



Dramatic Action, Dramatic Improvement

The Research on School Turnaround

By Tiffany D. Miller and Catherine Brown

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Across the United States, approximately 1,235 high schools serving 1.1 million students—only 5 percent of the nation’s high schools—have graduation rates at or below 67 percent.¹ While the high school graduation rate recently reached 81 percent in 2013, the number of chronically failing high schools remains much too high.² Among this group of failing public high schools, approximately 7 percent of students—who are overwhelmingly low-income students of color—are attending schools where it is not likely that they will go on to college or career.³

This situation not only limits the lifetime opportunities of the students consigned to these schools, but also carries long-term consequences for U.S. international competitiveness and economic progress. High school graduates earn between 50 percent and 100 percent more over their lifetimes than those who do not earn a high school diploma.⁴ They are also more likely to be employed and less likely to rely on public assistance.⁵ According to one study, the U.S. economy would gain almost \$335 billion in additional revenue if students who dropped out of high school graduated instead.⁶

While the No Child Left Behind Act, or NCLB, required states and districts to identify persistently low-performing schools and take action to improve student learning, it provided very limited resources or support to actually help these schools improve.⁷ Many states and districts did not know what steps to take. Moreover, states tended to spread the funds that were provided across many schools instead of focusing on rigorous, evidence-based interventions in only a few. While NCLB and state accountability systems successfully identified failing schools, few state or districts leaders took steps to aggressively tackle the challenges that these schools faced.

Five years ago, the federal government took a more aggressive and targeted approach to school turnaround by investing substantially in school improvement efforts. Through funds provided by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009—called the School Improvement Grants, or SIG, program—school districts applied for three-year grants in exchange for implementing a number of reforms in their chronically lowest-performing schools.⁸ This program has awarded more than \$4 billion to help turnaround at least 1,200 schools across all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and American Indian tribes and Alaska Native reservations through the U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Indian Education.⁹

Although rigorous evaluation of the national SIG program is still underway, existing research offers key lessons about what methods are most effective when turning around low-performing schools. This brief summarizes much of that research, including studies that assess the impact of NCLB restructuring, the state-level impacts of SIG, and district-level strategies to turn around schools and improve student achievement. This brief also includes case studies of four schools that have successfully increased student achievement through targeted turnaround efforts.

Research on turnaround schools

The schools included in these studies faced substantial challenges. Many school improvement efforts simply tinkered around the margins rather than addressing the problem as a whole. The available body of research, however, suggests that dramatic action is necessary to bring about dramatic school improvement.

Council of the Great City Schools (2015)

According to a recent study by the Council of the Great City Schools, 70 percent of urban schools that received targeted assistance for school turnaround increased the percentage of students who are proficient in reading and math. These schools also significantly reduced the number of students performing at a below-basic level. Furthermore, one major difference between successful SIG schools and unsuccessful ones was the coherence of the overall district and state strategies for supporting these schools—and how well these strategies were executed. According to the authors, “More successful SIG schools benefited from plans that clearly articulated how a turnaround school’s instructional program was to be enhanced, how professional development on the instructional programs was to be delivered, and how the school would be supported.”¹⁰

The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (2015)

This analysis examined the outcomes and enrollment patterns of 12,000 families who were affected by the closing of 47 underperforming or under-enrolled schools in 2013. It found that 93 percent of students ended up in schools that were higher performing than the schools they had previously attended—many in close proximity to their former schools.¹¹ The differences in school performance levels were pronounced in many cases: The difference in performance between a closed and newly assigned school’s policy points—the district’s school accountability policy—was 21 percentage points, on average.¹²

Harvard University (2014)

This study examined the extent to which low-performing traditional public schools that implemented the practices of high-performing charter schools improved student achievement. Twenty traditional public schools implemented five best practices gleaned from charters:¹³

1. Effective leaders and teachers, which included replacing 19 out of 20 principals and almost half of teachers
2. Increased learning time
3. More student-level differentiation
4. Data-driven instruction
5. A culture of high expectations

The authors concluded that infusing these best practices from charter schools had a statistically significant effect on low-performing traditional public schools in math achievement. In elementary schools, it was enough “to eliminate the racial achievement gap in math in Houston elementary schools in approximately three years.”¹⁴ In high schools, the effect narrowed the achievement gap in math by 50 percent over the length of the study. Finally, the result was strongest for students in fourth, sixth, and ninth grade math.¹⁵

MDRC (2014)

