



Supporting School Turnaround:

Lessons for Texas Policymakers

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Supporting School Turnaround:

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Introduction

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. Can we not do better for our neediest students, who stand to gain so much from a high-quality public education?

Policymakers are trying to do better. As early as 1984, the Texas legislature sought to establish a system of school-level accountability based on student achievement, through the passage of House Bill 72.¹ Ten years later, federal law followed suit, requiring states to identify and support low-performing Title I schools. Under *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)*, states were required to develop “statewide systems of support” that would intervene in schools that failed to achieve annual performance

targets. However, studies revealed that schools identified for restructuring under NCLB lingered in this status for years.²

In response, federal policymakers called for more forceful action to compel these schools to break the cycle of low performance. The School Improvement Grants (SIG) program, funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, provided \$4 billion

for the lowest-performing 5% of schools in each state. Although some SIG schools appear to have improved performance, thus far there is little widespread evidence of the dramatic turnaround policymakers were seeking.³

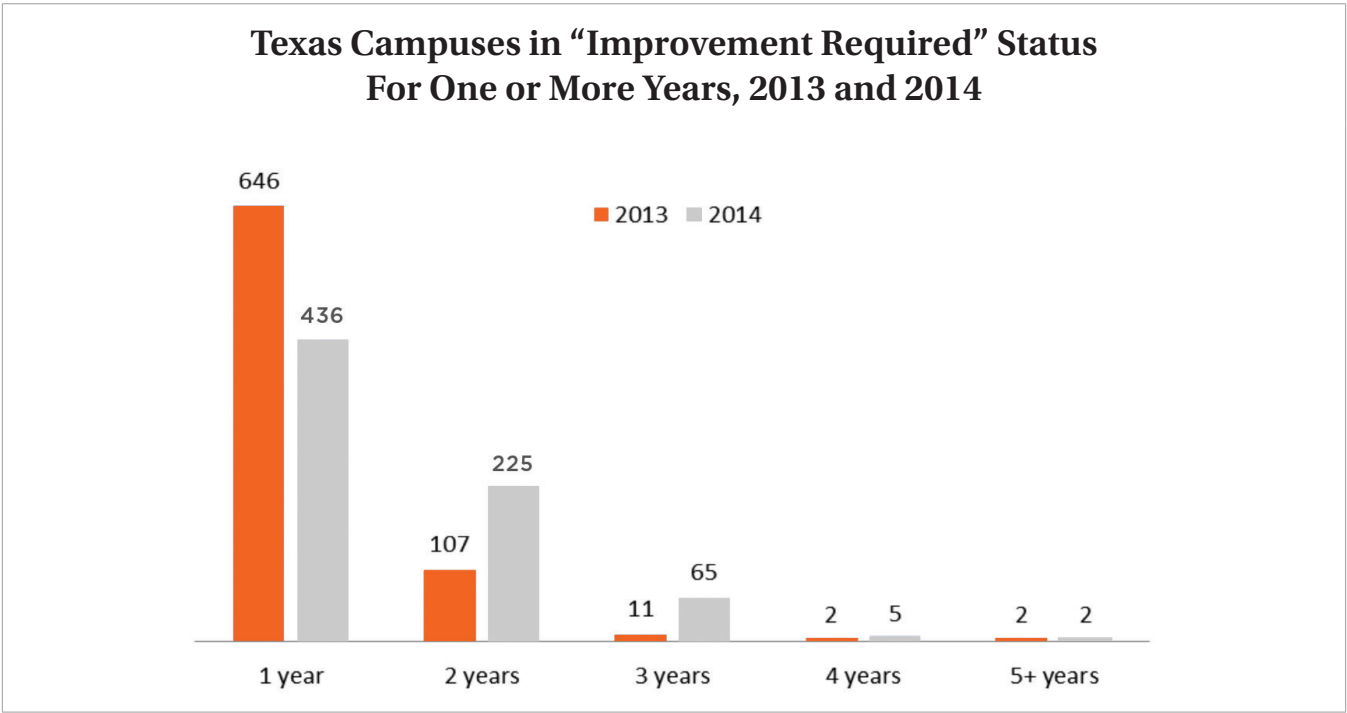
Texas officials, cognizant of the ongoing challenges in these chronically low-performing schools, have sought to establish appropriate interventions and supports. Authorized by the Texas Legislature in 2009, the Texas Center for District & School Support (TCDSS) provides support for all campuses and districts identified as underperforming. All Texas Accountability and Intervention System activities are anchored by a framework identifying critical success factors, support systems, and district commitments. TCDSS support includes a range of tools such as the “Campus Snapshot” needs assessment, collaborative school improvement planning, leadership coaching, and the Advancing Improvement in Education Conference. In addition, TCDSS operates the Texas Title I Priority Schools Grant Program (TTIPS), which is the Texas version of the SIG program.

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.⁴

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.

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



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

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 performance,⁵ 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. Although researchers’ definitions of school turnaround vary, there is evidence that school turnaround is possible, even if rare. The numbers of identified turnaround schools are generally small, for example, 44 in California,⁶

42 in Florida,⁷ and 20 in Michigan.⁸ Moreover, we should note that this “turnaround” generally occurs over a period of three to five years—not quite the rapid change that might be implied by this term. Still, even in this small number of schools, critical information can be gleaned about factors that may facilitate and promote sustained turnaround. This information can provide guidance to the stakeholders who are deeply committed to improving the most troubled schools and to helping schools overcome the barriers that so often stymie their turnaround efforts.

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.

To inform the next phase of turnaround efforts in Texas and to highlight policies and programs in other states, this paper summarizes the results of this review and concludes with policy recommendations for Texas legislators to consider in evaluating appropriate policy responses to address chronically low-performing campuses.

