

Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools



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The goal of this practice guide is to formulate specific and coherent evidence-based recommendations for use by educators addressing a multifaceted challenge that lacks developed or evaluated, packaged approaches. The challenge is turning around low-performing schools. The guide provides practical, clear information on critical topics related to school turnarounds and is based on the best available evidence as judged by the review team. Recommendations presented in this guide should not be construed to imply that further research is not warranted to judge the effectiveness of particular strategies for turning around failing schools.

Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools

May 2008

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Introduction

The goal of this practice guide is to formulate specific and coherent evidence-based recommendations for use by educators aiming to quickly and dramatically improve student achievement in low-performing schools. Although schoolwide reform models exist, most assume a slow and steady approach to school reform. They do not seek to achieve the kind of quick school turnaround we examine in this practice guide. That is not to say that schools using a packaged schoolwide reform model could not experience dramatic and quick results. Often the differentiating factors are the intensity of the turnaround practices and the speed of putting them in place.

Our expectation is that a superintendent, a principal, or a site-based decision-making council can use this practice guide to help plan and execute school turnaround strategies. The target audience includes school administrators and district-level administrators, key because they can help break down policy and administrative barriers and ease the implementation of intensive school turnaround practices. This guide can help them develop practice and policy alternatives for immediate implementation in schools.

The guide includes specific recommendations and indicates the quality of the evidence that supports the recommendations. It also describes how each recommendation can be carried out. The examples are from case studies but should not be construed as the best or most effective ways to carry out each recommendation. Instead, the examples illustrate practices noted by schools as having had a positive impact on the school turnaround. Note

that the specific ways the practices were implemented varied widely, depending on each school's context.

We, the authors, are a small group with expertise in various dimensions of this topic. Several of us are also experts in research methodology. The evidence we considered in developing this document ranges from expert analyses of turnaround practices to case studies of seemingly effective schools and to correlational studies and longitudinal studies of patterns of school improvement. In all cases, we paid particular attention to patterns of findings replicated across studies. But all recommendations had to rely on low levels of evidence, as defined by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) Practice Guide standards. We could not find any studies that fit the high-quality experimental and quasi-experimental study standards of the What Works Clearinghouse (<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc>) and that would provide the strongest evidence of causal validity.

We have taken findings from research and described how a practice or recommendation might unfold in school settings. Our aim is to provide sufficient detail so that educators have a clear sense of the steps needed to follow the recommendation.

A unique feature of practice guides is the explicit and clear delineation of the quality and quantity of evidence that supports each claim. To do this, we used a semi-structured hierarchy suggested by IES. This classification system uses both the quality and the quantity of available evidence to help determine the strength of the evidence base grounding each recommended practice (table 1).

Table 1. Institute of Education Sciences levels of evidence for practice guides

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| Strong | <p>In general, characterization of the evidence for a recommendation as strong requires both studies with high internal validity (i.e., studies whose designs can support causal conclusions) and studies with high external validity (i.e., studies that in total include enough of the range of participants and settings on which the recommendation is focused to support the conclusion that the results can be generalized to those participants and settings). Strong evidence for this practice guide is operationalized as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A systematic review of research that generally meets the standards of the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) (see http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/) and supports the effectiveness of a program, practice, or approach with no contradictory evidence of similar quality; OR • Several well-designed, randomized controlled trials or well-designed quasi-experiments that generally meet the standards of WWC and support the effectiveness of a program, practice, or approach, with no contradictory evidence of similar quality; OR • One large, well-designed, randomized controlled, multisite trial that meets the WWC standards and supports the effectiveness of a program, practice, or approach, with no contradictory evidence of similar quality; OR • For assessments, evidence of reliability and validity that meets the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing.^a |
| Moderate | <p>In general, characterization of the evidence for a recommendation as moderate requires studies with high internal validity but moderate external validity, or studies with high external validity but moderate internal validity. In other words, moderate evidence is derived from studies that support strong causal conclusions but where generalization is uncertain, or studies that support the generality of a relationship but where the causality is uncertain. Moderate evidence for this practice guide is operationalized as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiments or quasi-experiments generally meeting the WWC standards and supporting the effectiveness of a program, practice, or approach with small sample sizes and/or other conditions of implementation or analysis that limit generalizability and no contrary evidence; OR • Comparison group studies that do not demonstrate equivalence of groups at pretest and therefore do not meet the WWC standards but that (a) consistently show enhanced outcomes for participants experiencing a particular program, practice, or approach and (b) have no major flaws related to internal validity other than lack of demonstrated equivalence at pretest (e.g., only one teacher or one class per condition, unequal amounts of instructional time, highly biased outcome measures); OR • Correlational research with strong statistical controls for selection bias and for discerning influence of endogenous factors and no contrary evidence; OR • For assessments, evidence of reliability that meets the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing^b but with evidence of validity from samples not adequately representative of the population on which the recommendation is focused. |
| Low | <p>In general, characterization of the evidence for a recommendation as low means that the recommendation is based on expert opinion derived from strong findings or theories in related areas and/or expert opinion buttressed by direct evidence that does not rise to the moderate or strong level. Low evidence is operationalized as evidence not meeting the standards for the moderate or high level.</p> |

