

Supporting School Turnaround:

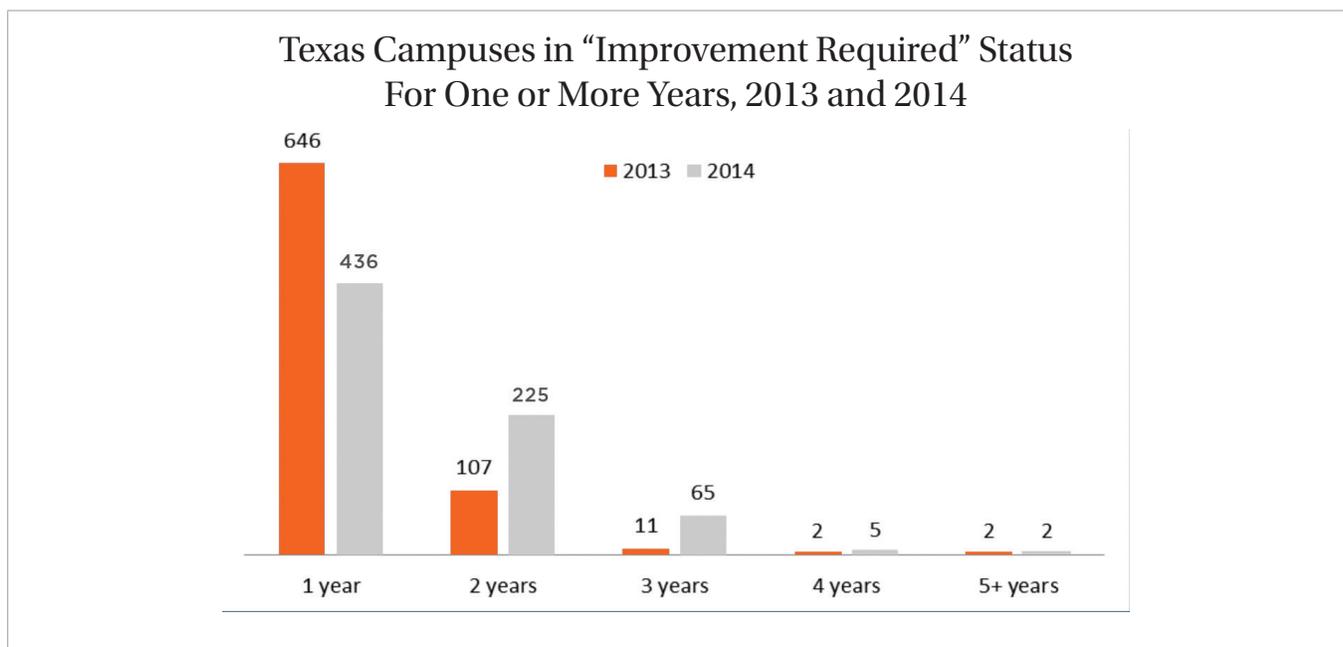
Lessons for Texas Policymakers

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Although they represent a relatively small subset of public schools, chronically low-performing schools remain a persistent and vexing problem in American public education. Not only do they do a disservice to students and families, they also undermine support for public schools. In some ways, chronically low-performing schools resist stereotypes. The reasons for their history of low performance vary, as do their size, geography, and needs. Yet there is a common thread: the majority of students attending the lowest performing schools live in poverty. Most are minority students, and many are English language learners. Texas has not been immune to this problem.

Statewide data suggest that in Texas, most low-performing schools have managed to get back on track after one year of identification as “academically underperforming.” From 2004 through 2010, approximately 80% of all campuses rated as “academically underperforming” were able to return to academically acceptable status after only one year, with another 14% exiting in Year 2—leaving only about 6% of targeted schools in “underperforming” status for three or more years.¹

Under Texas’ recently revised accountability ratings system, Texas has identified “improvement required” schools, and these data demonstrate a similar pattern: most schools have been identified for one or two years. The number of schools identified as “improvement required” for four years or more in either 2013 or 2014 was only in the single digits. However, the number of schools that were in “improvement required” status for three years increased notably in 2014 to 65 campuses, up from just 11 the previous year.



Source: <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/account/2014/multiyearau.pdf>

To what extent should Texans be concerned about these low-performing schools? After how many years of low performance is a school considered to be chronically low-performing? There is, in fact, no standard definition among either researchers or policymakers. In general terms, policymakers take two components into account: the absolute level of performance relative to other schools, and the lack of progress over a number of years.