Effective Practices Grounded in Research

Researchers have been studying low-performing schools since the 1980s, but the focus on a small set of chronically low-performing schools that manage to dramatically improve and sustain student achievement levels emerged mainly within the last decade. In part because of the relative newness of this field—and the complexity of school improvement—rigorous studies of school turnaround are still considered to be sparse, and the field is characterized by qualitative case study methodologies. Most such studies identify schools that appear to have boosted student achievement from very low levels and then collect data retrospectively, asking why and how they managed to improve outcomes. Case studies and mixed-methods studies do not permit researchers to make definitive statements about cause

and effect. However, when conducted with attention to reliability and validity, these studies can provide insight into important educational processes and practices—particularly when multiple studies with different schools reach the same conclusions. When available, this review also incorporates rigorous, experimental design studies lending further credence to the findings described here.

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. This review highlights six practices that appear to support successful turnaround: ***strong leadership, strategic staffing, professional learning opportunities, use of data for instructional decisions, a collaborative and trusting school culture, and program coherence.***

Preparing Turnaround Principals in Florida

To ensure chronically low-performing schools in Florida had a sufficient pipeline of principals with appropriate training, the Florida Department of Education partnered with the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), two universities (University of North Florida (UNF) and the University of Central Florida (UCF)), and five districts (Alachua, Duval, Orange, Pinellas, and Miami-Dade) to launch the Florida Turnaround Leaders Program (FTLP).⁹

Funded by the federal Race to the Top, FTLP was designed to prepare approximately 100 new principals to meet the challenges of Florida’s struggling schools. The cohort that entered the program in early 2012 included 90 participants, 83 of whom graduated in June 2014. Participants were selected for FTLP from a pool of current high-performing teachers and assistant principals.

Each future turnaround principal participated in the following:

- A series of 10 quarterly seminars led by turnaround experts, each focused on a particular skill set critical to the success of a turnaround leader and competencies identified by the Florida Department of Education. The program covered travel expenses for participants.
- A year-long practicum in which small teams worked at a low-achieving case study school to complete leadership tasks under the guidance of expert mentor principals. For example, participants analyzed several years of data on student performance and school culture in a priority school. The analysis culminated in a report including recommendations on turnaround strategies.
- A full-time, 6-month internship to take on major leadership responsibilities at a low-achieving middle or high school. During this process, mentor principals and coaches worked with candidates to plan meaningful learning experiences and help guide their reflections throughout the internship.
- Online or in-person school leadership course work complementing the seminars, practicum, internship, and mentoring delivered through UNF or UCF.

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.¹⁰ 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.”¹¹

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

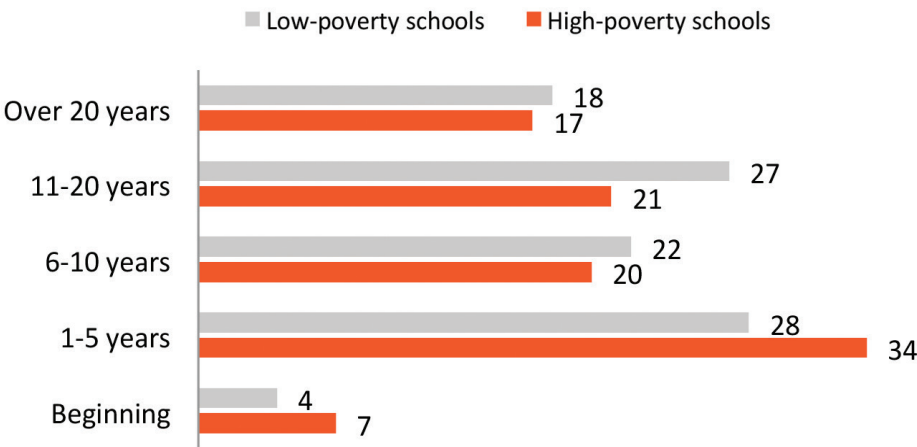
Accumulating research supports this critical finding: strong school leadership is associated with higher levels of student achievement. With increasing specificity, researchers have documented the strength of this relationship. One study applied a value-added approach to Texas data and estimated a difference of as much as 0.21 standard deviations in test scores between schools with effective and ineffective principals. This is a very

large effect, which translates into an annual impact of as much as 16 percentage points of student achievement. And, as the authors note, the achievement gap associated with effective and ineffective principals is even more pronounced in high-poverty schools.¹²

Two federally funded studies—one based on survey analyses and the other anchored by case studies—both determined that leadership was critical to rapid school improvement.¹³ The authors of the case studies concluded that principal leadership—including a clear instructional focus, quick wins, and distributed leadership—was the “turnaround driver” stimulating change.¹⁴ Other case studies of school turnaround in specific states,¹⁵ studies of small samples of turnaround schools,¹⁶ books,¹⁷ and single-case articles about school turnaround find common ground with regard to the importance of school leaders.

What do principals at turnaround schools do? A large, federally funded study of schools receiving SIG awards described three leadership styles, each well-supported by prior research.¹⁸ And, each of these includes practices highlighted by case studies documenting the role of school leaders in supporting turnaround, including reports of the competencies of turnaround leaders.¹⁹

Percentage of Teachers by Years of Experience in High- and Low-Poverty Campuses in Texas, 2010-11



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

These 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

actions. Indeed, the capacity to develop, articulate, and share a *theory of change* may be a critical differentiator among principals of successful turnaround schools.

If leadership is so important, is principal replacement necessary to bring about change? Although current federal policy would respond with a definitive “yes,” the research is far from conclusive. The most frequently adopted reform models under the SIG program (the so-called *transformation* and *turnaround* models) require schools to replace the principal. And, case studies of school turnaround frequently point to new leadership as a critical component.

