

**Reference Desk Response No. 240:
Effective Turnaround Strategies**

Question/s:

1. What are the most effective turnaround strategies (or combination of strategies)?
 2. Are there any turnaround strategies that are most effective for particular demographics (ELL, IEP, SES)?
-

Report:

Following an established REL-NEI Reference Desk research protocol, we conducted a search for research reports as well as descriptive and policy-oriented briefs and articles in this area. The sources included federally funded organizations, additional research institutions, several educational research databases, and a general Internet search using Google and other search engines. We also searched for appropriate organizations that may act as resources on this issue. We have not done an evaluation of these organizations or the resources themselves, but offer this list to you for your information only.

Our Researchers have found that there has been little in the way of multi-year evaluative research assessing the effectiveness of specific turnaround strategies or combination of strategies. There is, however, a body of research-based articles and references outlining guidelines, recommendations and resources to support states and districts supporting low performing districts and schools. The resources included here indicate that there is no single strategy that is effective for turning around schools and districts but rather a combination of strategies rooted in the unique needs of the specific district or school.

The requestor has asked two questions, and the protocol was followed to answer the questions as two separate items. However, our researchers found that the research, in general, did not identify particular subgroups for specific turnaround strategies. Addressing the needs of subgroups is implied but not explicit in the articles noted in response to question one. One report specifically identified SES and race in the report's statement of need. That report is included in the response to question two but also does not recommend separate or specific strategies for subgroups.

Question/s:

1. **What are the most effective turnaround strategies (or combination of strategies)?**

1.1. Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools: A Practice Guide

Herman, R., Dawson, P., Dee, T., Greene, J., Maynard, R., Redding, S., and Darwin, M. 2008. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.

Source: US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences
(http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/Turnaround_pg_04181.pdf)

This guide identifies practices that can improve the performance of chronically low-performing schools—a process commonly referred to as creating “turnaround schools.” The four recommendations in this guide work together to help failing schools make adequate yearly progress. Discussion of each recommendation includes the following elements – summary of evidence to support the recommendation, how to carry out the recommendation, potential roadblocks and solutions. The recommendations highlighted in the practice guide include:

1. Signal the need for dramatic change with strong leadership
2. Maintain a consistent focus on improving instruction
3. Provide visible improvements early in the turnaround process
4. Build a committed staff

1.2. Breaking the Habit of Low Performance: Successful School Restructuring Stories

Brinson D., and Rhim, L. M.; August 2009; Lincoln, IL: Center on Innovation & Improvement.

Source: Center on Innovation & Improvement

(<http://www.centerii.org/survey/>)

“This report examines five schools that successfully restructured. By current accountability standards, these schools had long-documented histories of poor performance and failed efforts to improve. At each of these schools, multiple factors enabled them to kick the low-performance habit. The report looks at what these schools have done differently from the thousands of schools that languish in improvement status as well as what actors intervened to catalyze, change, or create an environment conducive to improvement. The Center on Innovation & Improvement has an entire body of work in this area and is also listed as a resource below.”

1.3. The Turnaround Challenge: New Research, Recommendations, and a Partnership

Framework for States and School Districts. *Boston, MA: Mass Insight Education & Research Institute; 2007.*

Source: Child Development & Adolescent Studies MRB-BG090518-019

(<http://www.massinsight.org/micontent/trnresources.aspx>)

The purpose of this 116-page report was to produce recommendations for states and districts seeking a flexible, systematic approach to swift and significant transformation in schools (particularly high schools) deemed chronically underperforming. It includes a survey of (1) past and current reform efforts, (2) root causes of chronic underperformance, and (3) analyses of high-performing, high-poverty (HPHP) schools.

“From their analysis, Mass Insight developed a framework for state and district policy-shapers to develop the conditions to help struggling schools achieve dramatic turnarounds. The authors recommend the creation of a state or district turnaround zone to change traditional operating conditions that inhibit reform. Mass Insight describes a two-stage process, with fundamental transformation at the start [...and] steady, capacity-building improvement to follow. This model requires the state to drive a build in capacity and a shift or redesign in how schools work with external partners.”

1.4. Corrective Action in Low-Performing Schools: Lessons for NCLB Implementation From State and District Strategies in First-Generation Accountability Systems.

Mintrop, H. and Trujillo, T.; 2005; Report 657. Los Angeles, CA: Center for the Study of Evaluation, UCLA.

Source: ERIC, document # EJ846754

(<http://www.cse.ucla.edu/products/summary.asp?report=657>)

This 43-page paper “explores what lessons can be learned from the experiences of states that instituted NCLB-like accountability systems prior to 2001 (here called first-generation accountability systems). The authors looked at the experiences of three smaller states (Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina), four larger ones (California, Florida, New York, Texas), and two large districts (Chicago and Philadelphia). They analyzed evaluative reports and policy documents as well as interviews with state officials and researchers. The authors condensed the material into eight “lessons”: sanctions are not the fallback solution; no single strategy has been universally successful; staging should be handled with flexibility; intensive capacity building is necessary; a comprehensive bundle of strategies is key; relationship-building needs to complement powerful programs; competence reduces conflict; and strong state commitment is needed to create system capacity.”

1.5. School Turnarounds: A Review of the Cross-Sector Evidence on Dramatic Organizational Improvement

Public Impact for the Center on Innovation & Improvement; 2007.

