at low-performing schools and what resources across the district are available to help support those changes.

School practices

Finally, in order to target support, district leaders need to evaluate individual school practices relative to "school essentials" or standards that districts have developed to reflect the most current research on what high-performing schools do to generate and sustain improvement.[6] Often these essential practices provide the framework for annual school improvement planning. While these lists vary somewhat by district they include many common elements, including a school culture of achievement, aligned curriculum and assessments, interventions for students not meeting standards, professional development, social and emotional support, family and community engagement, and resource alignment.[7]

Yet not all districts systematically evaluate how individual school practice aligns with these standards. Because so many low-performing schools face overwhelming odds—serving a high-need population with an unstable staff that lacks the

skills to meet student needs—they often are not able to implement these practices effectively. An objective review of school practices at all schools within the district will target areas for required district support at the lower-performing schools.[8]

A systematic evaluation of student needs, teacher and leader capacity, and school practice across all schools in the district provides a foundation for district leaders to identify which schools need additional intervention support—both SIG-eligible schools and others—and to determine the appropriate intervention strategy for each school.

Step 2: Quantify what each school gets now and how it is used

State and district leaders cannot make the best decisions about how to deploy federal, state, and district school improvement dollars without a detailed understanding of what each low-performing school currently receives in both dollars and staff, and how well those resources are organized to meet the needs of the students at that school.

Turnaround, by definition, should be temporary. Ideally, a struggling school enters turnaround status, receives additional support and resources to break the cycle of failure, and emerges at the end of the process as a higher-performing school ready and able to meet the ongoing needs of its students. Federal School Improvement Grants as well as other state- and district-level turnaround funding are designed to provide this transition funding to get schools back on their feet and build the systems, processes, and infrastructure they will need going forward.

But this model assumes the baseline resources at these schools—the funding, staff, and support they receive relative to their student population—are appropriate and are organized effectively to support their ongoing needs. In many low-performing schools they are not.

Despite funding policies and rules that are designed for equity, we consistently find significant disparities in resource levels among schools in the same district with similar student populations. In one of our partner districts, for example, we found variations among schools of up to 200 percent in per-pupil funding. Even after the addition of school improvement funding, some targeted schools remained well below the funding median of the district overall, while other schools that were already funded at very high levels received the same or greater turnaround funding.[9] These differences are often undetected due to limitations of district budget

allocation and reporting systems. The magnitude and drivers of inequity vary among districts but the most significant sources of variation are differences in student needs, differences in staff capacity, and differences in school size.

Student needs

Most districts have mechanisms for providing additional resources for special student populations, including students in poverty, special education students, and English-language learners. Yet because many of the programs aimed at these students are administered at the district level and are not tracked to the individual school level, how those resources are actually allocated both among and within schools can be unclear.

In addition, districts often do not provide additional funding to schools or students based on proficiency level, which means that students who are struggling do not receive additional resources unless they fall into one of the special categories listed above. In order to avoid paying schools a "bonus" if their students don't perform, this additional funding should not be triggered by overall poor performance but instead be tied to incoming student proficiency for secondary school, and to other early assessments such as kindergarten and first-grade reading readiness for elementary school.

Chronically low-performing schools with significant populations of students in all these categories will need ongoing additional resources to support these students. The temporary funding they receive as part of a turnaround program, while jump-starting effective support for these students, is not enough to sustain improvement. Districts should look at general education funding per pupil as well as incremental per-pupil spending for special population categories across schools to ensure that all schools are receiving funding that is in line with their students' needs.

School staff

Funding systems that allocate staff to schools based on staff-to-student ratios or that use average instead of actual salary can mask differences in cost and quality of leadership and teaching staff across schools. An example of this is the comparability requirement for federal Title I funds. These funds are targeted at students in poverty and schools with high proportions of students in poverty. Title I schools are required to offer services comparable to those in non-Title I schools but

comparability is assessed in terms of staffing ratios—numbers of teachers and staff per student. The requirement is indifferent to the resource implications associated with actual teacher salaries, which are closely tied to levels of experience.[10]

In addition, ensuring access to the same number of teachers does not guarantee access to the same caliber of teaching. In practice, teachers at lower-performing schools are more likely to be novice teachers who are less effective, on average, than teachers with 5 to 10 years of experience. They are likely to have been at the school for less time and to be rated less highly than their peers at higher-performing schools on the district performance evaluation system. In one large, urban district, we found only 40 percent of teachers in the worst-performing schools were given the highest performance ratings, as compared to 73 percent of teachers in the top tier of schools.[11] Clearly there is a cause and effect question here—do successful schools perform better because they have more effective teachers or do more effective teachers gravitate to higher-performing schools?