a. American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education (1999).

b. Ibid.

Strong refers to consistent and generalizable evidence that a practice causes better outcomes for students in turnaround schools or that certain leadership practices are effective for school turnaround.¹

Moderate refers either to evidence from studies that allow strong causal conclusions but cannot be generalized with assurance to the population on which a recommendation is focused (perhaps because the findings have not been widely replicated) or to evidence from studies that are generalizable but have more causal ambiguity than offered by experimental designs (statistical models of correlational data or group comparison designs for which equivalence of the groups at pretest is uncertain).

Low refers to expert opinion based on reasonable extrapolations from research and theory on other topics and evidence from studies that do not meet the standards for moderate or strong evidence.

The What Works Clearinghouse standards and their relevance to this guide

For the levels of evidence in table 1, we rely on WWC evidence standards to assess the quality of evidence supporting educational programs and practices. The WWC addresses evidence for the causal validity of instructional programs and practices according to WWC standards.

1. Following What Works Clearinghouse guidelines, we consider a positive, statistically significant effect or large effect size (greater than 0.25) as an indicator of positive effects.

Information about these standards is available at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc>. The technical quality of each study is rated and placed into one of three categories:

- *Meets Evidence Standards* for randomized controlled trials and regression discontinuity studies that provide the strongest evidence of causal validity.
- *Meets Evidence Standards with Reservations* for all quasi-experimental studies with no design flaws and randomized controlled trials that have problems with randomization, attrition, or disruption.
- *Does Not Meet Evidence Screens* for studies that do not provide strong evidence of causal validity.

We include an appendix with more technical information about the studies and our decisions regarding the level of evidence for each recommendation. To illustrate the types of studies reviewed, we describe one study for each recommendation. Our goal is to provide interested readers with more detail about the research designs, the intervention components, and the way impact was measured.

We thank Brian Hassel and Dana Brinson for their helpful feedback and reviews of earlier versions of this practice guide. We also express our appreciation to Dr. Marlene Darwin, an AIR staff member involved in every phase of this project, from research analysis to draft text. Her role has been critical for the timely and successful production of this guide.

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Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools

Overview

In 1994 the Improving America's Schools Act introduced the concept of holding schools accountable for student performance on state assessments. Although the act encouraged states to assess whether schools were making progress and imposing sanctions on those that did not, it lacked much force. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 changed that by requiring a regimen of annual testing in grades 3 through 8 and by imposing sanctions on schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress.²

In school year 2006–07, 70 percent of 98,905 schools nationwide (64,546) made adequate yearly progress; 10,676 schools were designated as schools in need of improvement, and 2,302 schools were designated as schools in need of improvement restructuring.³ All failing schools, especially those that persistently fail, need guidance on what will work quickly to improve student outcomes. These schools generally have explored a variety of strategies to improve student achievement, but without rapid, clear success. They now need to look beyond slow, incremental change and examine practices that will raise and sustain student achievement within one to three years.⁴ The need to

quickly improve student achievement is most pressing for low-performing schools that serve disadvantaged students.⁵

How can we provide practical guidance to these schools to turn around their performance in a short time? To answer, we must first turn to research. Unfortunately, the research base on effective strategies for quickly turning around low-performing schools is sparse. The panel did not find any empirical studies that reached the rigor necessary to determine that specific turnaround practices produce significantly better academic outcomes. So, we tapped into less rigorous case study research and theory to provide practical recommendations about school turnaround practices. This research suggests practices likely to improve student learning. But it does not offer proof that these practices will always succeed.