Through the federal SIG program, the U.S. Department of Education focuses on the lowest 5% of schools—a proportion that signals serious concerns about the quality of education, yet suggests a manageable set of schools in which to intervene. In a state as large as Texas, however, with over 8,000 campuses, this standard would produce just over 400 campuses each year, which is far too great a number in which to intervene in any meaningful fashion. In identifying persistently low performing schools, most states consider three years of low performance², which seems to more meaningfully align with prioritizing those schools in most dire need of assistance while also producing a manageable number of campuses to target for intervention.

To provide a sense of the scope of the challenge in Texas, the 72 campuses in “improvement required” for at least three years (as of 2014) enrolled approximately 37,000 students. That number is concerning, as are the implications for these students’ futures. Fortunately, over time, educators, administrators, policymakers, and researchers have learned about practices that help schools break a cycle of persistently low performance.

Be Wary of Silver-Bullet Solutions

Despite a growing consensus among researchers about the features that are evident in turnaround schools, policy that stimulates and supports rapid improvement is far more contentious. Thus, while the public imperative to “fix” the lowest-performing schools remains urgent, figuring out how to do so is rather complicated. The limited success of the federal SIG policy only underscores these challenges, suggesting well-intentioned policymakers should be familiar with the relevant research, cognizant of the possible pitfalls, and wary of “silver-bullet” solutions.

Effective Practices Grounded in Research

The literature on school turnaround is characterized by prevalent and recurrent themes, on the basis of which we can point to key practices grounded in and supported by research.

Finding 1: Leadership Matters

An often-cited finding from studies of school turnaround notes there are virtually no documented cases of school turnaround absent a strong leader.³ Although a decade old—the study on which this was based was first published in 2004—this assertion has yet to be disproven. Indeed, the scholars who first described this relationship recently reaffirmed that “after 6 additional years of research, we are even more confident about this claim.”⁴

“There are virtually no documented cases of school turnaround absent a strong leader.”

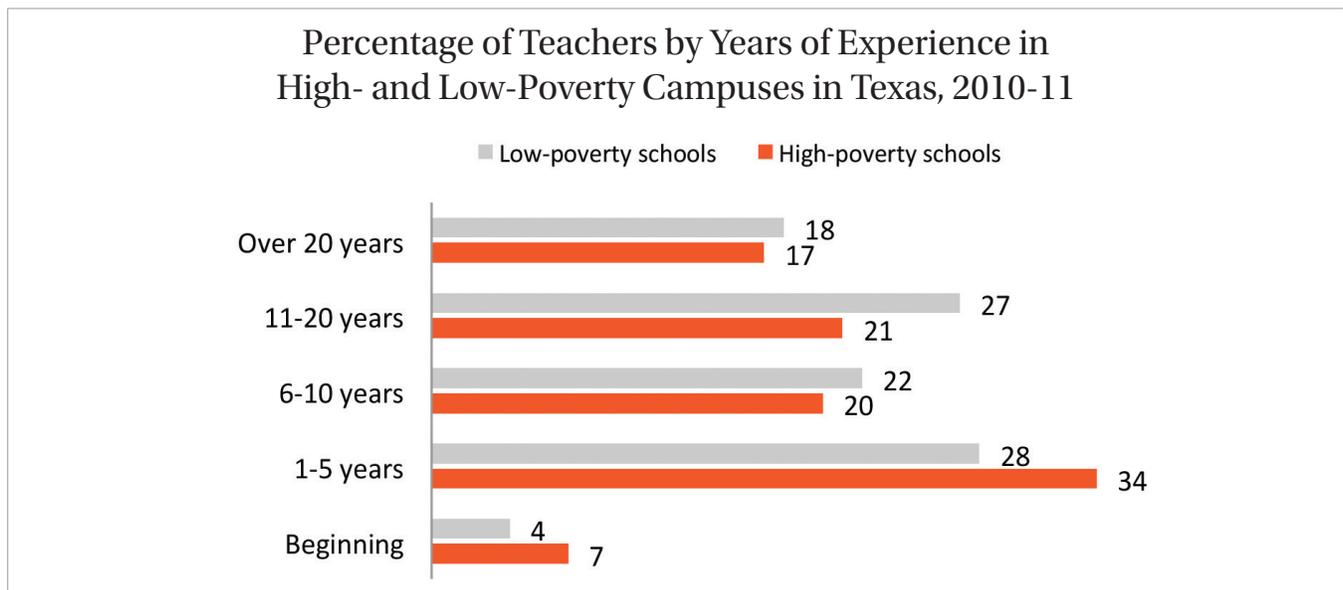
Turnaround leadership styles and associated activities include the following:

- **Transformational leaders** are visible, visionary, supportive of staff, set high expectations, welcome input, and develop other leaders in the school. More specifically, case studies and interviews of turnaround principals describe efforts to build consensus, share leadership, and communicate clearly—all activities congruent with transformational leadership.
- **Instructional leaders** focus on guiding and monitoring curriculum and instruction. They are knowledgeable about instructional issues and align school activities with a clear and consistent focus on instructional practice.

- **Strategic leaders** identify and articulate assumptions about how they will bring about change in their schools; that is, how they will get from their existing condition to their intended destination. They are confident, conceptual thinkers who ensure connections between school goals and improvement

Finding 2: Strategic Staffing Decisions

As important as principals appear to be in the turnaround process, the evidence supporting the critical role of teachers is compelling. Educator effectiveness is one of the single most powerful influences on student outcomes.⁵ Yet there is convincing evidence that the nation’s most effective teachers are disproportionately working in the most affluent schools and less likely to be in high-poverty schools⁶—a phenomenon contributing to the lower academic performance among disadvantaged students. Texas is no exception: TEA data demonstrate high-poverty schools have more teachers with five years of teaching or less, whereas low-poverty schools have higher percentages of experienced teachers.⁷



Source: <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/WorkArea/linkit.aspx?LinkIdentifier=id&ItemID=2147505377&libID=2147505371>

Finding 3: Professional Learning Opportunities

A crucial way school administrators can build capacity is to build the knowledge and skills of the teachers already there (internally sourced capacity). Because teachers’ knowledge and skills are so central to the educational venture, high-quality professional development must be a central feature of school improvement efforts. Indeed, there is an emerging consensus among researchers and practitioners that a comprehensive approach to human capital management should include this dual focus of *getting the best people, and building their knowledge and skills*.

Professional development for teachers exists in many forms (e.g., short-term workshops, institutes, courses, coaching, and mentoring, professional learning communities), serves many purposes, and is provided at different levels by different providers.⁸ Over the past 20 years, researchers have studied the features of professional development and associated links to teacher practice and student achievement. Based largely on nationally representative surveys with

self-reported changes in practice, researchers have developed a consensus on the features contributing to high-quality professional development. As described by AIR researchers, these include both core features and structural features of professional development:

- **Core features:** The core features of high-quality professional development include: (1) a focus on curricular content; (2) opportunities for active learning (e.g., observing classroom instruction, being observed while teaching a lesson, or reviewing student work); and (3) consistency with other reform efforts in the school.

- **Structural features:** The structural features of high- quality professional development include: (1) the long duration of the activity, in terms of both the number of hours and the span of time over which the activities were spread; (2) activities more commonly described as “job-embedded”; and (3) collective participation of teachers from the same school, grade, or subject.

Finding 4: Use of Data for Instructional Decisions

A remarkably consistent finding in studies of school improvement is the focus on data use: schools managing to improve student outcomes are those in which teachers compile data about their students, access test score and other outcome data, discuss results of data analyses with their colleagues, and use the lessons learned to fine-tune their instruction.

A federally-funded, systematic review of studies of data used to support instructional decision- making identified five practices the authors believe to be associated with higher levels of student achievement.⁹

These include:

1. Establish a clear vision for data use.
2. Develop and maintain a district-wide data system.
3. Make data part of an ongoing cycle of instructional improvement.
4. Provide supports that foster a data-driven culture within the school.
5. Teach students to examine their own data and set learning goals.

Finding 5: Develop a Collaborative and Trusting School Culture

Cultivating a culture of trust and collaboration among teachers is often a critical foundation for a school’s turnaround efforts. Offering teachers opportunities to engage with their colleagues professionally can help individuals to build knowledge, skills, and commitment to their schools. While it does not lend itself well to state policy levers, strategies for developing and cultivating a collaborative culture among educators on a turnaround campus should be an element of preparing principals to lead these campuses.

“Real turnaround may require more labor-intensive relationship building than advertised.”