The answer is some of both. Generally the schools in the top tier provide more attractive working conditions—stronger principals; more support structures; more effective teachers as colleagues; and student populations with lower levels of need, including students below proficient, special education students, and English-language learners. As a result, more effective teachers with more choice about where they work often choose the higher-performing schools rather than the struggling ones.[12]

It is important that districts examine teacher experience, teacher compensation, and if possible, teacher effectiveness or evaluation scores across schools to understand how teaching expertise is being deployed to low-performing schools. While average teacher salary at a school is not currently a proxy for average teacher quality (because in most districts salary rises with experience and educational attainment, not effectiveness), schools with relatively lower average salaries may require additional support if they have a large number of novice teachers or teachers without the appropriate mix of skills and experience to support the students at that school.

School size and capacity

Districts with large numbers of very small or underfilled schools may be paying a premium to operate these schools. Small schools can cost more per pupil

because administrative and schoolwide positions are spread over fewer students, and because small schools often receive additional district funding to ensure they can deliver a full spectrum of services. But this additional investment isn't necessarily directed toward core academic instruction. District leaders should examine whether changing funding rules for small schools (allowing school leaders, for example, to trade in administrative positions for teachers, or using part-time allocations) can focus more spending toward improving instruction, and whether larger schools may be underfunded relative to their smaller counterparts.

In many urban districts with declining enrollment, unused school seats may be tying up valuable resources. These resources could potentially be freed up by taking the difficult step of consolidating students and closing schools. Although the actual annual savings from closing a particular school will depend on many factors, including the size and cost of the school to begin with, and whether students can be placed into existing capacity in other schools, per-school savings estimates in districts with which we've worked are in the $1 million to $2 million range.[13] In districts with school choice, many students choose not to attend the lowest-performing schools, and so these schools are often the most underenrolled. In this situation, school closure may not only save costs but might also be an important part of an overall school improvement strategy.

How well schools use what they have

How schools use their people and time to support their instructional goals is as important as how much funding they receive. Traditional structures and organizational patterns remain the rule in most schools and drive how schools use their resources. In typical elementary schools, one teacher teaches a class of 20 to 30 students and students receive specialty subject instruction (physical education and art, for example) in those same groups of 20 to 30. In most secondary school models the day is broken into six or seven roughly equal periods. As a result, the average high school student spends approximately 15 percent to 17 percent of his or her day in English language arts and the same in math. Class sizes do vary by grade and subject, but not in a way that focuses scarce resources in critical areas. Instead critical, transitional grades (sixth grade in middle school, ninth grade in high school) and core required subjects, such as math and ELA, have the largest class sizes, while 11th- and 12th-grade elective courses have the smallest.[14] When students are significantly behind grade level, as is the case in many low-performing schools, this traditional design results in a severe underinvestment of time and

attention in core subjects for students needing the most acceleration. An intervention strategy for low-performing schools must ensure that schools adapt their use of existing time and staff in order to provide struggling students with the additional time and small group instruction that they need.

Step 3: Invest in the most important changes first

There is growing consensus that the most important contributor to improvements in student performance is the quality of the teaching the students receive.[18] Ensuring that each school has a transformational leader and a critical mass of high-capacity teachers who can create a culture of achievement and work together to continuously improve instruction based on student results therefore must be at the heart of a successful turnaround program. Without this foundation, any additional investments cannot return the results students in these schools so desperately need. For example, spending to extend the school day to provide additional

School design strategies for accelerating learning

Many schools will need to extend time beyond the school day in order to provide enough time for students who are significantly behind to improve. Before investing in extending time, however, which can be expensive, schools need to make the most of the time and staff they have. There are a variety of strategies for doing this, including:

- Strategically reduce class sizes in core academic subjects, particularly ELA and math, in critical grades and for struggling students, while allowing larger class sizes in other areas.
- Use student grouping strategies to provide additional time and attention to struggling students. These include fluid, flexible grouping strategies where specialist teachers come into the classroom for blocks of time each day and students are divided into groups of six to eight for differentiated instruction based on their immediate learning needs, and looping strategies where students stay with the same teacher for two or more years at a time.[15]
- Change the bell schedule to a block or other scheduling approach that creates longer blocks of math or ELA instruction and reduces the number of students for whom a teacher is responsible. This strategy leaves class size the same but reduces teacher student load: instead of teaching five 45-minute sections of 25 students, a teacher would teach two 90-minute sections and one 45-minute section for a total of 75 unique students instead of 125.
- Investigate creative ways to offer the specialty subjects that can be so critical to engaging students. Offer these specialty subjects in larger classes, outside of school hours, or through partnerships with community organizations. One middle school in Cambridge, MA, takes advantage of its proximity to numerous universities, hiring part-time staff to offer specialty subjects throughout the school day while freeing up core teachers for collaborative planning.[16] In another high school, all teachers provide elective and noncore courses during the last two weeks of the school year so that students and staff can focus on core academic areas during the rest of the year. [17]

support for students two to three years behind grade level can be valuable—but only if the school already has a teacher corps with the capacity, support, and instructional practices to use that extra time effectively.

We have divided possible interventions into three categories that are summarized here and described in more detail later:

Mission critical interventions must be the top priority for any turnaround strategy:

- A transformational leader with a clear vision for and commitment to improvement, and the authority to implement that vision
- Teams of teachers with the skills, expertise, and support to meet student needs
- Basic social, emotional, and health support for at-risk students to ensure they come to school able to learn

Second-tier interventions are also important, but should only be considered once mission critical elements are in place:

- Additional time and individual attention in core subjects both within and beyond the school day for students who have fallen behind
- Central office roles and processes that foster school-level improvements and demand accountability for results

Low-leverage interventions may not have the same sustainable impact relative to their costs as the two categories above, especially if they are not tightly integrated with the overall instruction vision and strategy:

- Extra time after school that is not integrated with core instruction
- Standalone tutoring programs[19]
- Across-the-board class-size reduction

The most important priority for any school turnaround effort must be to ensure that each target school has a proven leader with the skills, vision, and flexibility to implement the radical changes necessary for improvement. State regulations and collective bargaining agreements may limit the hiring, assignment, or removal of teachers. But for turnaround efforts to take root, the school leader must have the authority to create teams of teachers who collectively have the content, instructional, and specialty expertise to meet the significant needs of the students in the school, even if this means replacing some or all of the existing staff. This does not

necessarily imply that every turnaround school must have a new principal and a different set of teachers to succeed (although in order to be eligible for SIG funding, schools must replace any principal who has been in his position for more than two years). Nor does it mean that every principal and teacher currently in a low-performing school is inadequate.

What is critical, however, is that the school leader, the team of teachers, and all the other staff in the building have a shared belief that the school can succeed. They must share a vision for how they will achieve that success and must collectively have the skills and experience to meet the needs of the students in the building. While it is likely there will be some ineffective teachers or school leaders who should be removed from the district altogether, others may have skills that could be better utilized at another school or in a different role.

These schools will likely also need additional support for school leaders in the form of a high-quality assistant principal or business manager to share instructional leadership and/or administrative duties, along with expert support for teachers in the form of full-time instructional coaches or part-time teacher leaders. Districts should consider providing incentives to attract high-performing leaders and teachers to turnaround schools. These may include additional pay, but could also include targeted professional development (such as cross certification); the opportunity to transfer with other members of a high-performing team; the recognition of being tapped for a critical position in a high-priority school; or the opportunity to take on additional responsibilities, such as the role of coach or teacher leader for additional pay.

