



DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL TURNAROUNDS

PURSUING EQUITY AND LEARNING FROM EVIDENCE

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Executive Summary

In 2009, the Obama Administration announced its intention to rapidly “turn around” 5,000 of the nation’s lowest-performing schools. To do so, it relied on the School Improvement Grant program (SIG) to provide targeted funding for states and schools, and to mandate drastic, school-level reforms.

While the program channels grants to participating schools (up to \$2 million a year per school), it does not maintain funding beyond three years, nor does it alter the basic, inadequate funding structures for public education.

The SIG program’s reforms require massive administrative and teacher replacement, particularly under the “turnaround option.” In the public debate about the SIG program, reforms such as this have been described as new and innovative. In reality, the nation has significant experience with these models, particularly over the past 40 years. Generations of research show that the SIG reforms are based on faulty evidence, unwarranted claims and they ignore contradictory evidence. The most prominent error is the claim that these corporate-based models can yield transformative results. The second most prominent error is the assumption that the drastic reconstitution of school staff will prove beneficial. Neither claim is supported by research.

To support these policy claims, however, a collection of writing on school turnarounds is rapidly being generated. This literature resembles the educational-effectiveness research of the 1970s, ‘80s, and ‘90s. It repeats several of the methodological errors of the earlier studies, particularly in its narrow reliance on standardized test scores as the main measure of school success. It focuses almost exclusively on within-school factors that shape student outcomes. And it is virtually silent on the pervasive effects of contextual factors, like poverty, race, and systemic funding disparities, which have enormous effects on student achievement. The guiding assumption in this literature is that schools have the capability to overcome these factors. Thus, punitive sanctions are justified.

Fundamentally, the SIG policy is an extension of the NCLB market-based approach to education, not a change in direction. The policy assumes that schools behave in the same way as private corporations are envisioned to behave when it relies on competition, monitoring, and rigid accountability.

In this way the SIG policy is at odds with a democratic approach to public education, which treats schooling as a public good. Democratic purposes of schooling are far broader than profit-based, market-driven ones. The democratic approach creates opportunities for local communities to publicly deliberate and self-govern. Its goal is to provide all students with equitable opportunities to learn, participate in society, and further social change. Unfortunately, the federal government failed to engage those most affected by turnaround reforms—educators and families in the most racially and socio-economically segregated communities—in developing the SIG program.

This report considers the **democratic tensions inherent in the federal SIG policy's market-based school reforms**. It concludes with a set of recommendations that re-center the purposes of public education for low-income students, students of color, and local communities in developing more equitable, democratic school turnarounds:

- **Increase current federal and state spending for public education, particularly as it is allocated for turnaround-style reforms.**
- **Focus school turnaround policies on improving the quality of teaching and learning rather than on technical-structural changes.**
- **Engage a broad cross-section of schools' communities—teachers, students, parents, and community organizations—in planning and implementing turnaround strategies that are tailored to each school and district context.**
- **Surround struggling schools with comprehensive, wrap-around supports that stabilize schools and communities.**
- **Incorporate multiple indicators of effectiveness—apart from test scores—that reflect the multiple purposes of schools.**
- **Support ongoing, systematic research, evaluation, and dissemination examining all aspects of turnaround processes in schools and districts.**

DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL TURNAROUNDS: PURSUING EQUITY AND LEARNING FROM EVIDENCE

Introduction

The idea behind the Obama's Administration's School Improvement Grant (SIG) program seems simple: interrupting persistent low performance calls for quick, drastic actions, plus an infusion of funding into states and schools. The implementation of this idea is not simple.

The federal program mandates that SIG-funded schools choose one of four prescribed reforms (each borrowed from the corporate sector): turnaround, transformation, restart, or closure. Turnaround, the second most frequently chosen model, mandates that a **school's principal and all teachers be fired. The new principal has the option of rehiring no more than 50 percent of the original teachers.**

Although the SIG program and its four intervention models are publicly framed as new and innovative,¹ lengthy traditions of research on school and district effectiveness, and high-stakes accountability, reveal that almost all of the policy's details are based on unwarranted claims and are contradicted by empirical evidence. Among other lessons, this research offers cautionary findings about the undemocratic, inequitable character of turnaround-style reforms.