However, there is an important caveat: just because many turnaround schools have a new principal does not mean that all new principals are capable of turning around low-performing schools. Indeed, a systematic literature review of turnaround research prior to 2008 concluded that new principal *practices* were critical, not necessarily a new principal.²⁰ Principal replacement policies may entail unanticipated consequences: if districts have

Strategic Staffing in Garden Grove:

“You’re never going to be a better district than the teachers in your classrooms.”

Garden Grove Unified School district is a large, diverse district in California that has earned high student achievement rates, the respect of education decision makers, and the Broad Prize for Urban Education. To what do district administrators attribute their success? A comprehensive focus on human capital development anchored by two principles: getting the best teachers and building the capacity of existing teachers. Core elements of each include the following:

Getting the best teachers:

- A hiring and placement system emphasizing the skills and dispositions that would be a strong fit
- An induction program preparing new teachers for the district’s expectations
- An approach to tenure designed to retain the best teachers
- A compensation system attracting and rewarding the best teachers

Building the capacity of existing teachers:

- A comprehensive approach to professional learning
- A model of instructional supervision providing ongoing feedback
- Efforts to work with struggling teachers
- Opportunities for teacher leadership to foster professional growth

Source: www.cacollaborative.org/publication/youll-never-be-better-your-teachers-garden-grove-approach-human-capital-development

access to a limited pool of qualified candidates, district administrators may end up replacing current principals with new leaders of questionable qualifications. Moreover, mandated principal replacement may simply contribute to the leadership instability often characterizing low-performing schools. To address the need to develop a sufficient pool of school leaders with the right skills to work in chronically low-performing schools, policymakers are turning to specially designed leadership training programs discussed above, such as the Florida Turnaround Leaders Program.

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.²¹ 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 schools²²—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.²³

Moreover, chronically low-performing schools face structural barriers to improved human capital management. One study of barriers to school improvement (based on a small sample of principal interviews and review of policy documents) identified hiring and placement policies—including seniority-based staffing decisions and forced placement of teachers—to be notable barriers to school improvement.²⁴ In addition, low-performing schools are often located in districts with inefficient and rushed hiring processes starting in the summer, when the strongest teacher candidates have already accepted offers.²⁵

Thus, it should be no surprise case studies of schools turning around a history of low performance have made human capital a top priority. Accumulating evidence suggests low-performing schools (and districts) may

boost performance through a strategic focus on improving the capacity of their teachers.²⁶

There are two primary ways through which schools can build teacher capacity. First, by attracting, hiring, and keeping the best teachers—and, when necessary, removing teachers who are detrimental to the success of the school. Second, schools can build the knowledge and skills of currently employed teachers through sustained professional development and instructional support (described in Finding 3). Statistical analyses support this dual-pronged approach to building teacher capacity. A longitudinal statistical analysis of turnaround schools in North Carolina and Florida determined improvements in performance were associated with higher performing teachers entering the school *and* improvements in the productivity of current staff. As the study author points out, the results indicate “large improvements in performance in these turnaround schools appear to be primarily attributable to ... gains associated with the long-time staff in the school.”²⁷

Shifting the teacher labor force such that the best teachers end up in the most challenging schools may seem to be an elusive policy objective. Although states and districts have sought to attract teachers through financial incentives, there is evidence some programs have been poorly designed and ineffective.²⁸ That said, systematic reviews of research on financial incentives to attract teachers to low-performing schools suggest reason for optimism.^{29,30} Moreover, recent research provides some important lessons for policymakers. A randomized controlled trial (the gold standard in research design) demonstrated high-performing teachers can be induced to teach in low-performing schools. The research team identified the top 20% of teachers in 10 districts and provided a \$20,000 transfer incentive to serve in a low-achieving school. Not only did the study successfully fill almost all vacancies in the low-performing schools with high-performing teachers, but the experiment documented significant achievement gains in elementary schools. The authors explain these gains were equivalent to moving up each student by 4 to 10 percentile points relative to all students in their state.³¹

Developing Teams of Teacher Leaders: The T3 Initiative

The Turnaround Teacher Teams (T3) Initiative is an innovative program that recruits, develops, and supports highly effective, experienced teachers to serve as teacher leaders in low-performing schools. The initiative addresses the problem of inequitable access to effective teachers in the highest need schools. Moreover, because T3 places teams of Teacher Leaders, this assures a critical mass of highly skilled leaders in the school who can model collaboration and overcome isolation. The T3 Initiative:

- Creates cohorts of highly effective and experienced leaders
- Places them in teams of Teacher Leaders in schools where they are most needed
- Provides one-on-one Teacher Leader coaching with the help of a school-based T3 coach
- Supports Teacher Leaders in leading their peers to improve instructional practice and accelerate student achievement

Although there are no rigorous, external evaluations of T3 to date, analyses of outcomes of schools with T3 teams suggest their achievement gains have outpaced similar schools.