In 2002, New York City created a cohort of nonselective, small public high schools that mostly served disadvantaged students of color and emphasized academic rigor, strong staff and student relationships, and community partnerships. A rigorous multiyear study found that students who attended these schools raised their graduation rates by 9 percentage points. Students attending these schools also graduated at higher rates—72 percent—compared with students attending schools in the control group—62 percent.¹⁶

Among other findings, MDRC’s research demonstrated that “successful system-wide reform through the creation of new schools is possible” and that “comprehensive whole-school reforms can turn around struggling high schools, improve student achievement, and put more students on a successful path to graduation.”¹⁷

National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 20511 (2014)

This working paper found that leadership and management changes associated with the school-restructuring NCLB sanction showed the strongest positive effects on student achievement, as measured by school- and student-level data. This study also found that the initial threat of an NCLB sanction contributed to student learning but not to the same degree as the most aggressive NCLB reform. “We find suggestive incentive effects in schools first entering the NCLB sanction regime, but no significant effects of intermediate sanctions. Further analysis shows that gains in sanctioned schools are concentrated among low-performing students, with the exception of gains from restructuring, which are pervasive.”¹⁸ Although an imperfect bill, this finding suggests that the more aggressive NCLB sanctions led to increases in student achievement. The authors conclude, “The strong positive effects of restructuring—which appear to be broad, rather than focused on the lowest-performing students—indicate that school management or leadership problems constitute the single greatest obstacle to improved student performance. ... School leaders who cannot formulate strategies to improve performance cannot be expected to react constructively to incentives to do so.”¹⁹

S.H. Cowell Foundation (2013)

A four-year study of turnaround efforts in Sanger Unified School District—named by the state of California as one of its 98 lowest-performing districts in 2004—stands out as a proof point of effective methods.²⁰ By the 2011-12 school year, the district was exceeding expectations on the district’s Academic Performance Index, state tests, and graduation rates. This study offers many lessons—perhaps most importantly, what the study calls the “power of three principles for leading district change,” which are:²¹

1. Understanding the developmental nature of desired changes, whether asked of teachers or administrators
2. Grounding decisions in evidence of adult and student learning
3. Building shared commitments and relationships to sustain change

American Institutes for Research (2013, 2012)

A study by the American Institutes for Research found that improvements in turn-around schools in Florida and North Carolina used a combination of hiring more effective teachers to replace outgoing ones and improving the productivity of existing staff.²² Another study by the American Institutes for Research used a mixed-method approach to assess policy differences between “turnaround” and “not improving” schools. The authors found that:

*(1) Accountability pressures and support from the district combined with (2) strong instructional leadership, (3) strategic staffing (i.e., strategic recruitment, assignment, and “counseling out” of ineffective staff), (4) intensive professional development, and (5) data use focused on identifying and assisting struggling students are key components of a school’s turnaround process.*²³

National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 17990 (2012)

Using data from California schools that received SIG funds, this study found significant improvements in the test scores of schools on the “lowest-achieving” margin but not among schools on the “lack of progress” margin. These results were mostly found in schools that implemented the SIG turnaround model, which, among other things, compels more dramatic staff turnover. In fact, schools implementing this model saw greater gains in student test scores.²⁴ With respect to the magnitude of the effect, the study found that “reform-driven growth” moved schools up 34 points on the state’s test-based Academic Performance Index, closing the gap between state performance targets and a low-performing school’s performance by 23 percent.²⁵

Center on Education Policy (2012)

The Center on Education Policy, or CEP, issued a series of three special reports about the implementation of the federal SIG program.²⁶ These studies found that even with the challenges identified in recruiting and hiring effective staff, the majority of the 46 state survey respondents said that replacing teachers and principals was an important element of improving student achievement in SIG schools.²⁷ Based on interviews and an in-depth review of six schools that received the federal grants, Idaho, Maryland, and Michigan experienced positive changes in school climate—for example, the creation of a safe, productive, and orderly environment.

University of Wisconsin (2011)

A rigorous 2011 random-assignment study by researchers from the University of Wisconsin—Madison examined the effects of a district-level intervention to support data-driven decision making in more than 500 schools in 59 school districts across seven states. It found that the intervention had a positive effect on both student math and reading comprehension. The result was stronger and statistically significant in math. The researchers concluded, “Taken as a whole, we believe the results illustrate that data-driven reform efforts can have not only a statistically significant effect on achievement but a substantively meaningful impact as well.”²⁸

Mass Insight Education & Research Institute (2007)

This study identified six factors needed to successfully turn around chronically low-performing schools: recognition of the challenge; dramatic and fundamental change; urgency; supportive operating conditions; new-model, high-capacity partners; and new state and district structures.²⁹ In the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in Charlotte, North Carolina, a group of schools was identified for improvement and implemented a strategy that aligns with these six factors. As a result, each school experienced gains in both math and reading, while 91 percent of “zone” middle schools met adequate yearly progress in the 2008-09 school year, up 30 percent from the previous year.³⁰

Snapshots of successful turnaround schools

The four schools featured in this section used a combination of federal funding and research-based methods to successfully improve outcomes for students.

