

**Abstract Title Page**  
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**Title:** Implementation of Turnaround Strategies in Chronically Low-Performing Schools

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## **Abstract Body**

*Limit 4 pages single-spaced.*

### **Background / Context:**

*Description of prior research and its intellectual context.*

There is some evidence to indicate that chronically low-performing schools, whether improving student performance or not, often report pursuing substantially similar policies, programs, and practices (Aladjem, Le Floch, Zhang, Kurki, Boyle et al., 2006; Kurki, Boyle, & Aladjem, 2006; Turnbull, 2006). Some of these efforts have focused on school-level factors such as developing a consensus on school goals, high expectations for student achievement, principal leadership, and monitoring of student progress (Gamoran, Secada, & Marrett, 2000). Others focus on improving organizational conditions—teacher teams, teacher collaboration, principal support for teachers, flexible scheduling (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Lee & Smith 1996) and building the professional community in the school—shared responsibility, collective decision making, common values (Newmann & Associates, 1996). Other efforts have focused primarily on human resources such as improving instruction and developing instructional leaders as a means for improving student outcomes (Gamoran et al., 2000).

However, while chronically low-performing schools may pursue similar school improvement strategies, there is some evidence that the level and quality of implementation, as well as the coherence, alignment, and persistence of implementation, may lead to different prospects for school turnaround (Newmann & Associates, 1996; Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001). Correlational and case studies of school improvement and turnaround indicate that successful school improvement efforts use multiple PPPs, and no single PPP seems to achieve the intended results alone (Bryk et al., 2010; Herman et al., 2008). At the same time, adopting a high volume of PPPs may signal—or precipitate—incoherence in the school organization and, therefore, very limited implementation (Payne, 2008). As McLaughlin (1990) observed, summing up the findings of numerous implementation studies, local factors make variability in implementation the rule.

### **Purpose / Objective / Research Question / Focus of Study:**

*Description of the focus of the research.*

This study investigated how school improvement efforts were implemented in turnaround (TA) and non-improving (NI) schools (as identified in the first stage of the overall study, which is described elsewhere in this session), with a focus on the external and internal conditions that were perceived to support these efforts. This study addressed research question 3 in the Turning Around Low-Performing Schools (TALPS) study:

What differences existed between turnaround and not improving schools in the ways they implemented the policies, programs, and practices that were intended to improve their outcomes?

On-site case studies involved interviews with 281 educators and administrators. Through qualitative analyses of interview data, the research team examined the implementation of policies, programs, and practices and identified conditions and strategies schools undertook in an effort to provide quality curriculum, instruction, and assessment. This study also examined

whether particular combinations of improvement efforts and conditions were found more often in TA schools or in NI schools within the sample.

**Setting:**

*Description of the research location.*

Researchers conducted on-site interviews in 36 schools in three states (Florida, North Carolina, and Texas). Case study sites included 24 elementary schools and 12 middle schools in both urban and rural settings.

**Population / Participants / Subjects:**

*Description of the participants in the study: who, how many, key features, or characteristics.*

In selecting schools for study, we used quota sampling, a nonprobability-based approach. The sampling was based on several factors—school turnaround status (2:1 balance of TA and NI schools), location (12 cases per state) and grade level (2:1 balance of elementary schools and middle schools). Data sources included interviews with district and school staff. We interviewed 281 respondents in 36 schools or an average of 8 individuals per school. We focused on staff who were associated with the school during the key period of the study (before 2008) and who were still (or again) in the school at the time of data collection. The actual number of respondents per site ranged from 5 to 11 individuals as there was variation in staff persistence by school. In each school, respondents typically included four teachers, the school principal, and three other staff (e.g. counselors, coaches, and administrators—one of whom was often a district representative).

**Intervention / Program / Practice:**

*Description of the intervention, program, or practice, including details of administration and duration.*

The policies, programs, and practices identified by case study respondents varied within and across sites.

**Research Design:**

*Description of the research design.*

Seventeen qualitative researchers from AIR, DIR, PSA, and the Urban Institute conducted 281 on-site interviews with school staff and district administrators in turnaround and non-improving schools. Site visitors then developed detailed case study reports that were then analyzed for commonalities and differences between TA and NI schools.