Source: http://www.teachplus.org/uploads/Documents/1355156579_T3ClosingtheGap.pdf

Many school leaders—in studies, blogs, and interviews—have paraphrased the author of “From Good To Great,” who explained turnaround leaders “start by getting the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats.”³² A systematic review of studies of school turnaround prior to 2008 identified “building a committed staff” as a key recommendation. While this includes developing the skills of the existing staff, it also can require “releasing, replacing, or redeploying those who are not fully committed to turning around school performance.”³³

One large, federally-funded, mixed-methods study identifying and comparing “turnaround” and “not-improving” schools found the turnaround schools were more likely to hire well-qualified teachers and to retain effective teachers. Respondents from the turnaround schools also reported greater efforts to recruit staff who fit the needs of the school and to “counsel out” ineffective staff.³⁴ A second federally funded study documented case studies of turnaround schools in which the principals had the freedom and the will to replace teachers who could not support the change process.³⁵

Federal policy reflects the “workforce turnover” approach to school improvement: the SIG “turnaround model” mandates replacement of 50% of teachers, on the

premise the history of low performance is attributable, at least in part, to underperforming teachers. And emerging research provides some support for this policy. One study of schools receiving SIG funds in California identified student achievement gains of approximately 0.10 standard deviations, and interestingly, the largest gains were among schools adopting the SIG “turnaround model.”³⁶ Moreover, a rigorous analysis of SIG case study schools pointed to some initial reports of improvements among schools replacing teachers in the first year of SIG. In one school, the new teachers were described as “rising to the challenge, and they have high expectations. To me, it’s like a rebirth.”³⁷

However, mandating teacher replacement can lead to negative consequences; several case studies have documented instances in which districts simply shuffled the lowest-performing teachers from school to school, a practice commonly dubbed “the lemon dance.” Moreover, a one-time shift in a large number of teachers may reap rewards if implemented carefully, but repeated turnover can be disruptive and set back reform efforts. Indeed, one set of case studies of turnaround schools in Michigan³⁸ cited “islands of stability” (well-respected staff that remained with the school for several years) as one of the factors supporting the school improvement efforts.

Finding 3: Professional Learning Opportunities

There are a few ways in which school administrators can build teacher capacity. One way, described in the previous section, is to recruit and retain the teachers who are the best fit for the school needs and culture (e.g., externally sourced capacity). The second way 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.³⁹ 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 researchers⁴⁰, 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.

Although these features signal higher quality professional development, few rigorous studies demonstrate a causal link between professional development, changes in teacher practices, and improved student achievement. For example, a review of 1,300 studies of professional

Job-Embedded Professional Development With Proven Results: Video Observations through *My Teaching Partner*

The My Teaching Partner (MTP) professional development program, developed by faculty at the University of Virginia, provides tailored and specific instructional feedback to teachers based on the analysis of classroom videos. This individualized coaching model is anchored by a collaborative partnership between a teacher and a trained consultant who provides feedback throughout the year. Every two weeks, the teacher makes a video of his or her classroom instruction and sends it to the instructional coach for analysis. MTP coaches use a systematic, validated tool (the Classroom Assessment Scoring System, or CLASS) to guide the analysis and to provide specific feedback. Working through a two-week cycle, the coach and teacher discuss the feedback and develop an action plan in preparation for the next observational cycle.

The MTP intervention has been the subject of extensive research, including a randomized controlled trial in middle and secondary schools in Virginia (The student population in these schools was approximately 60% African-American and 30% white). This study determined the effects of MTP-Secondary to be the equivalent of increasing the achievement status of every student from the 50th to the 59th percentile – robust effects that are both statistically significant and meaningful.

For more information, see: <http://www.mtpsecondary.net/>

development yielded only nine meeting What Works Clearinghouse evidence standards.⁴¹

One of the challenges for experimental studies of professional development is the professional development interventions may not be commensurate with the demands of teachers' jobs. Indeed, among rigorous studies showing positive effects on student achievement, teachers received *more than 50 hours* of professional development—a threshold few professional development activities reach.

Nonetheless, the preponderance of case study evidence supports a role for professional development in the effort to support rapid school improvement.⁴² For example, in a set of case study elementary schools, 13 of the 15 schools identified "focused staff development" as a key element in the turnaround process.⁴³

There has been exciting progress in teacher professional development. Recent research has documented improved student outcomes associated with the use of video observations in professional development, further reflecting the need for professional development to be data-driven, job-embedded, long-term, and involving active learning.⁴⁴ (The My Teaching Partner intervention, described on page 9, is one of the rare examples of professional development validated through a randomized controlled trial that met standards of the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse.⁴⁵)

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.⁴⁶

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.

The previously cited 2008 literature review on school turnaround noted that turnaround schools use data at three levels: to guide school-level planning, to target teachers' professional development, and to improve instruction for individual students.⁴⁷ One study cited in this literature review described turnaround middle schools in Texas, in which all seven case study schools purposefully examined school-level student achievement data to identify performance gaps needing focused intervention.⁴⁸

Another set of case studies of turnaround schools identified data use as a prevalent practice to which respondents attributed their improved performance. In one such school, data were accessible and public: teachers were required to maintain "data notebooks" or "data boards"—and students tracked their own progress and created personal learning objectives. As the principal explained, "it's a competition with themselves, and students enjoy seeing their progress."⁴⁹

Importantly, more rigorous studies support these case study findings. A recent large-scale randomized study of a district-level intervention to support data use in over 500 schools in seven states found statistically significant effects on student mathematics test scores and positive impacts on reading.⁵⁰ The intervention helped low-performing districts implement quarterly student benchmark assessments and provided extensive training for school and district leaders on interpreting and using the data to guide reform. The schools realizing

Developing Tools And Systems To Support Data Use In Kentucky And Texas

To support the use of data to drive instruction, Leslie County High School in Hayden, Kentucky, developed a structured, multi-faceted approach to guide and support teachers. The Leslie system is anchored by two data tracking tools: student and teacher data notebooks. The student data notebooks enable students to clearly understand course expectations and share responsibility with teachers for tracking their own academic performance. Stored in a three-ring binder, these data notebooks are carried by students from class to class throughout the day and inform each individual student's discussions with teachers about areas in which the student is struggling. This strategy includes students' participation in daily support periods and reviews during quarterly "data days," a structured time when students meet with staff to review progress. Teacher data notebooks are reviewed by teachers during weekly professional learning community (PLC) meetings—or more often—to track individual and classroom-level performance and inform instructional planning, student supports, and parent communication. A distinguishing feature of this approach is the extent to which teacher and student participation is consistent, structured, and fully integrated into the school culture.