This guide identifies practices that can quickly improve the performance of chronically low-performing schools—a process commonly referred to as creating “turnaround schools.” For this guide, we define turnaround schools as those meeting two criteria.

- First, they began as chronically poor performers—with a high proportion of their students (generally 20 percent or more) failing to meet state standards of proficiency in mathematics or reading as defined under No Child Left Behind over two or more consecutive years.
- Second, they showed substantial gains in student achievement in a short time (no more than three years). Examples of substantial gains in achievement are reducing by at least 10 percentage points the proportion of students failing to meet state standards for proficiency in mathematics or reading, showing

2. Adequate yearly progress (AYP) is an individual state's measure of progress toward the goal of 100 percent of students achieving to state academic standards in at least reading/language arts and math. It sets the minimum level of proficiency that the state, its school districts, and schools must achieve each year on annual tests and related academic indicators. (<http://www.ed.gov>)

3. Mapping America's Educational Progress (2008).

4. Hassel, Hassel, and Rhim (2007).

5. Ibid.

similarly large improvements in other measures of academic performance (such as lowering the dropout rate by 10 percentage points or more), or improving overall performance on standardized mathematics or reading tests by an average of 10 percentage points (or about 0.25 standard deviations). The schools discussed in this practice guide met these criteria, according to the data reported in the studies.⁶

School improvement and school turnaround both aim to improve student outcomes by changing how schools and classrooms operate. They differ in that school turnaround involves quick, dramatic improvement within three years, while school improvement is often marked by steady, incremental improvements over a longer time. Because of their similar goals, the two may have common approaches, but they differ in implementation. In school improvement, sharing leadership and training existing staff to share responsibility may develop gradually. In school turnaround, a leader may have to quickly identify and train one or two key staff members who are already qualified and prepared to initiate shared leadership. In addition, a turnaround school is more likely to consider replacing staff unable to easily make the transition with those already qualified to do so.

School turnaround literature builds on effective school improvement practices but focuses on how to speed up and increase the impact of these practices. According to one researcher, effective school

turnaround strategies remove factors that inhibit school improvement and that do not support effective teaching and learning.⁷ This guide recommends four practices unique to turnaround schools. It does not explore the school improvement literature, which is well documented elsewhere.⁸ The four recommendations work together to help failing schools make adequate yearly progress and turn themselves around (see table 2).

This guide does not address comprehensive school reform (CSR) models, a specific approach to school improvement. Schools that adopt those models seek to implement all model components with supports and services provided by the model developer, such as professional development. Research on CSR models examine the models' effects on school improvement rather than the practices that comprise the model implemented by the school. And CSR models are typically designed to make incremental improvements over three to five years.⁹ The panel thus determined that CSR evaluations were outside the scope of this practice guide.¹⁰

We have included only research on “beating the odds” schools (schools that performed better than would be expected from their demographics) if those schools were also turnaround schools. The key distinction is that beating-the-odds schools may have always been high achieving. They have

6. The panel was unable to determine whether the schools in one study (Lachat and Smith 2005) showed dramatic improvement in three years because the study noted that data were collected over four years. But the panel chose to include this study in the evidence base because it provides research on practices that five low-performing high schools implemented to raise student achievement.

7. Duke (n.d.)

8. For some pivotal research on school improvement, please see Berman and McLaughlin (1978), McLaughlin (1990), Newmann and Wehlage (1995), Purkey and Smith (1983), and Rivlin and Timpane (1975).