The second priority for investment is support for at-risk students. Chronically or persistently low-performing schools generally have high populations of at-risk students—students who face tremendous challenges to academic success due to external factors such as extreme poverty, incarceration, foster care, or health problems. Districts and schools must ensure that these students have access to basic social, emotional, and health support to ensure that these students are ready and able to learn. While it is not practical or necessarily desirable for schools and districts to take on responsibility for meeting all of students' health and social needs, district leaders should explore partnerships with community-based organizations to fill these gaps. The City Connects program in Boston connects public schools with existing community resources and "places master's-trained professionals (school counselor or school social worker) in schools to … connect students to services and resources inside and outside of school and work closely with school staff to create a healthy environment where teaching and learning can take place."[20]

With the right staff and support in place, turnaround efforts next should focus on providing students with the time and attention they need to succeed. Students who have fallen far behind their peers need the most help and the strongest interventions. Successful turnaround depends on providing enough time and support for these students to make up ground. This may include extending the school day but will also likely mean changing the way existing time is used to increase time spent on core academic subjects in addition to providing small group instruction throughout the day and week for struggling students.

Finally, states and districts also must provide additional central support and accountability to these schools so that schools receive the resources and direction they need. These schools need intensive problem-solving support as well as help from other central functions, such as human resources and special education, to make the radical changes needed in school structure, staffing, and instruction. This should include particular attention to helping school leaders attract the right mix of teaching skills and experience to the school, including specialists in literacy, special education, and ELL.

Many other common turnaround investments have not demonstrated the same sustainable impact relative to their costs as the areas outlined above. These areas include standalone tutoring programs, extra time after school that is not integrated with core instruction, and across-the-board class-size reductions.[21] Districts should approach them with caution, funding them only if additional resources are available. In this case of class-size reduction, in particular, the cost of blanket policies is prohibitive for all intents and purposes. Highly targeted class-size reduction, such as first grade in high-poverty schools serving significant numbers of ELLs, could be a cost-effective program but not a mission critical one.

An examination of several recent urban school turnaround efforts provides an instructive example of how prioritizing interventions and customizing them to school needs can work. Charlotte-Mecklenburg's Strategic Staffing schools; Atlanta's Project GRAD schools; and New York City's Chancellor's District schools are all generally considered successful, with each experiencing measurable increases in student performance.[22] Each of them focused squarely on ensuring that mission critical interventions were in place at each school.

In Charlotte, Superintendent Pete Gorman handpicked the strongest principals in his district—men and women who were leading some of the district's strongest schools—and personally asked them to take on the challenge of leading the

lowest-performing schools. This move originally created controversy at some of the schools that were losing high-performing principals, but Gorman and the principals pointed out the district's responsibility to make sure that the highest-need students receive the leadership they deserve. The Strategic Staffing principals transferred to their new schools in March in order to give them time to meet the staff and assess school needs well in advance of the next school year. After school ended in June, principals had the opportunity to bring in a turnaround team including an assistant principal, a literacy specialist, and up to five teachers recruited from high performers across the district. They were also allowed to remove up to five teachers who were not a good fit for or not fully committed to the school's improvement vision and needs.

In addition to the staffing changes outlined above, Strategic Staffing schools were included in Charlotte's "Freedom and Flexibility" program, which gave them increased flexibility over how they use time and staff. Principals were given very clear performance goals and a three-year window to achieve these goals, as well as ongoing data on student performance and other key metrics. Area superintendents responsible for Strategic Staffing schools were given reduced spans of control—overseeing only half as many schools as other area superintendents—in order to focus more energy and attention on these schools. None of the Strategic Staffing schools extended student time.

The results of the Strategic Staffing initiative to date have been impressive. There are now 19 schools in the program and improvements in student proficiency in ELA and math at cohort 1 schools are running at two to three times the district average. This program had a relatively modest price tag of less than $200,000 per school but achieved major results because the money was targeted to mission critical investments.

Atlanta's Project GRAD program was implemented after a districtwide effort to increase elementary school teaching and leadership quality. As a result, most of the Project GRAD schools had principals that were new to the school, although changing principals was not part of Project GRAD itself. In addition, many teachers in these schools had been replaced as part of the previous effort. With the right leadership and teaching core in place, the project focused on supporting teachers with additional coaching and providing additional tutoring and social and emotional support for struggling students.

The average project investment was similar to that in Charlotte—approximately $250,000 per school, and the results were positive. The percentage of fourth grad-

ers in Project GRAD schools meeting or exceeding reading standards in these schools increased 35 percent from the 2000-01 school year to the 2002-03 school year, compared to 28 percent in the district overall.

