U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

# Achieving Dramatic School Improvement: An Exploratory Study

# Achieving Dramatic School Improvement: An Exploratory Study

A Cross-site Analysis From the Evaluation of Comprehensive School Reform Program Implementation and Outcomes Study

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# PREFACE

This report from the Evaluation of the Comprehensive School Reform Program Implementation and Outcomes (ECSRIO) presents findings about low-performing schools that dramatically improved their performance. It follows prior research from this study examining the implementation and outcomes of the federal Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) program.

The CSR program was established as a demonstration program in 1998 and authorized as a full program in 2002 as part of the reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)*. It is one approach to help low-performing K–12 public schools meet state performance standards.

In 2006, the U.S. Department of Education contracted with WestEd and American Institutes for Research to add an additional substudy to ECSRIO, involving case studies of 11 CSR schools. The focus of this study is on schools that made significant improvements in student achievement in a relatively short (one- to two-year) time frame as well as at a slower, steadier pace over a longer period.

To avoid reader confusion, we want to emphasize that this study examines quick-and-dramatic as well as slow-and-steady school improvement retrospectively, seeking to understand the policies, programs, and practices that contributed to "turning around" these schools' performance. This stands in contrast to current federal policy objectives that aim to prospectively identify the lowest-performing schools in each state as targets for concerted turnaround interventions. The findings of this study can inform the development of high quality school turnaround designs and programs in these sites. In addition, this report concludes with suggestions for an ongoing research agenda for contemporaneously studying low-performing schools that are targeted for school turnaround.

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Jennifer O'Day of American Institutes for Research reviewed multiple drafts of this report. Her probing, insightful, and challenging questions improved the report immeasurably

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Improving persistently low-performing schools is a core goal of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB),* the most recent reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.* As a result, policymakers have sought ways to address the increasingly large numbers of schools identified as low-performing. Across the nation, 13,457 schools failed to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) in 2007–08. Of those, 1,583 were planning for restructuring, and 3,358 were in the first year of implementing restructuring. These numbers are likely to rise because many states have established progressively ambitious targets for meeting the *NCLB* goal of student proficiency by 2013–14.[1]

School reform research suggests that multiple factors contribute to improvement: leadership and staffing, school climate, instructional improvement strategies, and external (district, state, federal) support. Furthermore, a large body of research accumulated over several decades indicates that the interplay of these components is complex and improvement is incremental, occurring over several years—what we call in this report slow-and-steady. For example, studies of comprehensive school reform suggest that implementation for at least three to five years is typically the time necessary to see student achievement improve (Aladjem et al., 2006; Borman et al., 2003; Desimone, 2000; Zhang et al., 2006).

The pressure to meet *NCLB's* 2014 deadline has motivated many policymakers to question this widely held consensus that it takes at least three to five years to improve failing schools enough to produce substantial gains in student achievement. Some policy analysts have asked what can be learned from the private sector about quick and dramatic organizational improvement. Recent literature draws lessons from failing businesses and corporations that have turned around. This literature suggests that schools can accelerate reform efforts and see the same sort of quick, dramatic improvement if they engage in a process—characterized by strong leadership, a clear focus on improving instruction, achievement of "quick wins," and building of a committed staff—similar to that used by successful corporations.[2] The business-model literature suggests that much more rapid-improvement is possible in less time than the usual three to five years.

To avoid reader confusion, we want to emphasize that this study examines quick-and-dramatic as well as slow-and-steady school improvement retrospectively, seeking to understand the policies, programs, and practices that contributed to "turning around" these schools' performance. This stands in contrast to current federal policy objectives that aim to prospectively identify the lowest-performing schools in each state as targets for concerted turnaround interventions. The findings of this study strongly support this proactive approach and can inform the development of high quality school turnaround designs and programs in these sites. In addition, this report concludes with suggestions for an ongoing research agenda for contemporaneously studying low-performing schools that are targeted for school turnaround.