9. Desimone (2002).

10. For overviews of the research on Comprehensive School Reform, see Borman, Hewes, Overman, and Brown (2003); Desimone (2002); Herman et al. (1999); Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center (2006a,b,c).

not necessarily made a transition from low to high achievement, a transition that poses some unique challenges (overcoming staff disillusionment and inertia) and requires unique solutions. Because this guide focuses on low-performing schools transitioning to high performance, the case studies are only of schools that were initially low performing. If the studies did not indicate the level of a school's performance, the panel did not include them in its examination of evidence.

Summary of level of evidence to support recommendations

As suggested in the overview, the research base on school turnaround practices is limited. Turnaround schools are, by definition, schools that have demonstrated that they have dramatically improved student outcomes in a short time. Studies of turnaround schools tend to be case studies that look back at factors that may have contributed to the school's success. This research design is particularly weak in determining causal validity for several reasons, including the fact that there is no way to be confident that the features common to successful turnaround schools are not also common to schools that fail.

The recommendations in this guide are based on a collection of case studies of low-performing schools that improved student achievement in one to three years. The panel feels compelled to emphasize that the level of evidence is *low* because none of the studies examined for this practice guide is based on a research methodology that yields valid causal inference. The recommendations are based on 10 case studies that examined turnaround practices across 35 schools: 21 elementary schools, 8 middle schools, and 6 high schools.¹¹

11. Conzemius (2000); Duke (n.d.); Duke et al. (2005); Johnson and Asera (1999); Lachat and Smith (2005); Picucci et al. (2002a,b); Tung and

Two of the documents in this review are secondary analyses of primary studies. In each case, the primary document profiles several schools, but the secondary document identifies the strategies common across successful turnaround schools. The panel's recommendations are drawn from the secondary analyses and cited accordingly.

The panel also drew from *Turnarounds with new leaders and staff*.¹² This report draws from research on turnaround schools and on organizational improvement in the business sector, providing substantial background on, and basic principles of, significant school improvement.

The panel also incorporated evidence from a related field, business turnaround.¹³ Like school turnaround, business turnaround occurs when a failing business makes dramatic changes to become more successful. Often, turnaround businesses face bankruptcy or dissolution and restructure to become solvent. Schools and businesses share some organizational features, and some business turnaround practices also appear in turnaround schools. This guide draws on evidence from business turnaround to support recommendations for practices in both fields. For example, both schools and businesses that improve outcomes tend to use strong leadership to signal change early in the turnaround process.¹⁴

The evidence from business turnaround research lends support to the recommendations that schools should signal change in the turnaround process. But because businesses and schools can be very different organizations, we caution against rely-

Ouimette (2007); Whiteside (2006); Zargarpour (2005).

12. Kowal and Hassel (2005).

13. Kowal and Hassel (2005); Walberg (2007).

14. Ibid.

ing exclusively on the business turnaround research.¹⁵ For example, businesses often cut costs to promote turnaround, a strategy not relevant to schools. Further, businesses operate under the immediate threat of bankruptcy and termination; schools typically do not. So, this guide does not highlight practices that emerged in the business turnaround research unless they also emerged in the school turnaround research.

Readers should note that the case research on school turnarounds and the business research clearly indicates that there is no specific set of actions that applies equally well to every turnaround situation. Every school described in the case studies examined for this guide applied actions and

practices tailored to the school and local community.

Using their knowledge of school change, panel members emphasize that school turnaround encompasses a set of actions and practices. A school cannot select only one recommendation from this practice guide and reasonably expect quick results. For example, signaling change with strong leadership but not following through with visible improvement early in the school turnaround process (quick wins) could make school staff skeptical. So, readers should view these recommendations as a viable set of practices that have each demonstrated, at least in case studies, that they may work well together in turning around low-performing schools. Appendix 4 presents more information on the research evidence from the case studies to support each recommendation.