In Texas, TEA has developed a user-friendly, online platform (studentGPS Dashboards) through which educators have access to historical, timely, and predictive information on students in their schools and classrooms. According to TEA, the data dashboards will:

- Flag emerging issues such as problems in attendance, class work, and test performance.
- Help teachers adjust their instruction to reverse negative academic trends.
- Provide instant access to analyzed data, instead of requiring requests to a data analyst.

One of the challenges for Texas administrators will be to promote widespread systematic use of this platform—sporadic use will not result in the desired outcomes. Indeed, TEA cautions district and school administrators to be prepared for some initial user resistance as teachers become accustomed to the new data platform. Nonetheless, the student GPS dashboard has the potential to be a powerful tool.

For more information see: http://www.tea.state.tx.us/TSDS/studentGPS%E2%84%A2_Dashboards/
And: <http://www.ksba.org/6-122TurnaroundLeslieCounty.aspx>

the greatest success were those using data to identify evidence-based strategies to address student needs.

A rigorous study of data use among teachers in urban districts also identified a positive relationship between data use and student achievement in elementary reading and middle school mathematics.⁵¹ This study included a careful literature review highlighting several barriers to effective data use, including lack of time to engage with data, lack of timeliness and accuracy of data, and limited capacity among teachers and administrators. The study's analyses also demonstrated the barriers were significantly and negatively associated with student achievement. Hence, these barriers point to important action steps for policymakers seeking to enhance data use for instructional decisions.

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.

Teacher collaboration has been the subject of substantial research. In the 2000 National Research Council report, "How People Learn," the authors hypothesized that

creating community-centered learning environments that encourage teacher collaboration would enhance teacher learning if they included opportunities for shared experiences and discourse about student learning.⁵² Since then, correlational studies have documented a relationship between teacher collaboration and indicators of school improvement, including student outcomes.⁵³

Likewise, ample research has documented the importance of relational trust among teachers and school leaders. In a landmark longitudinal study of 400 Chicago schools, researchers documented the relationship between trust among school staff and value-added measures of student academic growth. As the study authors wrote, “Strong relational trust also makes it more likely that reform initiatives will diffuse broadly across the school because trust reduces the sense of risk associated with change... relational trust supports a moral imperative to take on the difficult work of school improvement.”⁵⁴

Case studies of schools engaged in turnaround efforts consistently describe a culture of teacher collaboration and trust as a critical priority. A study examining the first year and a half of SIG implementation in Maryland, Michigan, and Idaho found that strengthening staff collaboration and morale was one of the key strategies adopted across school sites and was often cited as one of the schools’ initial reform priorities.⁵⁵ The school officials interviewed for this study indicated that creating structures that encouraged teachers to work together to share expertise, formulate and implement action plans, and reflect on instructional practice “enabled them to sharpen the focus on curriculum and instructional reforms in the second year” and instilled a sense of momentum.⁵⁶

Retrospective case studies of successful turnaround schools also indicate that developing a strong school culture of collaboration and trust among teachers is likely critical for sustained student achievement test

Districts Modeling and Supporting Collaboration in California

The Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership is a collaboration between Fresno and Long Beach Unified School Districts, the third and fourth largest districts in California. The Partnership is designed to accelerate achievement for all students and close achievement gaps by capitalizing on shared, systemic capacity-building across the two districts. The districts identified four strands that focus their work: enhancing mathematics instruction, improving outcomes for English learners, developing leadership at the school and district level, and college and career readiness. The cross-district conversations in these four arenas have led to a number of strategic district policy and program reforms designed to improve outcomes for all students as the districts work toward their common goals. As a growing number of districts consider cross-system collaboration, it is more important than ever to learn how partnerships like this one operate and how the work becomes embedded in the policies, structures, and daily work of each district.

Some lessons learned from this collaboration include:

- Identify common goals, strategies, and indicators of success, and document these in a Memorandum of Understanding.
- Build a partnership team that incorporates senior district leadership and holds them accountable.
- Develop relationships and trust to facilitate candid exchange and discussion of “thorny” questions.
- Deepen the culture of evidence-based practice, leveraging a variety of data to measure progress, accelerate growth, and increase capacity for data use.

Collaborations such as this are not easily replicated. However, policymakers can play an important role in removing barriers such as one-size-fits-all requirements to use prescribed external providers as part of accountability programs or in developing incentives for collaboration, in cases where districts have identified a district partner and are willing to hold themselves publicly accountable for their work together.

Source: www.cacollaborative.org/publication/special-series-fresno-long-beach-learning-partnership-series-overview

score gains.⁵⁷ An exploratory study of 11 schools with student achievement gains (both rapid gains in student achievement and “slow-and-steady” improvement) found a significant focus of many principals was “building a supportive, trusting collegial community that would coalesce around the goal of raising student achievement.”⁵⁸

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

In a sample of nine turnaround schools in California, six of the principals emphasized teacher collaboration as a key improvement strategy. These structured opportunities for teachers to come together as a team helped them become more familiar and comfortable with sharing data, ideas, and concerns. Some of these principals described implementing peer coaching or peer classroom observations, during which teachers actively reviewed and supported each other’s practices as part of their efforts to promote a trusting, interdependent, and collaborative culture.⁵⁹

School leaders can promote teacher collaboration by providing scheduled time, space, and material resources for such efforts, but developing trusting relationships takes perseverance. As one scholar of school turnaround noted, “real turnaround may require more labor-intensive relationship-building than advertised.”⁶⁰

Although teacher collaboration is school-based, districts play an important role in supporting these practices—efforts to build shared responsibility, collegiality, and trust among teachers cannot effectively operate in a vacuum. These activities must be implemented in an overall environment that prioritizes time for teacher collaboration and cultivates a sense of shared responsibility for student achievement.⁶¹

For example, districts and schools must not only provide time in the school schedule to allow teachers to come together regularly and often, but do so in a noncompetitive, supportive, and professional atmosphere that fosters a learning community.⁶² Indeed, districts can model this practice for schools and in doing so, foster a district-wide culture of continuous learning (as in the Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership example referenced above).