As the SIG program continues to unfold, some communities are organizing to collectively propose strategies for more equitable and democratic SIG processes— strategies that are supported by the research on community organizing. For example, community organizations have suggested prioritizing explicit goals for teaching and learning in turnaround schools, developing turnaround plans in collaboration with educators, parents, students, communities and outside experts, and incorporating wraparound services to address the contextual conditions that are typical of low-performing schools.² Although some of the recommendations are minimally addressed in the Department of Education's SIG guidance,³ **which provides an overview of the program's purposes and major components,** they are also easily overlooked by schools and districts that are primarily focused on the implementation of mandatory, drastic staffing and structural changes.

This report examines the evolution of and intent behind the 2009 federal SIG program. From there, it considers the lessons of forty years of research on educational effectiveness and reform. It builds on this evidence, as well as the growing **literature on communities'** engagement in reform, in its analysis of the school turnaround research and practice. The report culminates in a set of recommendations, accompanied by sample legislative code, that are intended to re-center the purposes of public education for low-income students, students of color, and local communities in developing more equitable, democratic school turnarounds.

The Federal Alphabet Soup: NCLB, ESEA, ARRA, and SIG

The federal School Improvement Grant program was created in 2002 as part of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). One primary goal of NCLB was for states to identify their lowest-performing schools so that students could transfer out of such schools into higher performing ones.⁴ Another goal, seen in the School Improvement Grant program legislation, was to provide support to systemically improve those lowest-performing schools. The legislation required schools identified as low-performing for two or more years to create a plan for increasing achievement. These schools had to include at least one of the following corrective actions: replace school staff responsible for the failure to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP); implement a research-based curriculum and a professional development program to improve student achievement; decrease school-level management authority; appoint an outside expert; extend the school year or school day; **change the school's internal organizational structure; propose other similar interventions.**⁵ **NCLB's authors created the School Improvement Grant program to provide financial support for the development and implementation of these corrective actions.** Yet, while the policy was on the books from 2002, the SIG program was not funded until 2007.⁶

In 2009, the SIG program was transformed in size and scope by the passage of President **Obama's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA).** **The SIG budget increased** from \$125 million program in 2007 to \$3.5 billion in the 2010-11 school year. After this one-time ARRA infusion of funding, the SIG program was funded at \$546 million for the 2011-12 school year, and \$535 million for the 2012-13 school year.⁷ **The administration's** explanation for re-inventing the SIG program was that dramatically turning around schools requires financial investment alongside significant structural changes. Currently, each SIG school can receive up to \$2 million per year for three years. For impoverished **schools already struggling to meet students' needs during** local and state fiscal crises, the amount of money is significant. However, under the SIG program grant recipients revert to their original funding levels after the three-year federal commitment expires. In this way, the one-time spending increase does not fundamentally alter basic federal spending structures—structures whose inequitable, inadequate distribution across lines of poverty and race have been well documented.⁸ Along with the infusion of money came a mandate to prioritize the bottom five percent of **each state's schools and to adopt one of four** prescriptive federal models of school improvement.⁹

To determine which schools are eligible for the SIG program, states are instructed to identify their persistently lowest-**achieving schools based on schools'** absolute performance on state Language Arts and Math assessments and their lack of test score growth over a period of time. High schools with low graduation rates are also eligible. Federal guidelines specify that states must create three tiers of schools eligible for the SIG program¹⁰:

- Tier 1: the lowest five percent or the lowest five (whichever is larger) Title I schools¹¹ currently in program improvement, corrective action or restructuring, or Title I high schools with a graduation rate under 60 percent.