In New York City, Chancellor Rudy Crew removed 58 chronically underperforming middle and elementary schools from their community district, consolidating them into a centrally run Chancellor's District. The principals and underperforming teachers in most of these schools were replaced and incentives such as additional pay for extended hours and intensive coaching support were used to attract high-performing teachers to these schools. Schools in the Chancellor's District also offered expanded school days and smaller class sizes relative to their counterparts in the rest of the district. Moreover, schools in the Chancellor's District were able to offer additional tutoring for struggling students. But more importantly, these investments were made in addition to ensuring that the right teachers and leaders were in place.

Between the 1998-99 and 2001-02 school years, the percentage of fourth graders meeting or exceeding reading standards in these schools increased 17 percent, compared to 12 percent in comparable schools. The average investment per Chancellor's school was about $2.4 million, or $3,500 per pupil, with the largest single investment being extended learning time. Unfortunately, political pressure associated with the extra investments in the Chancellor's District led to its dissolution in 2002.[23]

Compare these results to a fourth urban district's turnaround effort. In this particular program the district spent more than $1 million per school, primarily to extend learning time by 30 minutes per day. But aside from adding an instructional coach to each school, the district did not make any other staff changes at these schools. The failure to first make the difficult changes to ensure the right team was in place meant the extra time did not increase student achievement and the program was discontinued.[24]

Step 4: Customize the strategy to each school

District leaders should create customized turnaround approaches and funding levels for each school based on what that school needs and the resources it currently receives. In some cases this may mean closing low-performing schools. If a school has a significant number of empty seats, a higher proportion of students with extraordinary learning challenges than other schools, a large number of underperforming teachers, and there are higher-quality schools nearby where these students can be placed, school closure may be the best option.[25]

In districts where there are severe collective bargaining constraints on teacher and principal hiring, transfer, and scheduling, district leadership must work with unions to negotiate changes or exception for these schools to allow school leaders to assemble the right staff and provide them with the time and support they need to serve the high-need student populations in these schools. In 2009, the School District of Philadelphia negotiated a groundbreaking contract with the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers that explicitly increased principal flexibility around staffing and teacher time for struggling schools. Principals in chronically underperforming schools were given the ability to increase the school day by up to one hour and the school year by up to two Saturdays per month and up to 22 days in July. They were also given discretion over the use of one teacher planning period per week. In addition, in these schools, all teachers in each school needed to reapply for their positions, with a limit of 50 percent of applying teachers being rehired to the same school.[26] District leaders also may want to consider contracting with a charter management or other external organization that is able to organize resources to best meet student needs.

Where districts are able to provide increased flexibility around hiring, assignment, and scheduling, the biggest challenge will likely be figuring out how to attract the right leader and mix of teachers to these hard-to-staff schools. The key is that the strategy for each school be grounded in that school's specific needs, and that it ensures first that mission critical elements of strong leaders and teacher teams and support for at-risk students are in place, and then invests in second-tier areas such as organizing time and attention to support struggling students as required.

If a district has schools that are eligible for School Improvement Grant funding, the strategy for those schools will need to fit into one of four federal intervention strategies. These strategies are designed to promote the radical changes that these schools often need—focusing on creating the mission critical conditions for success. If district leaders have systematically assessed school needs and identified which of the mission critical and second-tier elements need to be addressed, it should be relatively easy to match each school with the most appropriate federal strategy. But this is often not how a federal intervention strategy is selected for each school.

In many cases the choice is based on which strategy is the least disruptive and easiest to "sell" to the various constituencies. Transformation—replacing the principal and implementing a series of other reforms—does not require remov-

ing any teachers and is therefore the "easiest" choice. Since SIG guidelines require no more than 50 percent of schools use the transformation model, districts must implement one of the other models in the remainder of schools in order to receive funding: turnaround—replace the principal and rehire no more than 50 percent of staff; restart—transfer control of, or close and reopen a school under external management; and finally, school closure. But the danger is that the least disruptive strategy, transformation, will also be the most common.