Finding 6: Cultivate Program Coherence

Too often, improvement strategies in low-performing schools appear to be a scattershot collection of interventions. Individually, these interventions might be promising—even effective—but collectively they can drain scant resources, divide teachers’ attention, duplicate efforts, or even work at cross-purposes.

Increasingly, states are seeking to shape the coherence of school improvement plans by adding specificity, rigor, and supports to the existing needs assessments and action plans in their lowest-performing schools. If these processes are supported with careful guidance, timelines, and support, states can exert some leverage and ensure schools approach the change process with purpose and focus.

“Less adept leaders may revert to compliance-oriented activities that are not anchored by a focused and strategic set of objectives.”

Emerging Policies With Limited Research

Some school turnaround practices are sufficiently prevalent in the literature that they can be described as research-based. However, other policies and practices are simply too new to have established a robust research base. This does not mean the policy or practice is ineffective—just that there is no methodologically sound evidence of effectiveness. And as such, any causal statements about the effectiveness of these policies would be unwarranted. Such is the case for two newer policy mechanisms: achievement school districts and parent trigger policies.

Topic 1: Achievement School Districts

As states across the country continue to struggle with how to effectively support the school turnaround process, some have sought to enhance operational authority through a more dramatic approach, with varying degrees of success. The Recovery School District (RSD) in Louisiana, the Achievement School District statewide model for school turnarounds in Tennessee, and Michigan's Education Achievement Authority (EAA) turnaround districts provide three of the more prominent examples.

The Recovery School District (RSD) — New Orleans underwent a massive overhaul of its education system following Hurricane Katrina in August 2005. Almost all public schools were moved from the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) to the state-run RSD, which had been established in 2003 to turn around persistently low-performing schools.¹⁰ Most of the RSD schools became charter schools—accompanied by significant turnover in the teaching force. Over 7,000 teachers were fired and replaced mostly by inexperienced teachers who had been trained and placed through Teach for America or other alternate certification routes. In addition, students were not required to attend their neighborhood school; instead, as long as space was available, parents could enroll their child in the school of their choice.

“We know much less than we think about the effects of New Orleans school reforms.”

The research conducted on RSD with respect to school improvement and turnaround has examined policy and governance; teacher quality; student access and equity, including the fairness of the school choice and application system and racial segregation of the school system; teacher quality; and student performance.¹¹ Despite the volume of publications about the RSD, several researchers have pointed to the lack of consensus in the findings.¹² Multiple reports have documented steady improvement in student achievement through 2013;¹³ however, overall performance levels remain low in comparison to the state, and there is insufficient evidence to link any achievement gains to specific practices.¹⁴

Achievement School District (ASD) — Tennessee's Achievement School District is a statewide school district created through the state's Race to the Top grant. The purpose of the district is to move Tennessee's bottom 5% of schools into the top 25% in the state in five years. The district was fully established beginning in the 2012–13 school year and included six schools. In year two, 11 new schools were added, and in the 2014–15 school year, the ASD has a total of 23 schools with all but one located in Memphis. Achievement results are decidedly mixed.¹⁵ While some leading indicators appear promising (such as student reports of positive school culture), there is a notable lack of comprehensive data and carefully designed analyses.

The ASD is still too early in its implementation to gauge whether, and the extent to which, the model is successful and effective in meeting its turnaround goals.

Education Achievement Authority (EAA) — Michigan's EAA is a state-run district intended to serve schools in the lowest performing 5% of public schools in the state. Authorized by the state legislature in 2011, the EAA is comprised of 15 of the lowest-performing schools in Detroit. The EAA was initially managed through Eastern Michigan University but in February 2014, the state superintendent announced he would terminate the EAA's contract, amidst EMU faculty protests and resignations

from the EAA board. In June 2014, the chancellor of the EAA resigned in the shadow of press reports citing high rates of teacher turnover, declining student enrollment, and financial mismanagement. Nonetheless, the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) claimed modest gains in EAA schools.¹⁶

With no research to date, the only data sources on the EAA are MDE assessment reports and press articles, neither of which provide compelling evidence of improved student outcomes.