- Tier 2: the lowest five percent or the lowest five (whichever is larger) schools that are eligible for, but do not receive Title I funds, or any high school that is eligible for but does not receive Title I funds and has a graduation rate under 60 percent.
- Tier 3: the remaining Title I schools that are not in program improvement, corrective action or restructuring

Identifying the bottom 5 percent of schools is not a simple task. As is often the case with federal policy, the devil lies in the details. States select their assessments, determine how much weight one factor receives over another (absolute test scores or lack of test score progress over time), and decide how to prioritize schools. The list of schools can vary widely based on which measures are used, how those measures are calculated and how accurate the data are in the first place. In addition to this challenge, the SIG program straddles the well-known tightrope between federal intervention and state autonomy. The result is that the final guidelines provide some rules about how to identify SIG-eligible schools, but leave substantial discretion to each state.

The second major component of the SIG program is the mandate that SIG-funded schools choose one of four prescribed intervention models (each derived from corporate practices in the private sector): turnaround, transformation, restart, or closure.¹²

- **Turnaround: The school’s principal and all teachers are fired. The new principal,** using newly granted flexibility, can rehire up to 50 percent of the original teachers along with new staff.
- **Transformation: The school’s principal is fired; a principal and teacher**-evaluation system based on student achievement and other measures, as well as rewards and sanctions for principals and teachers, must be developed; strategies for teacher recruitment, retention, and professional development must be implemented; a series of structural and curricular changes must be made.¹³
- **Restart:** The school is converted or closed, then reopened under a charter school operator, charter management organization, or education management organization.
- **School Closure:** The school is closed and its students transferred to higher-achieving schools in the district.¹⁴

In addition to implementing one of these prescriptions, SIG schools are directed to **develop “effective leaders and teachers; [a] supportive and safe school environment; increased time for teaching and collaboration; operational flexibilities and capacity building; strong, aligned and responsive instruction; and family and community engagement.”**¹⁵ While guidance around the four prescriptions is very specific, the details of these additional reforms are vague.

As of March 2011, states had granted 820 schools federal SIG funding. Transformation is the most common model, accounting for 74 percent of SIG schools. Turnarounds account for another 20 percent.¹⁶

School Turnaround: Another Educational Reform for an Economic Crisis

In prioritizing the improvement of the nation's lowest-performing schools, the Obama administration sounded the characteristic Washington call for economic growth by way of educational investments.¹⁷ The decision echoed both the economic crisis debates and the mainstream educational policy conversations of the moment.¹⁸ Early press releases and speeches from President Obama and Education Secretary Duncan reinforced the oft-heard notion that a subset of the public school system was failing to adequately educate children, **thereby squelching America's economic hopes. In his 2010 State of the Union address,** President Obama nested the SIG policy in his overall economic recovery plan:

Instead of funding the status quo, we [will] only invest in reform - reform that **raises student achievement... and turns around failing schools that steal the** future of too many young Americans... In the 21st century, one of the best anti-poverty programs is a world-class education.¹⁹

The message was strong: strengthening the economy required the federal government to fix the schools at the bottom of the system.

Persistent Market-Based Reforms: Testing, Sanctions, and Competition

As many scholars have articulated, NCLB and the SIG program are based largely on market-based principles.²⁰ The idea behind a market theory of public education is that schools can and should behave in the same way as private corporations. From this perspective, principles of competition, performance measurement, monitoring, and accountability for results are assumed to produce more effective, efficient schools. Charter schools, vouchers, sanctions, and the four SIG models are grounded in such market-based principles.

In contrast, a democratic theory of public education asserts that schooling is a public good that requires the participation of diverse constituencies. From this perspective, public schools are seen as furthering social change by creating opportunities for local communities to equitably share decision-making and participate in self-governance. Such participation is presumed to promote collective engagement in local education, as well as a public system whose goal is to provide all students with equitable opportunities to learn and participate in society. Community schools, integration, and increasing college preparation and access are all examples of education policies that stem from a democratic theory of education.

The original NCLB requirement for states to identify low-performing schools was grounded in a market-based assumption: the potential loss of money to a persistently low-scoring school as parents use their new NCLB option to transfer students to better schools would provide competitive pressure to compel schools to turn themselves around. SIG grants were seen as a carrot to be added to this stick. Though some students (and the money attached to them) would be gone, the schools would receive some money to try to improve. While framed as a departure from previous high-stakes accountability policies, the details of the reinvented 2009 SIG program are intimately linked to the NCLB policy framework set in place by the Bush administration.²¹ Standardized test scores are still the main means for identifying schools for intervention, and punitive sanctions for under-performance remain central to the federal program.