Source: Center on Innovation & Improvement

(<http://www.centerii.org/survey/downloads/Turnarounds-Color.pdf>)

The 62-page report synthesizes literature from multiple sectors— business, nonprofit, government, and education—and identifies the factors that have been shown to influence turnaround initiatives in schools and other types of organizations. The findings are organized into two broad themes: environmental context and leadership. The section on environmental context

looks at five areas that influence turnaround strategies: timetable, freedom to act, support and aligned systems, performance monitoring, and community engagement. In looking at leadership, the authors focused on pre-existing capabilities of the leaders and the common set of activities undertaken by the leaders. Appendices include a matrix of the literature indicating the factor(s) to have played a role in the turnaround success.

2. Are there any turnaround strategies that are most effective for particular demographics (ELL, IEP, SES)?

2.1. Reaching Capacity: A Blueprint For the State Role in Improving Low Performing Schools and Districts. *Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy at MassINC; 2005.*

Source: Google Search

(http://www.renniecenter.org/research_docs/0504_ReachingCapacity.html)

According to the abstract: “The purpose of the 54-page report is to clarify the state’s role in helping schools and districts address their needs. The report begins from the premise that the state has an obligation that it is not meeting. Schools and districts—disproportionately those that serve low-income and non-white students—are struggling and need tools, resources and assistance to raise student achievement.”

In preparing the report, the Rennie Center gathered data from both within Massachusetts and outside of the state. Data included interviews with principals, superintendents, DOE, and EQA staff in Massachusetts as well as officials from five additional state departments of education notable for their intervention efforts in low- performing schools and districts. The report is also based on an exhaustive literature review of research on school and district interventions, the state role, and capacity-building strategies from which they selected evidence and examples to support their recommendations.

With an eye toward building capacity in the highest need schools and districts, the report describes the ideal role for the state department of education. The report discusses programs and interventions in three categories—curriculum and professional development, assessment and data, and leadership.

Additional Organizations to Consult

- **The Doing What Works School Improvement Website**

(http://dww.ed.gov/topic/topic_landing.cfm?PA_ID=11&T_ID=21)

Doing What Works offers a number of resources intended to be used in conjunction with the IES Practice Guide. The site includes sections aligned with each of the four recommendations outlined above. Each recommendation includes three types of content—Learn What Works, See What Works, and Do What Works—that provide visitors with greater depth of content. Learn What Works focuses on the research supporting the recommendation, See What Works provides content demonstrating the recommendation in action through the use of videos and profiles of schools implementing the recommendation, and Do What Works provides ideas, tools, and templates for implementing the recommendation.

- **The Center on Innovation & Improvement Website**

(<http://www.centerii.org/>)

Center on Innovation & Improvement (CII), a national content center supported by the U.S. Department of Education, supports regional centers in their work with states to provide districts, schools, and families with the opportunity, information, and skills to make wise decisions on behalf of students. CII offers publications in addition to those already cited here, to support states in their efforts to turn around low performing schools. CII also collaborates with the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) to offer the National Network of State School Improvement Leaders (NNSSIL) which engages state leaders in developing an evidence-based body of knowledge that can lead to accelerating sustainable school, district and state improvement to raise educational results for all learners. Its mission is to provide collegial support among state leaders of school improvement to build, utilize and disseminate a robust body of knowledge of professional practices leading to systemic educational change. The network accomplishes this through the website resources, periodic webinars and a newsletter.

- **The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement**

(<http://www.centerforcsri.org/>)

The CCSRI locates and promote research-based improvement strategies; creates tools, guides, and products for practitioners; and provides web-based technical assistance. The website offers an Ask-the-Expert area as well as access to a searchable database of over 5,000 research articles on school reform and improvement. The Center also publishes its own articles and newsletters. Of particular interest to the requestor might be the area of the site focusing on English Language Learners and Diverse Students

(http://www.centerforcsri.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=678&Itemid=126).

Key words and search strings used in the search:

Effective turnaround strategies, school improvement strategies, improving subgroup performance, English language learners, students with disabilities, SES

Search databases and websites:

Institute for Education Sciences Sources: Regional Educational Laboratory Program (REL); What Works Clearinghouse (WWC); Doing What Works (DWW); National Center for Education Statistics (NCES); Institute for Education Sciences (IES); IES Practice Guides

Other Federally Funded Sites: The Assessment and Accountability Comprehensive Center; The National High School Center; The Center on Innovation and Improvement; The Center on Instruction; The National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality; National Center for Education Statistics (NCES); Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement;

Additional Data Resources: ERIC; EBSCO Databases

Criteria for inclusion:

When Reference Desk Researchers review resources, they consider, among other things, four factors:

1. **Date of the publication:** The most current information is included unless in the case of nationally known seminal resources
2. **Source and funder of the report/study/brief/article:** Priority is given to IES, nationally funded, and certain other vetted sources known for strict attention to research protocols);
3. **Methodology:** i.e. Random control trial studies, surveys, self-assessments, literature reviews, policy briefs, etc. Priority for inclusion is given generally to random control trial study findings; however, the reader should note at least the following factors when basing decisions on these resources: Numbers of participants (just a few? Thousands?); Selection (did the participants volunteer in the study, or were they chosen?); Representation (were findings generalized from a homogeneous or a diverse pool of participants? Was the study sample representative of the population as a whole?)
4. **Existing knowledge base:** Although we strive to include vetted resources, there are times when the research base is slim or non-existent. In these cases we have included the best resources we could find, which may include newspaper articles, interviews with content specialists, organization websites, etc.

REL Northeast and Islands

The Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Reference Desk is a service provided by a collaborative of the REL program, funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES). This response was prepared under a contract with IES, Contract ED-06-CO-0025, by REL Northeast and Islands administered by Education Development Center, Inc. The content of the response does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.