15. Ibid.

Table 2. Recommendations and corresponding levels of evidence to support each

| Recommendation | Level of evidence |
|--|-------------------|
| 1. <i>Signal the need for dramatic change with strong leadership.</i> Schools should make a clear commitment to dramatic changes from the status quo, and the leader should signal the magnitude and urgency of that change. A low-performing school that fails to make adequate yearly progress must improve student achievement within a short timeframe—it does not have the luxury of years to implement incremental reforms. | Low |
| 2. <i>Maintain a consistent focus on improving instruction.</i> Chronically low-performing schools need to maintain a sharp focus on improving instruction at every step of the reform process. To improve instruction, schools should use data to set goals for instructional improvement, make changes to immediately and directly affect instruction, and continually reassess student learning and instructional practices to refocus the goals. | Low |
| 3. <i>Make visible improvements early in the school turnaround process (quick wins).</i> These can rally staff around the effort and overcome resistance and inertia. | Low |
| 4. <i>Build a committed staff.</i> The school leader must build a staff that is committed to the school's improvement goals and qualified to carry out school improvement. This goal may require changes in staff, such as releasing, replacing, or redeploying staff who are not fully committed to turning around student performance and bringing in new staff who are committed. | Low |

Source: Authors' compilation based on analysis described in text.

Checklist for carrying out the recommendations

Note: These recommendations are explored in greater detail in the practice guide.

Recommendation 1. Signal the need for dramatic change with strong leadership

- ☐ A change in leadership practices in the school is essential. Because the current school leader may be enmeshed in past strategies, a new leader can immediately signal change.
- ☐ If there is no change in leadership, the existing leader can signal change by radically altering leadership practices.
- ☐ Make the school leader the instructional leader who is highly visible in classrooms.
- ☐ Publicly announce changes and anticipated actions.

Recommendation 2. Maintain a consistent focus on improving instruction

- ☐ Examine school-level data on student achievement to identify specific gaps in student learning.
- ☐ Have teachers use formative data about individual students to analyze their instruction in light of student progress toward standards.
- ☐ Establish priority areas for instructional focus and make necessary changes in those areas to strengthen teaching and improve student learning.
- ☐ Arrange for targeted professional development based on analyses of achievement and instruction, differentiated according to teacher needs and the subject areas targeted for instructional improvement.
- ☐ Have staff collaboratively conduct a comprehensive curriculum review to ensure

that the curriculum aligns with state and local standards and meets the needs of all students in the school. Be sure to involve teachers in the review.

- ☐ Ensure that all school leaders and instructional staff monitor progress regularly, and systematically make adjustments to strengthen teaching and student learning.

Recommendation 3. Make visible improvements early in the school turnaround process (quick wins)

- ☐ Start with a goal that is important, can be achieved quickly, and will provide visible improvement.
- ☐ Develop a strategy for accomplishing the goal that can be implemented quickly—for example, the school already has the authority and resources to implement the strategy.
- ☐ Consider some common goals for quick wins, such as changing the school's use of time, improving access to resources and the physical facilities, and improving discipline.

Recommendation 4. Build a committed staff

- ☐ Assess the strengths and weaknesses of the staff. Identify staff who are not fully committed to the school turnaround goals or who do not have the qualifications to carry them out.
- ☐ Redeploy staff members who have valuable skills but are not effective in their current role.
- ☐ Replace staff members who actively resist the school's turnaround efforts.
- ☐ Recruit new staff who have the needed specialized skills and competencies for positions in the school—such as interventionists, reading specialists, and mentors and instructional coaches.

Recommendation 1. Signal the need for dramatic change with strong leadership

A failing school does not have the luxury of years to implement incremental reforms. Instead, leaders at the school should make a clear commitment to dramatic changes from the status quo and signal the magnitude and urgency of those changes. Leadership is key, but it alone is not adequate. The leader also needs to show that dramatic changes will be necessary to turn the school around.

Level of evidence: **Low**

The panel judges the level of evidence supporting this recommendation to be *low*, based on 10 case studies that describe school turnaround practices in 35 schools.¹⁶ Of the 10 studies, 2 describe in detail the ways that schools implemented dramatic changes with strong leadership.¹⁷ One study looked at 7 middle schools¹⁸ and the other at 15 elementary schools¹⁹ that participated in school turnarounds. The remaining case studies provide additional support.

Brief summary of evidence to support this recommendation

The authors of the two studies²⁰ that described dramatic changes with strong

leadership identified patterns across 22 schools. The majority of the schools started the turnaround with new leaders; all underwent major changes in leadership practices.