Unlike the testing and accountability policies that came before, the 2009 reinvention of the SIG program includes more funding for implementation. Nevertheless, the SIG policy remains grounded squarely in market-based ideas. It assumes that strong external threats motivate teachers and principals to improve, that standardized test scores are reliable measures of student performance, that meaningful, sustainable changes can be spurred by competition, and that outcome-oriented accountability reforms can effectively interrupt historical patterns of low performance. In other words, the policy assumes that the only barrier to success in the past was a lack of motivation and incentive, and that the best form of motivation and incentive is money. While these market-based policy ideas are not new, the SIG program has increased their prominence in the discourse, research, and practice of turning around low-scoring schools.²²

Review of Research: From Schools to Districts to Turnarounds

In Pursuit of School and District Effectiveness

While the present-day concept of school turnaround rose to prominence seemingly overnight with the rollout of the SIG program, the roots of these dramatic reforms run deep in the literature on educational effectiveness and improvement.

In the late 1970s, partially in response to the Coleman Report²³ and other studies²⁴ reporting that the effects of school characteristics on student achievement were far weaker than were the effects of poverty, race, and other family background variables, scholars began to produce an extensive collection of studies about effective schools. Intended in part to prove that instructionally effective schools could exist for high-poverty, high-minority communities, Edmonds and his contemporaries compiled a plethora of studies about the properties of schools that were linked with higher standardized test scores.²⁵ This literature re-focused debates about public education from questions of adequate funding and investments in public schools, to questions of what schools could achieve in spite of inequalities in resources and conditions for schools which served primarily low-income children and children of color. Over time, school-effectiveness researchers

identified seven common correlates of effective schools: a safe and orderly environment, high expectations for students, strong instructional leadership, frequent monitoring of student progress, time on task, positive community relations, and a clear mission or vision.

This research tradition held steady throughout the restructuring era of the 1980s, but disillusionment eventually set in. Studies revealed that school-level reforms did not lead to sustainable improvements in student achievement. They also did not lead to the large-scale changes envisioned by the creators of state and federal high-stakes accountability

The SIG policy remains grounded squarely in market-based ideas. It assumes that the only barrier to success in the past was a lack of motivation and incentive, and that the best form of motivation and incentive is money.

policies.²⁶ Influenced by Smith and O'Day's²⁷ seminal proposal for more coherent systemic reforms based on state standards and assessments that align each level of public education from the state, to the district, to the school, scholars shifted from taking individual schools as their units of analysis to focusing on entire districts.²⁸ As policymakers and educational leaders considered how to ignite large-scale improvement throughout school districts, scholars began inquiring about the characteristics of districts that could spark greater effectiveness in the context of a standards-based, high-stakes accountability policy environment.²⁹

These school and district effectiveness studies did much to focus the attention of scholars, policymakers, and practitioners on the aspects of schools and districts that might be strengthened to improve the performance of children of color and children from low-income families. However, critics pointed to several methodological and conceptual limitations of these studies.³⁰ The methodologies of both the school and district research traditions relied on small, skewed samples, usually based on unusually high student test scores.³¹ The studies were also often conducted on samples of convenience or samples based on anecdotal reports rather than on systematically selected cases. This selection process meant that the results of the studies did not represent the range of experiences **across the nation's schools. Likewise, much of this research was based on short-term, snapshot evidence, not on data collected over the entire length of the reform.** Such designs incorrectly assumed that the test score gains would be sustained.³² Further, while later studies expanded the sources of data used to explain effectiveness,³³ the bulk of this research drew conclusions about the factors that influenced student performance based largely on self-reports from administrators or small, unrepresentative samples of teacher interviews.³⁴ This severely limited how much the lessons from these studies could be applied to schools or districts with different characteristics. The limited data sources also led researchers to produce somewhat fragmented, incomplete interpretations of the classroom, school, and community dynamics that shaped—and were shaped by—the reforms.