Unfortunately, unless the school already has a strong and committed teaching staff with the skills needed for radical improvement (which is unlikely in a failing school), this strategy will not address the mission critical conditions and therefore will likely not succeed. Districts that take this "path of least resistance" miss the opportunity to leverage these federal mandates and the promise of accompanying funding to make the bold changes in staffing, scheduling, and even closing schools that would not be possible otherwise.

Step 5: Change the district, not just the school

Radical turnaround programs focused on a handful of the lowest-performing schools can be a powerful catalyst for change. Relaxing district and union rules (or removing these schools from district oversight through a charter or contract process) in order to provide additional flexibility around staffing and scheduling is easier to accomplish on an exception basis. Finding the right mix of leaders and teachers from within and outside the larger district is more feasible on such a small scale. And, when successful, these new models provide inspiration and motivation to the entire community demonstrating that these schools can succeed given the right staff, conditions, and support.

Yet if these programs focus only on the individual school, if district systems and processes remain the same, and if the most successful schools lose the special exceptions and additional support and funding they received once their performance improves slightly, their success will not be sustainable or scalable. If the underlying conditions surrounding these schools do not change they will remain the exception rather than the rule, and district leaders will have lost a valuable opportunity to capitalize on their accomplishments.

Struggling schools are likely to continue to serve a population with significant needs even after turnaround efforts are over. Therefore, districts need to ensure that

all schools in their districts receive the appropriate level of ongoing funding relative to the needs of their students regardless of transitional turnaround funding.

In Step 2, we described a process of evaluating what level of baseline funding each school receives and how well that funding is used. This process should be repeated annually and funding systems should be refined in order to ensure that each school receives a fair piece of the pie and makes the most of it. Weighted student-funding systems that provide schools with dollars instead of staff allocations make it easier to track how much each school gets relative to their student population, but even these systems require careful analysis in determining which weights are assigned to which types of students in order to provide the most equitable result.

Which student categories receive additional weighting? Special-education, ELL, and free- and reduced-lunch students are often included, but districts should also consider providing additional funding based on incoming student proficiency levels, and the number of students in multiple categories.

How nuanced are the weighting categories? It may be appropriate to have several weights within special education, for example, depending on the disability level, or to have a different weight for free lunch than reduced-price lunch, or for students several levels behind grade level versus just one or two grade levels. These decisions will depend on how much these more detailed categories vary among schools in each district.

District and state leaders also need to examine ways to increase the pipeline of school leaders and teachers with the skills and desire to teach in the most challenging schools. While it may be possible to attract outstanding school leaders and teacher teams to turnaround schools by targeting the "best and brightest" in the district, this approach is not scalable over the long term. And it may not even be sustainable in turnaround schools if incentives for attracting the best teachers and leaders disappear with transition funding. Districts should think carefully about how they fill assistant principal and other school leadership positions—targeting candidates with the highest potential to be successful school leaders and staffing them in positions that provide them with the support and mentoring to move to the next level. This might include pairing them with successful principals or staffing newly promoted principals at a higher-performing school with an experienced or retired principal as a mentor for two to three years before moving them to a low-performing school.

In addition, districts and states need to evaluate the quality of teacher certification programs—which programs are producing the teachers that have the best long-term outcomes in terms of performance and retention, and which are falling short. Districts can strengthen ties with their best hiring sources, and stop or reduce hiring from poor sources. They should communicate their experiences to the certification programs and to their states that may be able to increase pressure on these programs to improve. Districts may also want to explore partnering with nontraditional certification programs like Teach for America or The New Teacher Project. And they should focus on recruiting and developing teachers with the right mix of skills to teach at schools with high student needs. This might include providing training and funding to cross-certify special-education teachers and ELL teachers in content areas and vice versa, and establishing teacher-leader or other more senior (and highly compensated) positions in low-performing schools that can both attract high-performing teachers and leverage their skills to train their peers.

It is also important for district leaders to continue to annually assess how leaders and teachers are distributed across schools in the district and develop mechanisms to increase the quality of teachers and leaders in high-need schools. If financial incentives for effective teachers to teach at turnaround schools were a successful part of the turnaround program, districts should look at ways to sustain these incentives and even expand them. But other, less costly incentives can also be attractive. Many teachers are motivated to move to a challenging environment by the chance to work with a school leader and other teachers who share their drive and vision. Districts should look for opportunities to allow teams of high-performing teachers or teachers and leaders to transfer to a low-performing school together. Another opportunity mentioned above, is to create more senior leadership positions at low-performing schools that allow strong teachers to have more responsibility, leveraging their skills and experience through leading and mentoring others, and giving those teachers the opportunity to make more money.