**Statistical, Measurement, or Econometric Model:**

*Description of the proposed new methods or novel applications of existing methods.*

Not applicable.

**Usefulness / Applicability of Method:**

*Demonstration of the usefulness of the proposed methods using hypothetical or real data.*

Not applicable.

### **Data Collection and Analysis:**

*Description of the methods for collecting and analyzing data.*

For the interviews, site visitors were blind to the turnaround status of schools, and the same questions were asked in TA and NI schools. The case study protocol included both open- and closed-ended questions that asked respondents to describe the school improvement effort pursued by the school during the study period and to describe conditions in the school that may have positively or negatively influenced implementation. Site visitors developed detailed case study reports for the 36 case study schools for analysis.

A core team of analysts first focused on identifying the central improvement efforts, as described by at least two respondents in the school. The team worked closely and iteratively to identify common themes within and across cases. Second, researchers examined the evidence on external and internal conditions and supports for implementation (external accountability pressures, external funds or assistance, leadership, staffing, professional development and coaching, orderliness of the environment, teachers' shared commitment, and use of evidence about program effectiveness) Each implementation factor was identified as a facilitative support if (1) at least two respondents identified a condition as having been a support for improvement efforts during the study period and (2) no respondents identified the condition as having been an impediment to improvement efforts.

Two researchers independently rated all cases. We then examined differences between TA and NI schools. Since almost all of the case study schools engaged in more than one type of improvement effort that at least two respondents remembered as "central," we explored how often various combinations of efforts were found in the TA and NI schools. We then examined the most common combinations of central improvement efforts.

### **Findings / Results:**

*Description of the main findings with specific details.*

Differences between the TA and NI case study schools were apparent, although the study's necessary reliance on individuals' memories and on a small convenience sample dictate caution in interpreting these findings. With respect to central improvement efforts, respondents in TA schools compared with those in NI schools more frequently cited data use (chiefly for pinpointing individual students' progress and needs), targeted student supports (during or beyond the school day), and the use of common planning time for collaboration. Conversely, more NI case study schools identified adopting new curricula or instructional approaches as central to their work during the study period.

Respondents in TA case study schools were more likely to report favorable conditions and supports (e.g., strong leadership, strategic staffing, accountability pressures) than NI case study schools attempting similar central improvement efforts. Respondents in TA case study schools were more likely than respondents in NI case study schools to report that school leaders monitored and supported teacher practice through classroom visits and other means. Respondents in more than half of TA case study schools reported that strategic staffing (i.e., strategic recruitment, assignment, or "counseling out" of staff) supported the implementation of their school's central improvement effort, compared to one third of the NI schools. More TA than NI case study schools described pressures to improve student performance from their district

(explicit demands from district administrators) and their own awareness of school consequences from the state and federal accountability system for continued low performance. In one respect, the support reported in TA and NI schools was almost identical: high proportions of each group reported adequate funding for the particular improvement efforts under way.

### **Conclusions:**

*Description of conclusions, recommendations, and limitations based on findings.*

Our fieldwork in turnaround and non-improving schools identified improvement strategies more commonly found in TA than NI schools within this sample (increased data use and targeted student supports) and affirmed the importance of specific local factors in implementation. This study suggests, consistent with prior research, a complex interrelationship among policies, programs, and practices (PPPs). The case study data suggest that the relationship among PPPs is important—including the ways in which some PPPs may facilitate or enable implementation of others. For example, in this sample data use was closely related to targeting of help for struggling students and could be supported by intensive professional development, accountability pressures, and strong principal leadership.

The case study data recast some of the PPPs in a new light. The PPPs had originally been conceptualized as policy- and practice-friendly drivers of school improvement; essentially, each PPP or combination of PPPs could be a primary school improvement initiative. However, the case study data, based on questions about a central improvement effort and the supports that affected implementation, suggest that many of the PPPs were supports for a more central effort. Accountability pressures, school leadership, intensive professional development, an orderly academic environment, and teacher commitment were described by schools as supporting their central improvement effort rather than as the improvement effort itself. This suggests a different conceptualization of PPPs, for future studies, as constellations of primary efforts and supports.

## Appendices

Not included in page count.

### Appendix A. References

References are to be in APA version 6 format.

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