Frederick Douglass High School, Baltimore, Maryland

Frederick Douglass High School in Baltimore, Maryland, was established in 1883 and is the second-oldest historically integrated public high school in the United States. After decades of financial and administrative struggles, Frederick Douglass High—once a school with a reputation for excellence—became one of the most challenged schools in the city. As featured in the 2008 HBO documentary *Hard Times at Douglass High*, the school suffered from low academic performance and graduated less than 25 percent of its students.³¹ This underperforming school failed generation after generation of Baltimore students. The former principal, Antonio Hurt, described the school at the time he took over in 2010 as “an education cemetery.”^{32*}

In 2010, Baltimore City Public Schools launched a dramatic school turnaround effort in Frederick Douglass High that resulted in hiring a new principal and replacing more than 50 percent of its staff. Teacher recruitment focused on staff members that were committed to creating a college-going culture, among other things.³³ Frederick Douglass High School prioritized staff development and increased planning time for teachers and learning time for students. The principal also created a dual-enrollment program through which students could earn college credit at Baltimore City Community College.³⁴

As a result, something dramatic happened between the 2010-11 and 2011-12 school years: Proficiency rates in English language arts rose from 41 percent in 2011 to 53 percent in 2012.³⁵ Math proficiency rates also increased from 32 percent to 44 percent.³⁶ And Douglass High's less than 25 percent graduation rate is history: In 2014, the graduation rate was 57 percent.³⁷ While the school still has room for improvement, this kind of momentous increase in student achievement is almost unheard of.

Leslie County High School, Hyden, Kentucky

By all accounts, the community surrounding Leslie County High School, located in rural Kentucky, had reason to be discouraged. During the 2009-10 school year, only 65 percent of students were proficient in reading and just 40 percent were proficient in math on statewide tests.³⁸ However, after one year of focused school turnaround efforts, proficiency rates improved dramatically. In 2010-11, 80 percent of students were proficient in reading and half were proficient in math.³⁹

According to Leslie High's principal, Robert Roark, the biggest difference was the school's focus on making data-based decisions as it sought dramatic turnaround in student achievement. "Data-based decision making allows us to create a greater sense of ownership for improving individual student performance among both students and teachers," Roark explained.⁴⁰ Leslie County High implemented an integrated, multifaceted system of instructional support that employed data-tracking tools for teachers and administrators. School leaders continuously monitored this intensive data use. The new focus allowed teachers and students to assess and track student performance in order to identify and target areas for additional intervention and support.

Emerson Elementary School, Kansas City, Kansas

Emerson Elementary School was identified by the state as Kansas' lowest-performing school in 2009.⁴¹ Ninety-four percent of students qualified as economically disadvantaged, and 52 percent were English language learners—a combination of factors that is often associated with low-performing schools.⁴² At the time, only 37 percent of students were proficient in reading, and just 44 percent were proficient in math.⁴³

Emerson Elementary underwent a remarkable transformation. The school district hired a new, visionary principal who was given operational flexibility. The principal focused on retaining and hiring effective teachers, implemented data-based decision making, increased learning time, and concentrated on family engagement to significantly increase academic achievement. As a result, Emerson Elementary School has seen dramatic improvement in student achievement over the past five years, moving from failure to exemplar among district elementary schools. Remarkably, 71 percent of students were proficient in reading on statewide tests in 2013 compared with 46 percent of all students in the district.⁴⁴ In math, 84 percent of Emerson students were proficient compared with just 42 percent of students across the district.⁴⁵

Rose Ferrero Elementary School, Soledad, California

During the 2009-10 school year, only 32 percent of Rose Ferrero Elementary School students were proficient in English language arts, and just 40 percent were proficient in math on statewide tests.⁴⁶ The following year, Rose Ferrero Elementary implemented professional learning opportunities for teachers, increased teacher collaboration, and used data to drive instruction with the goal of improving student learning. In 2013, proficiency rates rose to 49 percent in English language arts—an increase of 17 percentage points—and 68 percent in math—an increase of 28 percentage points.⁴⁷