If a district has built a successful central office processes to support its turnaround programs, it can leverage these successes districtwide. Districts should consider these opportunities even as they design their turnaround programs. For instance, an investment in developing better student data systems or student assessments that is funded by turnaround dollars could easily be expanded more broadly at relatively low cost. More rigorous accountability systems or an improved process for supporting principals in removing low-performing teachers can in many cases be rolled out across the district. In addition, districts need to get feedback from

school leaders and teachers at successful turnaround schools to understand which elements were most instrumental to their success and investigate ways to replicate those changes more broadly.

Finally, districts should leverage the success of turnaround schools to increase flexibility for all schools to adapt their staffing, scheduling, and instruction to meet the needs of their particular students.

If district policies around staffing (more flexibility to swap positions, or assignment of part-time FTEs), scheduling (more flexibility around time-in-seat or class-size requirements), or spending (more discretion around funding streams) were changed for turnaround schools, districts should consider providing this same flexibility across the board. In some cases, not all principals will have the capacity or training to make the best decisions with this increased freedom, so districts may want to consider a graduated approach that provides more flexibility to some principals based on experience and performance. If districts were able to work with unions and states to provide more flexibility around hiring, transfer, and removal of teachers and principals, or around the use of teacher time, they should collaborate to understand which elements of these programs worked well and which did not, and which elements might be expanded to other low-performing schools or to the district.

Conclusion

The continued challenge of turning around the nation's lowest-performing schools is daunting. But the current focus and funding provides an opportunity to break down the structures that have limited school improvement efforts in the past, and develop a new vision for how to best serve the nation's neediest students.

There is no single model for what makes a successful turnaround school. But an approach that is grounded in a systemwide assessment of what each school needs and what resources they already receive to meet those needs will be better able to target their baseline and turnaround investments towards the schools and the specific interventions that are most leveraged. District leaders who can work collaboratively with their state, unions, and community to take the difficult first steps, including closing or reconstituting schools where appropriate and replacing school leaders and teachers where necessary, will improve their chances of success. And the districts that are able to use their turnaround efforts as a catalyst to transform the way that all schools are funded, managed, and supported will create a foundation for sustainable improvement at scale.

Endnotes

1 Andrew Calkins and others, "The Turnaround Challenge: Why America's best opportunity to dramatically improve student achievement lies within our worst-performing schools" (Boston: Mass Insight Education and Research Institute, 2007).

2 "Turnaround Schools," available at http://stepupboston.webnode.com/news/turnaround-schools/.

3 Boston Public Schools, "School Committee Approves Superintendent Johnson's Reorganization Plan," Press release, November 7, 2008, available at http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/node/1738.

4 "MCAS Tests of Spring 2010: Percent of Students at Each Performance Level for Boston," available at http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/mcas/performance_level.aspx?linkid=32&orgcode=00350000&orgtypecode=5&&dropDownOrgCode=2.

5 Education Resource Strategies, "The Teaching Job: Restructuring for Effectiveness" (2010).

6 Gary Ratner and Monty Neill, "Common Elements of Successful School Turnarounds: Research and Experience," available at http://www.edaccountability.org/pdf/CommonElementsSuccessfulSchoolTurnarounds.pdf.

7 Calkins and others, "The Turnaround Challenge."

8 Education Resource Strategies, "Turnaround Schools: District Strategies for Success and Sustainability" (2010).

9 Ibid.

10 Saba Bireda and Raegen Miller, "Walking the Talk: Closing the Comparability Requirement Loophole in Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2010).

11 ERS, "Turnaround Schools."

12 Susan Moore Johnson and Sarah E. Birkeland, "The Schools that Teachers Choose," *Educational Leadership* 60 (8) (2003): 20–24.

13 James Vaznis, "School closings may not ease woes," *The Boston Globe*, October 8, 2010, available at http://www.boston.com/yourtown/boston/hydepark/articles/2010/10/08/school_closings_may_not_ease_woes/; ERS analysis, 2006.