Conceptually, one of the most frequent critiques of these studies was that they relied on a single measure of effectiveness—standardized test scores. While relying on standardized test scores was methodologically problematic because it falsely assumed that the assessments were valid and reliable, doing so as the sole measure of effectiveness also led to narrow conceptions of student success and the purposes of education—ignoring the social, civic, and broader academic aspects of schooling. This narrow, test-based definition of effectiveness is characteristic of market-based arguments that **assume that education’s** primary functions are economic. From this viewpoint, test scores are often employed as the only indicator that schools are preparing students for competition in the workplace.³⁵ This perspective contrasts with arguments that focus on the democratic purposes of schooling, which frame schools as vehicles for fostering the values and skills necessary for collective, democratic participation and civic engagement.³⁶ Student scores on standardized tests are far too narrow to be the sole indicators of school success in the democratic model of schooling.

Finally, these research traditions were critiqued for their inadequate treatment of the socio-political and normative contexts of schooling.³⁷ The studies discounted the inherently political nature of schools, as seen in issues of who has access to power and resources, who can make decisions, and how resources are allocated. They also overlooked the ways in which norms and beliefs about what quality schooling looks like, and to whom it should be directed, **shaped educators’ and communities’ support or rejection of certain** reforms. Instead, studies of effectiveness were limited to questions about curriculum, time on task, monitoring, and the like—the technical dimensions of schooling. As a result, the **research overestimated the relationship between schools’ technical changes and student** learning. It also discounted the ideological opposition certain school reforms may provoke, the influence of resources like funding and stable staffing, and the vulnerability of even **those schools deemed “effective” to the structural effects of poverty and racism.**³⁸

Thus, despite the persistence of these school and district research traditions, their methodologies often restricted their validity and reliability, as well as their conceptions of effectiveness. Their heavy reliance on standardized test scores as the main indicators of success over-emphasized the economic purposes of schools and downplayed the **democratic ones. They discounted the powerful roles of schools’ contexts in shaping reforms’ social, political and normative** realities. And they discounted the pervasive effects of class, race, and funding disparities on **schools’ potential to improve**. It is somewhat ironic, then, that researchers are once again pursuing an analogous line of research on **“effectiveness,” this time inquiring about the characteristics of schools and districts** that can rapidly, dramatically turn around low student-achievement scores.

Research on School Turnaround: Old Wine in New Bottles

In 2007, the Mass Insight Education and Research Institute published *The Turnaround Challenge*.³⁹ This report argued for a new, tougher approach to improving the bottom five percent of schools. It was spurred by the proliferation of studies that documented the

failure of NCLB-driven reforms to produce quick, intensive test score gains, as well as by the growth of business and management gurus promoting corporate-style turnaround efforts.⁴⁰ At the time the report was issued, school turnaround efforts were beginning to **spring up, most notably those spearheaded by Chicago’s Academy for Urban School Leadership.**⁴¹ The media highlighted several cases of so-called “**miracle**” schools, low-scoring schools that were alleged to have dramatically changed their performance by firing staff or being turned over to private management companies. Most of these cases were later debunked.⁴²

As evidence mounted against the effectiveness of NCLB corrective actions intended to **stimulate improvement, “turnaround specialists” cropped up across the country to meet the demands on schools, districts, and states to swiftly demonstrate test-based effectiveness.** “**Turnaround specialists,**” a term borrowed from the business world, are external assistance providers, private management companies, and principals who claim to specialize in improvement strategies that spur intense test gains. Yet the evidence behind those claims is weak, and their uneven results are beginning to be documented by the media.⁴³

Research on recent school and district turnarounds, however, remains in its infancy. While there is substantial empirical research on comparable reform efforts, rigorous, empirical studies of this increasingly widespread practice are as yet in short supply.