Instructional coaching was at the heart of Rose Ferrero Elementary School's turnaround strategy. The school utilized both real-time and walk-through coaching.⁴⁸ It also took a three-pronged approach to peer observation, giving teachers opportunities to observe instructional practices through leadership rounds, peer visitation, and real-time coaching sessions.⁴⁹ Finally, Rose Ferrero Elementary implemented weekly teacher-facilitated, grade-level team meetings and monthly whole-staff meetings to discuss school-wide student achievement data and instructional strategies.⁵⁰ The school placed data at the center of discussion during weekly teacher collaboration time, as well as one-on-one meetings between teachers and the principal.⁵¹

Key findings

While not inclusive of every study on school improvement, the evidence base on school turnaround presented here is illuminating and points to the following critical elements of successful school turnaround.

Aggressive action on the part of school districts

The most compelling finding from this research review is that school turnaround is possible and that it occurs when districts take aggressive steps. New York City transformed some of its large high schools into 100 small, nonselective ones and realized dramatic

improvements in graduation and college-going rates. Houston infused the practices of high-achieving charter schools into its traditional public schools and saw its achievement gap in math fall 50 percent. These districts did much more than tinker around the edges. As researchers at MDRC noted, “implementing stand-alone programs that target a specific subset of the student population tend to have a limited impact and cannot revive a struggling school.”⁵²

Resources and requirements

Requirements that states and districts turn around chronically failing schools through accountability systems are necessary but insufficient. Because aggressive turnaround efforts are by nature disruptive, they are often contentious within a community. Sometimes they engender political opposition. Federal laws that require better outcomes for students in these schools can give local leaders the freedom to take aggressive action, while additional targeted resources help make the transition smoother. When districts and schools are given targeted funding—either from philanthropic organizations or the government—they are better positioned to achieve significant change.

Governance and staffing changes

Schools that replaced ineffective leaders showed the greatest gains in student learning. One study commissioned by The Wallace Foundation about how leadership influences student learning found that for the most part, there are no documented instances of school turnaround without an effective principal—leadership is second only to effective classroom instruction as the most important school-level factor affecting student achievement.⁵³ What’s more, the study’s authors said, “After six additional years of research, we are even more confident about this claim. To date, we have not found a single case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership.”⁵⁴ Simply replacing the principal, however, is not enough to drive significant change. Principals need the skills and vision necessary to turn around low-performing schools.

Data-driven decision making

Research supports the use of data-based decision making to improve student achievement. A study by researchers at the Council of the Great City Schools looked at the relationship between data use and student achievement in urban schools.⁵⁵ Researchers found a positive relationship between teachers’ data use and student achievement in elementary and middle school math, and the use of data by principals was associated with higher student achievement in some grades and subjects.⁵⁶

A focus on school culture and nonacademic supports for disadvantaged students

While turnaround efforts are ultimately judged by improvements in academic proficiency and graduation rates, schools that most successfully turn around tend to focus their efforts more broadly. They work purposefully and deliberately to create collaborative, positive, and enriching school cultures with high expectations for all students. They create fortified environments to enhance the social, emotional, and behavioral development of all students, particularly of those who are growing up in poverty and facing challenging circumstances that affect every aspect of their development. Schools that successfully turn around offer wrap-around services to help support all the needs of their students and, where possible, their families and communities.

Conclusion

The research highlighted here illustrates that school turnaround is possible in the presence of a concerted strategy that incorporates evidenced-based best practices: Aggressive action on the part of school districts, resources and requirements, governance and staffing changes, data-driven decision making, and a focus on school culture and nonacademic supports for disadvantaged students. Frederick Douglass High, Emerson Elementary, Rose Ferrero Elementary, and Leslie County High School serve as powerful case studies demonstrating that schools can evolve from chronically failing their students to exceeding district and state averages on tests within a few short years. Yet with hundreds of schools in need of improvement, more work remains to be done. Making greater strides in academic achievement will require more rigorous research into best practices, dedicated funding for school improvement, and a strong commitment to make the tough choices that are best for students. Federal policy should prioritize strong requirements and targeted support that not only identifies chronically failing schools, but also empowers states and districts to take meaningful action to turn those schools around.

Tiffany D. Miller is the Director of Education Policy and Catherine Brown is Vice President of Education Policy at the Center for American Progress.

**Correction, March 31, 2015: This issue brief has been corrected to accurately characterize Antonio Hurt's position at Frederick Douglass High School.*

Endnotes

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