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. Even the best teachers cannot master the instructional techniques required of multiple new interventions in a given year; this is even more challenging for the inexperienced teachers who are disproportionately assigned to low-performing schools.

Yet, the proliferation of interventions is understandable. Leaders of low-performing schools, tempted to act quickly to address numerous challenges, might seek to address all of the problems, all at once. In the 1990s, Bryk and colleagues coined the phrase “Christmas tree schools” to describe schools in which the “new, special programs were like dazzling ornaments, hung on a tree at Christmas.”⁶³

Indeed, one of the most consistent findings from the effective schools research of the 1970s and 1980s was the importance of a common and coherent focus on instruction.⁶⁴ In the 1990s, scholars from the Consortium on Chicago School Research articulated a definition of instructional program coherence and demonstrated a relationship between improving coherence and improving student achievement.⁶⁵ A few years later, a mixed-method study of school accountability in California

Building Instructional Coherence in a Virginia Elementary School

The following account is a vignette of leadership activities designed to foster coherence in a chronically low-performing school. Although the names of the principal and school are pseudonyms, this is an actual account.

Principal Williams was appointed to lead Juniper Elementary school just weeks before the start of school. A high-poverty school located near public housing projects, Juniper Elementary had missed state academic targets for nine years, so one of Principal Williams' first tasks was to gather information on the instructional program.

To do so, she observed all of the classrooms in the school, participated in every grade-level team meeting, and concluded Juniper was instructionally "very disjointed." She explained they had various grant programs that brought an array of curricular interventions, professional development, and manipulatives, but "nothing was tied in or focused." As she recalled, "I visited the classrooms and I learned that the teachers didn't understand the [state content standards] and what they were requiring children to do. They were so used to people coming in with a new program and trying to latch onto the next best thing that nothing ever took hold of the school."

Principal Williams decided to work closely with the teachers to help them understand the extent to which their instructional materials were truly aligned with state content standards, only retaining the components that were consistent with them. "I'm sure teachers felt like I was pulling the rug out from under them," she explained, "but I had to let them see that what they were doing had nothing to do with the standards. So we looked at the standards, we looked at what are we currently using that is aligned with the standards and if it's not aligned, we're throwing it out. There were a lot of hard conversations... It was mindboggling how many programs the school had but didn't know what to do with them all." She participated in every grade-level meeting, twice a week for each grade, systematically reviewing all instructional materials. She wanted to communicate to teachers that "we were in this voyage together, not just me telling them what they had to do."

By December, Principal Williams observed that teachers' conversations in the grade-level meetings were less about curricular alignment, and more focused on student data and how teachers could intervene instructionally with struggling students. The teachers started to take ownership of their instruction, and Principal Williams observed that "they started depending on each other for instructional support and not them depending on what was outside that we could buy... As educators, we become too dependent on what is for sale, and we stop depending on ourselves."

By the end of the school year, Juniper Elementary hit state academic targets for the first time. When they received the good news, school administrators invited parents to a celebratory picnic. "It was just crazy the amount of people who came and it was so great to see how excited the parents were. We had always been the lowest school and it was wonderful to finally come together and celebrate something positive."

also identified an association between instructional coherence and growth in student achievement.⁶⁶ According to the Chicago researchers, program coherence consists of "a set of interrelated programs for students and staff that are guided by a common framework for curriculum, instruction, assessment and learning climate and that are pursued over a sustained period." That is, teachers in schools with program coherence describe consistency and coordination among curriculum, instruction, and learning materials.⁶⁷

More recent studies of school turnaround have reinforced these findings, but with an emphasis on low-performing schools achieving dramatic gains in student outcomes. For example, the most systematic and rigorous review of turnaround studies through 2008 identified "a consistent focus on instruction," as an important practice in 10 case studies of 35 schools.⁶⁸ In a set of case studies of school turnaround in Michigan, a lack of instructional coherence was one of the problems to which respondents in all six schools attributed their history of low performance.⁶⁹

And, a case study analysis of 15 turnaround schools credited the principals for having developed a highly focused mission around which all improvement activities were aligned.⁷⁰

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

Current federal policy does not always encourage focus and coherence. Indeed, the intervention models described in the SIG policy require a broad set of interventions, including extended learning time, job-embedded professional development, use of formative assessments, and social-emotional supports. Ideally, these interventions can, and should be, mutually reinforcing, and strategic school leaders can craft a coherent approach. But less adept leaders may revert

to compliance-oriented activities not anchored by a focused and strategic set of objectives. Such practices underscore the need for effective programs to prepare high-competency leaders for turnaround leadership roles discussed elsewhere in this report.

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. For example, Virginia now trains a cadre of consultants in the Virginia needs assessment process, and pays for these consultants’ work with identified districts and their chronically low-performing schools. Because there are extensive materials and associated trainings, the state education agency can ensure all districts across the state are engaging in the same process with the same level of rigor.⁷¹

Quality of Implementation: A Distinguishing Feature of Successful Schools

When it comes to the organizational and instructional practices of an effective school, the practices observed in turnaround schools might seem to be similar to those of less successful schools. In both, teachers might say they use data, engage in professional development, and perhaps even use the same curricular package.