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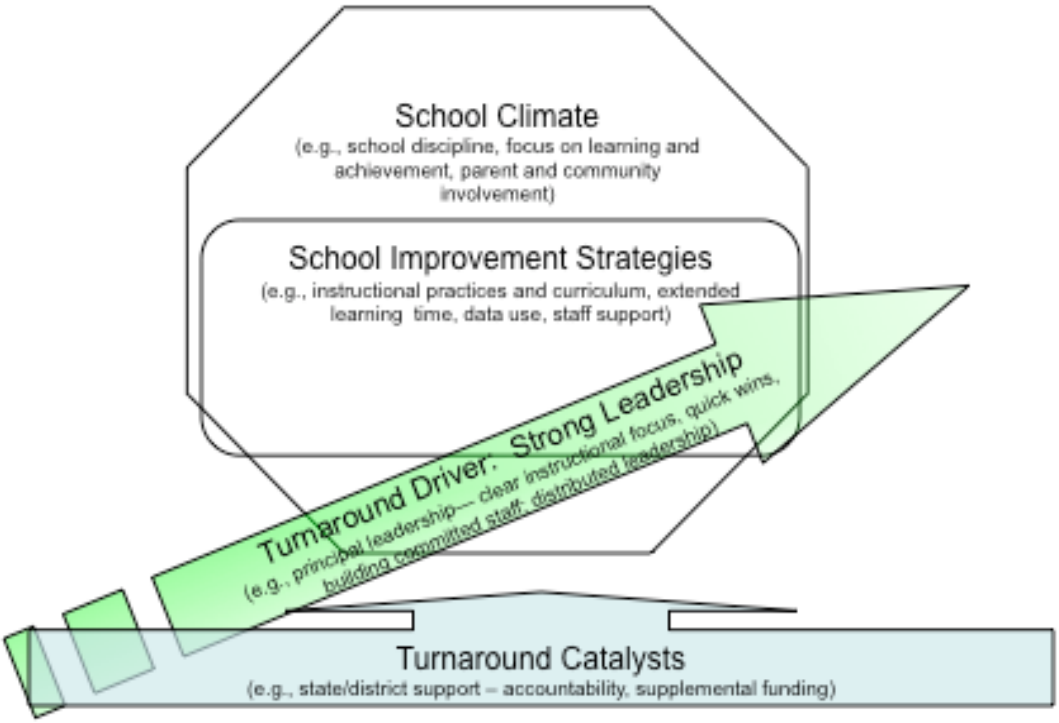
1 http://www.ed.gov/programs/statestabilization/schooldata.pdf

2 Herman and colleagues (2008) point out that there is little rigorous evidence to support this conception, although there is a consensus on which factors seem related to turning around low-performing schools based on the current state of the research literature.

Exhibit E.1 displays the integrated framework that guides this report. As shown in the exhibit, school climate (or, more specifically, the school's disciplinary policies and activities, focus on learning and achievement, and extent of parent and community involvement) is an integral part of the school, represented by the octagon. The school improvement strategies box reflects many of the components emphasized in the literature on school change, including instructional practices and curriculum, extended learning time, data use, and support for staff.

The remaining parts of the exhibit unite school reform research and the business perspective on school improvement. The arrow striking through the school octagon represents the business perspective that focuses on the driving role that leadership—both principal leadership and distributed leadership—plays in achieving school improvement. The arrow pointing to the bottom of the octagon represents external factors that are important potential catalysts for school improvement including federal and state accountability requirements, state and district technical support such as professional development, and supplemental outside funding.

**Exhibit E.1**
**Integrated Framework for School Improvement**




Prior research on factors that contribute to school improvement and recent literature on models of rapid school improvement led us to the following research questions for this exploratory study:

**To what extent do rapid-improvement CSR schools exist (i.e., schools that have made quick and dramatic improvement in student achievement)? Could we locate them among a**

**national pool of Comprehensive School Reform−funded schools engaged in improvement efforts?**

**Did the processes of reform across rapid-improvement schools and initially low-performing schools that steadily improved at a slower pace (i.e., slow-and-steady) reflect the characteristics and strategies found in prior research on school improvement?**

**Did rapid-improvement schools differ in observable, systematic ways from slow-and-steady schools?**

**How did rapid-improvement schools and slow-and-steady schools address challenges to implementing and sustaining improvement strategies?**

This set of case studies, conducted jointly by WestEd and the American Institutes for Research, is part of a larger study, the Evaluation of the Comprehensive School Reform Program Implementation and Outcomes. In 2001, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) contracted with WestEd to conduct a longitudinal study of the Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) program. The case studies had two purposes: to conduct in-depth, retrospective case studies to examine schools nationwide that received CSR grants and that demonstrated significant improvement in student achievement; and to understand the processes and practices in which they engaged to accomplish this improvement.

## Methodology

This exploratory study describes approaches to improving schools through retrospective, in-depth qualitative case studies. To select schools to be examined, we sought to identify CSR schools demonstrating two distinctive patterns of improved student achievement between 2000 and 2005, rapid-improvement (i.e., schools that made quick and dramatic improvements in student achievement over a one or two year time period) as well as slow-and-steady (i.e., schools that made noteworthy student achievement improvements but over a four or five year timeframe). Exhibit E.2 outlines the steps used for identifying candidate sites. This process led us to study 11 schools.

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