The research points out that school leadership is a key part of school change and turnaround.²¹ Turnaround leadership should be anchored in school improvement practices and in strategies to make rapid and substantial changes. Although the research did not list a specific set of leadership skills and actions shared by all principals in turnaround schools, some commonalities were identified by the panel. In general, turnaround leaders demonstrated a commitment to developing a learning community for students and staff, with the primary focus of the school on learning and with staff and students working together toward that goal. Specific leadership actions were framed in a child-centered lens and the belief that staff should have the skills and knowledge to provide strong instruction.²²

School leaders also signaled change by:

- Communicating a clear purpose to school staff.
- Creating high expectations and values.
- Sharing leadership and authority.
- Demonstrating a willingness to make the same types of changes asked of their staff.
- Identifying advocates within the staff.
- Building a consensus that permeated the entire staff.

16. Conzemius (2000); Duke (n.d.); Duke et al. (2005); Johnson and Asera (1999); Lachat and Smith (2005); Picucci et al. (2002a,b); Tung and Ouimette (2007); Whiteside (2006); Zargarpour (2005).

17. Picucci et al. (2002a); Duke (n.d.).

18. Picucci et al. (2002a).

19. Duke (n.d.).

20. Picucci et al. (2002a); Duke (n.d.).

21. Whiteside (2006); Picucci et al. (2002a); Rhim, Kowal, Hassel, and Hassel (2007); Duke (n.d.); Johnson and Asera (1999).

22. Johnson and Asera (1999).

- Eliminating any distractions to ensure that the maximum amount of classroom time was focused on instruction.
- Establishing a cohesive culture.²³

School leaders committed to the turnaround effort worked toward integrating these principles into their daily practices.

The business research on leadership indicates a broad set of leadership actions in business turnaround.²⁴ Turnaround leaders figured out what actions would get rapid results and demonstrate an upward trend quickly. They implemented practices that deviated from the prevailing norms. They analyzed performance data. And they relentlessly focused on results.²⁵ These actions were a catalyst for change to build future successes.

Strong turnaround leadership sometimes met resistance.²⁶ In several instances, school leaders who took dramatic steps to turn a school around faced calls from parents to resign or be removed. In the face of this resistance, leaders had to remain focused on the goal of raising student achievement. Gradually, teachers saw positive changes and became less resistant. Turnaround leaders learned to strike the right balance between demanding change and developing a collaborative culture within the school and among staff members.

How to carry out the recommendation

1. A change in leadership practices in the school is essential. Because the current school leader may be enmeshed in past

strategies, installing a new principal can signal change.²⁷ The case studies on school turnarounds have numerous instances of new principals being catalysts for change.²⁸ Teachers often cited the new principal as the motivating force.²⁹ Case study research on school turnarounds indicates that strong leadership is a critical element of the turnaround process.³⁰

In successful turnaround schools, new principals came into the schools with a clear purpose, ready to share responsibility for turning around the school. They immediately began to set clear expectations for students and faculty. They initiated a culture of change from the first day, letting teachers and students know that a defeatist or business-as-usual attitude would not be accepted. They sent the message that everyone—including administrators—needed to change the daily school operations and the way instruction was delivered.

Although new principals entered their school with a determination to raise student achievement, they did not act rashly. Instead, they spent long hours studying the school and its needs. But they still took steps to move the school forward with some immediate changes.

2. If a change in leadership does not take place, the existing principal may signal change by substantially reforming leadership practices.³¹ Although this can be quite challenging for a principal in a low-performing school, it is possible to radically alter leadership practices and develop a new culture that

23. Picucci et al. (2002a).

24. Kowal and Hassel (2005).

25. Rhim et al. (2007).

26. Picucci et al. (2002a); Duke et al. (2005).

27. Murphy and Meyers (in press).

28. Duke et al. (2005); Johnson and Asera (1999); Duke (n.d.).

29. Picucci et al. (2002b).

30. Whiteside (2006); Picucci et al. (2002b); Duke (n.d.).

31. Duke et al. (2005); Duke (n.d.).

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