Although the catchphrases might be the same, the substance of the work differs. In successful schools, the implementation of these practices is more sustained, consistent, and pervasive. As scholars have noted, “faithful implementation of a policy, program, or practice is more the exception than the rule, according to decades of educational research.”⁷²

A large study of comprehensive school reform that included large-scale surveys, student achievement analyses, and case studies determined higher levels of implementation were associated with strong principal leadership, committed faculty, and professional development opportunities—all of which have also been cited as important features of school turnaround. Moreover, efficient roll out of new programs or policies can be hampered by bureaucratic processes that slow the disbursement of funds, hiring of staff, ordering new materials, or communicating key information.

Thus, as policymakers consider new policy mechanisms, they should be attentive to the conditions supporting implementation, without which the policy might never yield the anticipated results.

Source: Herman, R., & Huberman, M. (2013). Differences in the policies, programs, and practices (PPPs) and combinations of PPPs across turnaround, moderately improving, and not improving schools. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA.

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. Because these are emergent topics of policy interest, we have opted to discuss them in this review.

Topic 1: Achievement School Districts

The promising practices for school turnaround described above have largely been implemented in traditional public school systems—that is, school districts governed by a locally elected board and managed by a superintendent, and that require teachers to meet state certification requirements, and typically assign students to neighborhood schools based on their home address. Although SIG policy required districts to extend operational flexibility to SIG schools, a recent study examining the operational authority, support, and monitoring of school turnaround in persistently low-performing schools showed that, overall, districts afforded their schools limited responsibility for decision-making in areas such as staffing, hiring, and dismissal; assessment policies; curriculum; and length of the school day and school year.⁷³ At the same time, increased flexibility in operation and governance structure has been cited as a potential catalyst for school improvement. Moreover, some advocacy organizations have argued that local urban governance, teacher unions, and constrained school choice hinder reform efforts.⁷⁴

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.⁷⁵ There was also a rapid increase in the charter school population—as 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.

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.⁷⁶

Despite the volume of publications about the RSD, several researchers have pointed to the lack of consensus in the findings.⁷⁷ Multiple reports have documented steady improvement in student achievement through 2013;⁷⁸ however, overall performance levels remain low in comparison to the state, and there is insufficient evidence to link any achievement gains to specific practices.⁷⁹

Although some studies indicate the RSD charter schools may be generating greater achievement growth than public schools with comparable students,⁸⁰ the ability to assess whether students are performing better under the New Orleans reform effort is hampered by the fact the population changed substantially after Katrina.⁸¹ In addition, a study of parent perceptions of school choice in post-Katrina New Orleans suggests that, while parents affirmed school choice is important, most only reported applying to one school and low-income parents and parents of special needs children were accessing school choice to a lesser degree than other parents.⁸² Although we are beginning to see some carefully designed studies of New Orleans reforms, the director of the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans commented that “we know much less than we think about the effects of New Orleans school reforms.”⁸³

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

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: although test scores improved in math (a net gain of 5.5 percentage points since 2012), 2014 reading results are lower than when the ASD began in 2012 (a net loss of 1 percentage point).⁸⁴ 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.

Tennessee’s ASD model and Louisiana’s RSD share many of the same features. For example, the ASD both serves as an operator of schools and recruits and authorizes charter operators. Eligible schools are removed from their own local education agency and placed under the authority of the ASD. Staffing procedures also changed. ASD educators enter into a contract with the ASD and become state employees; teachers negotiate staffing arrangements with individual schools. The state partnered with leadership and teacher organizations to help recruit and train new educators to the ASD, and Teach for America has been cited as a key supplier of new teacher recruits to the ASD.

However, there are differences between Tennessee’s approach to the ASD and Louisiana’s approach to the RSD. RSD is the primary operator of New Orleans public schools and became so almost overnight. In contrast, the ASD has been slower and more deliberate in its selection of schools, and the ultimate goal is to have schools exit the ASD and return to their own Local Education Agencies (LEAs) after demonstrating successful turnaround (to date, however, there is no evidence how and under what circumstances schools will rejoin their home school district). In addition, while parents are afforded some school choice, students in “neighborhood zones” of an ASD school get priority at that school. The district also established a new salary schedule and performance-based compensation system so teachers who earn high ratings on the basis of student achievement data and principal observations can earn more faster, with the intent of incentivizing teachers to come to the district and, for those deemed effective, to stay.⁸⁵

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. Moreover, the resources, strategies, and supports associated with the RSD suggest it will be worth following this district’s progress. Until then, policymakers should be cautious in the interpretation of preliminary data.

Education Achievement Authority (EAA) — Similar to Louisiana’s RSD and Tennessee’s ASD, 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.⁸⁶

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. As other states consider similar policies, the turbulent experience of Michigan may provide sobering lessons.

“As other states consider similar policies, the turbulent experience of Michigan may provide sobering lessons.”

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.⁸⁷ Specifically, parent trigger legislation gives parents the ability to intervene in their child's school if the school is identified as low performing. 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.⁸⁸

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.⁸⁹ 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.^{90,91} Since California passed its parent trigger legislation, at least 24 additional states have considered such legislation and six have enacted some variation of a parent trigger law (in addition to California, the six states include Connecticut, Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, Ohio [pilot program only in one district], and Texas).⁹²

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. For example, parents in states with parent trigger laws on the books have “pulled the trigger” relatively few times. In Indiana, the parent trigger law was enacted in 2011, but as of mid-way through 2013, no schools had been taken over through a trigger process.⁹³ Likewise, in Mississippi, although 35 schools had performed poorly enough over a consecutive three-year period to be eligible for parent-trigger based on performance, two years after the parent trigger law was passed, no parents had elected to pull the trigger and start the process.⁹⁴ And although Texas passed parent trigger legislation in 2011, the parent trigger had not been implemented in any school districts as of 2014.