In our review of the emergent literature on turnarounds, we identified three books on **schools and districts with dramatically “turned around” student performance scores,**⁴⁴ ten journal articles on turnaround policies and their effectiveness,⁴⁵ and twenty-seven non-peer-reviewed reports from think tanks, research centers, or advocacy organizations on the subject of school turnaround.⁴⁶ The bulk of these sources speculate about the characteristics of schools and districts associated with effective turnarounds, as well as the conditions that could be cultivated to prime turnaround efforts for more intense impact. In what follows, we summarize the major themes that emerged from this review, as well as their implications for the research on and practice of school and district turnarounds.

Challenges to identifying schools in need of turnaround and to identifying successful turnarounds.

The literature on turnarounds has still not resolved the question of what constitutes an effective turnaround. Researchers have put forward various proposals for systematically identifying successful turnarounds,⁴⁷ yet there is no single agreed-upon definition for the amount of growth that is required, the length of time in which this growth should occur, or the requisite sustainability of the results. Techniques for tracking growth in single cohorts of students, rather than comparing different groups of students, have not been devised. As a result, many of the initial studies of successful turnaround cases resemble the earlier studies of effective schools and districts—they are selected based on anecdotal evidence or reputation, and they ignore counter-examples in which turnaround efforts are associated with decreased test scores. Furthermore, given that a turnaround is, by definition, a case of

swift, dramatic gains in test performance, identifying effective turnaround schools requires researchers to rely on single- or two-year fluctuations in test scores—patterns that tend not to hold up from one year to the next.⁴⁸

Alongside these challenges to researching turnarounds, the practice of identifying SIG-eligible schools is equally problematic. While the federal guidelines use Title 1 eligibility to identify schools with high concentrations of poverty, Title 1 eligibility tends to be under-reported, especially at the federal level. In addition, the federal guidelines do not account for schools serving high concentrations of English learners or special needs students. As previously mentioned, each state has its own criteria for SIG eligibility. The result is a federal program that is based on inconsistent definitions of successful turnarounds, that relies on faulty, test-based measures of effectiveness, and that continues to base high-stakes decisions on these measures.

Limited snapshot analyses.

Aside from the basic challenge of identifying effective turnaround cases, the results of the few systematic—but not peer-reviewed—studies of turnaround efforts are decidedly mixed. Some analyses have suggested that turnaround schools have achieved small test gains and improved student attendance compared to other low-performing schools in Philadelphia and Chicago.⁴⁹ A recent study of turnaround in California by University of Virginia researcher Thomas Dee found more substantial test gains, but the study was based on a very small sample of **schools and on a single year’s test scores**.⁵⁰ Like the earlier research **on effective schools and districts, such “snapshot” studies of effective turnarounds** examine gains made over a brief period of time—usually only one year—and therefore suffer from the same methodological shortcomings outlined above.⁵¹ An exception to these **“snapshot” studies can be seen in the Institute for Education Science’s current Turning Around Low-Performing Schools project**. This longitudinal federal study, whose results are **due to be released later this year, systematically analyzed three years’ worth of test score** data to identify and study sustained turnarounds. Out of 750 low-performing schools, the researchers identified 15 percent who were able to sustain an increase in the number of proficient students by at least five percentile points, usually in math.⁵² Other analyses have yielded opposite findings, concluding that turnaround cases did not produce the expected changes in test scores.⁵³ One case study found that non-test-based indicators of quality, such as learning climate, the level of intellectually challenging academic work, or family **and community involvement, did not match up with turnaround schools’ test scores from year to year**.⁵⁴

Other studies have taken up questions that consider issues beyond the narrow window of test performance. For example, some analysts examined the long-term test performance of schools initially identified as turnarounds. They found that almost all gains incurred during the one- to three-year windows were not sustained and in some cases were associated with later declines in test scores.⁵⁵

Faulty and unwarranted claims.