Topic 2: Parent Trigger Policies

In 2010, California became the first state to pass a parent trigger law. The passage of this law gained national attention as a potential (and controversial) policy aimed at empowering parents to play a more impactful role in their children's education.¹⁷

With sufficient parent support (typically demonstrated through parent signatures or a vote), parents can take actions they believe will support school improvement. Such actions may include school closure, replacement of school faculty and/or leaders, private school voucher options, or converting the school into a charter school.¹⁸

The underlying theory of action for parent trigger is that parents can and should serve as active drivers of reform, and that the traditional, federal, state, and district-led approaches to school turnaround are too slow and marred by political interests and agendas.¹⁹ Opponents of parent trigger warn, however, such policies may not be an effective turnaround strategy and will result in unintended consequences that could derail school improvement efforts.^{20,21}

To date, there are no carefully designed studies of the implementation and effects of parent trigger policies in peer-reviewed publications or by non-partisan research organizations. In part, this is because parent-triggers have rarely been attempted and more rarely fully executed.

External organizations may play a significant role in recruiting, facilitating, and motivating parent action. Parent Revolution, for example, is a nonprofit organization that works directly with parents to launch a parent trigger campaign at their school.

However, accounts of the school management changes at parent trigger schools indicate the process can be divisive and result in hostilities among parents and the community, and between the community and school staff.^{22,23}

Indeed, some organizations have argued the parent trigger policies run counter to research on best practices for school improvement and parental involvement.²⁴ For parents to play a truly active and meaningful role in school improvement and reform, parents need to have access to clear and transparent school performance data. In addition, meaningful and sustainable parent engagement in reform will likely require a foundation grounded not in conflict and the efforts of external organizations to motivate change, but in a strong parent and school partnership, and in a shared belief that students need high-quality school environments providing them ample opportunities to learn.²⁵

Policy Recommendations

The fact that successful turnaround policy remains elusive reflects the complexity of the task. Although the research on school turnaround converges on some common themes, not all research findings are amenable to state level policy solutions.

We focus here on policy recommendations with direct implications for human capital management. Schools are, fundamentally, organizations in which human capital is the greatest asset. Improving the capacity of the adults in the school—both leaders and teachers—will have direct implications for the other activities described in this report.

Recommendation 1: Establish statewide or regional turnaround Leadership Academies

To ensure Texas has a sufficient number of school leaders with training for the unique challenges of chronically low-performing schools, we recommend the Legislature consider allocating grant funding to establish statewide or regional turnaround leadership academies.

Leadership academy grantees may be institutions of higher education or not-for-profit organizations with a track record of training and developing principals in low-performing schools. Grant awards should provide funding for two cohorts of turnaround leaders with collective enrollment in each cohort being large enough to ensure all chronically low-performing schools in Texas have access to a principal trained in turnaround competencies. Continued funding should be contingent on program evaluation.

All funded leadership programs should reflect the principles of high-quality professional learning opportunities and research on principal effectiveness, including the following design components:

- **Selective admissions**
- **Research-based content**
- **Active learning opportunities**
- **A supervised internship component**
- **A mentorship component**
- **Intensive training**
- **An evaluation of program effectiveness**

Recommendation 2: Provide greater staffing autonomy for principals of low-performing schools

School leaders should not have to work around personnel policies in order to address the challenges of chronically low-performing schools head-on. Toward this end, the Texas Legislature should consider extending greater staffing autonomy to principals of low-performing schools and free them from restrictive personnel policies. Protections for low-performing campuses that the Legislature should consider include:

- Protecting chronically low-performing schools from forced placements, in which a district office can move a teacher to a school despite the principal's objections
- Authorizing chronically low-performing schools to begin the hiring process two months before all other schools in the district, in order to make offers to the most effective teachers
- Increasing flexibility for chronically low-performing schools to hire teachers from outside the district in order to find the best teachers
- Not requiring low-performing schools to comply with seniority-based layoffs in the event of a reduction in force
- Not requiring principals in chronically low-performing schools to retain an under performing teacher, even if he or she has tenure

Recommendation 3: Fund grants for pilot programs to provide financial incentives to attract highly qualified teachers to low-performing schools

In addition to providing autonomy to principals around human capital management, the Legislature should consider stimulating and supporting innovation by funding grants for bold experiments in teacher recruitment.

Possible approaches may include:

Grant Program to Provide Financial Incentives for Highly Qualified Teachers Serving in Low-Performing Schools. Create a competitive grant providing eligible districts with funding to provide substantial financial rewards (\$15,000-\$20,000 annually) for highly qualified teachers who will commit to serving in low-performing schools for three or more years.

Grant Program to Place Highly Qualified Teachers in Low-Performing Schools as Instructional Leaders. Create a competitive grant for district programs to recruit, develop, and support highly effective, experienced teachers to serve as teacher leaders in low-performing schools.

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