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. Parent Revolution has been involved in six parent trigger efforts in Southern California. The organization claims they helped parents leverage the parent trigger policy to

transform one school into a nonprofit charter, implement a college-focused school model at another, and obtain new school leadership at another school.⁹⁵

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.^{96,97} A policy brief from the Annenberg Institute described these communities as “divided and embittered” following the parent trigger activities.⁹⁸ Indeed, parent trigger efforts often arise out of conflict in the community and conflict between a segment of parents and the school. A report out of the National Education Policy Center argues the parent trigger approach “challenges the democratic underpinnings of public education, temporarily empowering the majority of parents currently using a school but disenfranchising the broader

community, including the taxpayers funding the school and parents whose children would subsequently attend the school” (p. 4).⁹⁹

Indeed, some organizations have argued the parent trigger policies run counter to research on best practices for school improvement and parental involvement.¹⁰⁰ 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.¹⁰¹

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. For example, it is very difficult to change school culture and beliefs through policy and mandates. One cannot mandate “quick wins.” Moreover, over-specifying interventions can lead to compliance-oriented behavior that is unlikely to yield results.

Nonetheless, we believe the findings reported here point to a small set of focused policy recommendations to be considered by state legislators. 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.

When responding to the urgent need to fix the lowest-performing schools, policymakers must ensure they only put into policy those actions that can be supported by rigorous research. In addition to the recommendations on the following pages, we offer this framework for approaching state policy:

- **Model the coherence at the state level we would expect at the school level** — Just as research suggests low-performing schools have a tendency to latch on to the next best thing in school reform, policymakers have been known to do so as well. The result is sometimes a confusing assortment of mandated interventions and layers of support sending mixed messages to schools and districts.
- **Do not mandate solutions for which there is not adequate capacity** — That is, do not mandate that a school be closed if there is no higher-performing

school to receive the displaced students. Do not mandate a principal be removed if there is no better principal to take his or her place. And do not take over schools if there are no administrators with a strong track record willing to take on the challenge.

- **Pay attention: Invest in monitoring.** If an action is sufficiently important to mandate, it stands to reason it is worth paying attention to whether schools and districts are following through. Careful monitoring processes signal to schools and districts that the state attaches importance to what they are doing, sets high expectations, and positions state officials to respond appropriately when improvement processes are not on track.

The following are specific policy recommendations based on the research presented in this paper.

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.

While leadership program developers may propose different approaches, 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** based on evidence of effectiveness and evaluation for school leader competencies and dispositions
- **Research-based content** aligned with existing activities and frameworks endorsed by the Texas Turnaround Center and training consistent with competencies of turnaround leaders
- **Active learning** opportunities, including data analysis and interpretation, strategic planning, and field-based problem-solving activities
- A **supervised internship** component before principals are assigned to a school of their own
- A **mentorship** component through which principals receive support after they assume leadership responsibilities
- **Intensive training**, no less than 10 months prior to placement in a school leadership position, including no less than 80 hours of instruction, although more intensive approaches may receive preference
- An **evaluation** of program effectiveness, including both formative and summative measures

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

While comprehensive proposals to support the overall teacher workforce have received extensive discussion in policy circles, there is a more constrained set of human capital challenges faced by chronically low-

performing schools. Multiple descriptive studies have shown low-performing schools frequently have fewer highly qualified teachers, more novice teachers and more teachers teaching out of their certification areas. These staffing realities add greatly to the challenges of improving the performance of these campuses. These challenges are sometimes exacerbated by personnel policies described earlier, often leading to creative work-around strategies devised by determined school leaders.

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. Although research does

not establish a threshold at which incentives are clearly effective,¹⁰² the most rigorous evidence suggests it should be a substantial amount. Districts must commit to continuing to fund the incentives out of district funds for at least two additional 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 along the lines of TeachPlus' Turnaround Teacher Teams Initiative. The initiative addresses the problem of inequitable access to effective teachers in the highest need schools, and places teams of teacher leaders in low-performing schools where they are most needed.

Any pilots should include a rigorous evaluation so effective interventions may be replicated and ineffective programs discontinued.

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Appendix

Although it was beyond the scope of this report to conduct an exhaustive, What Works Clearinghouse type of review, we sought to employ a systematic approach and to be transparent about the methodology of the research cited. We acknowledge that few studies have sufficiently rigorous methodology to provide causal evidence of the effectiveness of specific interventions for improving chronically low-performing schools. Indeed, most studies of school and district turnaround rely on case study, correlational, or mixed-methods approaches; few have employed quasi-experimental designs. In compiling the body of research to be considered for this review, we initially cast a broad net, acknowledging study design limitations, but also recognizing that case study and qualitative designs may be rigorous and replicable. Through search engines and consultation with experts in relevant fields, we identified over 400 articles or reports on issues related to school turnaround, although most were excluded from review because they did not meet minimum selection criteria (that is, they were intended to be “toolkits” or “how-to” recommendations for schools or districts, “thought pieces” that included no new data, or were journalistic articles). The majority of the studies included were either multiple or single case studies; many employ mixed-methods. In addition to case studies that identified practices prevalent in turnaround schools, we incorporated studies with a broader sample, including nationally representative descriptive studies or those with an experimental design (see, for example, the professional development or data use topics). To the extent possible, we sought to prioritize findings from prior systematic literature reviews (such as those sponsored by the Institute of Education Sciences) as well as the few randomized controlled trials that were relevant for the topics described in this report.



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