14 Education Resource Strategies, "School Design: Leveraging Talent, Time, and Money" (2010).

15 Karen Walker, "Research Brief: Looping" (The Principals' Partnership, June 2004).

16 Karen Hawley Miles and Stephen Frank, *The Strategic School: Making the Most of People, Time, and Money* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2008); Regis Shields and Karen Miles, "Strategic Designs: Lessons from Leading Edge Small Urban High Schools" (Watertown: Education Resource Strategies, 2008).

17 Regis Shields and others, "Relevance Strategic Designs: Life Academy of Health and Bioscience" (Watertown: Education Resource Strategies, 2008).

18 Center for Public Education, "Teaching Quality and Student Achievement," 2005; available at http://www.aspeninstitute.org/sites/default/files/content/docs/education%20and%20society%20program/Teacher Quality_and_Student_Achievement_CPE.pdf XX DEAD LINK XX; Linda Darling-Hammond, "Teacher Quality and Student Achievement: A Review of State Policy Evidence," *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 8 (1) (2000); Robert Gordon, Thomas J. Kane, and Douglas O. Staiger, "Identifying Effective Teachers Using Performance on the Job," (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 2006).

19 Carolyn J. Heinrich, Robert H. Meyer, and Greg Whitten, "Supplemental Education Services Under No Child Left Behind: Who Signs Up, and What Do They Gain?", *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 32 (2) (2010): 273–298.

20 "Welcome to City Connects," available at http://www.bc.edu/schools/lsoe/bostonconnects/.

21 Miles and Frank, *The Strategic School*.

22 This paper draws on analyses produced as part of Education Resource Strategies's engagement with client districts, including Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools and another large, urban district, both in the period from 2008 to 2010. This information is complemented by publicly available documents. See: Jonathan Travers and Barbara Christainsen, "Breaking the Cycle of Failure in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools" (Watertown, MA: Education Resource Strategies, 2010); Deinya Phenix and others, "Virtual District, Real Improvement: A Retrospective Evaluation of the Chancellor's District, 1996-2003" (New York: Institute for Education and Social Policy, 2004).

23 "New York City's Chancellor's District: District Turnaround Strategy Profile," available at http://www.massinsight.org/publications/stg-resources/99/file/4/pubs/2010/04/20/III_District_Profile_NYC_CD.pdf.

24 ERS, "Turnaround Schools."

25 While unfilled seats alone should not drive school closure, as a rough guideline, schools in which more than 25 percent of available space is not used represent a red flag that the district needs to address some fundamental structural issues. Weighing a number of factors, including projected population growth and the physical condition of the building, it could be that a school that does not use 10 percent of its space should be closed, and another that does not use 30 percent of its space should not be closed. The point is that performance can be used to stimulate a decision-making process that is notoriously political, and that multiple data points should be brought to bear on the decisions.

26 "What the New Contract with the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers Means," available at http://www.philasd.org/announcements/pft_contract.pdf.

About the author

Karen Baroody is the managing director of Education Resource Strategies, Inc., a nonprofit organization dedicated to changing the way people, time, and money are used in urban education so that all students receive the support they need to succeed. Baroody is responsible for business development, strategic planning, and internal operations. She manages grants and outside partnerships and edits many of ERS's publications and tools, notably the Resource Guides. Prior to joining ERS, Baroody worked as a senior vice president at Fidelity Investments. Over a 15-year span at Fidelity, Karen worked in many areas, including the retail mutual fund and brokerage businesses and the 401(k) division. Before joining Fidelity, she was a management consultant at Bain & Company. Baroody holds a bachelor of arts in mathematics from Princeton University.

Acknowledgment

The Center for American Progress thanks The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation for their sponsorship of this publication as well as their ongoing support of our education programs. The thoughts and opinions presented in this report are those of American Progress alone, and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the foundation.

The Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values. We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is "of the people, by the people, and for the people."

Center for American Progress

Made possible with support from the broad foundation education

1333 H STREET, NW, 10TH FLOOR, WASHINGTON, DC 20005 • TEL: 202-682-1611 • FAX: 202-682-1867 • WWW.AMERICANPROGRESS.ORG