Aside from the problematic nature of such short-term studies, we also identified several faulty and unwarranted claims that underlie turnaround interventions on the whole. These include the claims that turnarounds have produced the desired results in the corporate sector, and that there is evidence to support the drastic reconstitution of school personnel.⁵⁶ Neither assumption is supported by empirical evidence.⁵⁷

The majority of the literature on school turnarounds urges schools and districts to pattern their efforts after corporate management and turnaround strategies.⁵⁸ It encourages schools to avail themselves of the lessons gleaned in the corporate sector on the assumption that businesses have experienced success with these types of intervention.⁵⁹ However, researchers learned long ago that corporate turnarounds and related management strategies rarely yield the positive results that reformers expect.⁶⁰ One analysis linked only a quarter of business turnaround efforts with major organizational improvements.⁶¹ Other analysts of popular, turnaround-style management reforms found that such efforts are linked with greater outsider appeal and perceptions of innovation, but not actual improved company performance over both short- and long-term periods.⁶²

In the educational literature, a sizeable body of rigorous, systematic research on early reconstitution reforms shows that firing and replacing school staffs has usually failed to achieve the intended effects. One meta-analysis showed that reconstituted schools in San Francisco continued to show up on lists of low-performing schools.⁶³ In Chicago, longitudinal research on reconstitution revealed that staff replacements were no higher in quality than their predecessors and that teacher morale deteriorated under these reforms.⁶⁴ And a comprehensive, long-term study in Maryland demonstrated that reconstitution inadvertently reduced the social stability and climate of schools and was not associated with either organizational improvements or heightened student performance.⁶⁵

Also implicit in the claims about the efficacy of reconstitution is the assumption that the **benefits accrued from replacing the bulk of a school's staff** will outweigh the unintended consequences. Yet, retrospective analyses of such dramatic interventions have concluded that the resulting logistical challenges, political fallout, and loss of organizational culture make such interventions prohibitive.⁶⁶ Finding enough qualified personnel to refill vacant slots in reconstituted or turnaround schools has proven difficult. In some cities, for example, districts found themselves swapping principals from one SIG-funded school to another. In Louisville, over 40 percent of the teachers hired to work in turnaround schools were completely new to teaching.⁶⁷ Another study showed how hiring difficulties forced many reconstituted schools to begin the school year with high numbers of substitutes.⁶⁸

Same strategy, different labels.

One of the most prominent themes to emerge in our review of the nascent literature on turnarounds was that the bulk of analyses advise schools or districts to enact strategies that greatly resemble those put forth in earlier generations of school and district

effectiveness research. In fact, in our review of the work to date the most common turnaround recommendations for schools and districts include finding strong leaders, focusing on data and monitoring, establishing a safe, orderly climate, and establishing a culture of high expectations.⁶⁹

Like many district-specific studies of effectiveness, turnaround studies advocate for schools to focus on the technical dimensions of reform that are presumed to yield quick boosts in test scores: curriculum alignment, test preparation, and a sharp focus on test-based student achievement goals. But the presumed boost from such reforms is only weakly supported by rigorous, long-term empirical research.⁷⁰ These recommendations echo those of the earlier school and district effectiveness studies almost word for word. One possible exception to these patterns might be found in the current IES Turning Around Low-Performing Schools studies, whose preliminary results suggest these conventional technical strategies are most helpful when implemented in conjunction with multiple interventions, including strategic teacher recruitment and intensive professional development.⁷¹ Nevertheless, the overall similarity across the literature raises questions about the degree to which the knowledge base on turnarounds has evolved conceptually and theoretically in the years since those studies were conducted.

The emergent field of turnaround literature is distinct, however, in its consistent calls for another series of market-based change strategies.⁷² The majority of reports recommend that schools and districts find ways to reduce collective bargaining, increase site-based autonomy over personnel and budgetary decisions, prioritize customer service, reduce waste, and introduce incentives and stronger accountability for teachers based on test scores.⁷³ Recommendations are also made to achieve early wins, break conventional **norms, and “push rapid-fire experimentation.”**⁷⁴ Such tactics are grounded in aggressive business management practices related to competition, performance measurement, and efficiency. And many of them diminish the roles of unions.⁷⁵

A persistent focus on testing rather than teaching and learning.

This turnaround literature continues the earlier effectiveness studies' emphasis on test-based notions of success. In fact, all but one of the analyses that we reviewed measured school effects in terms of student scores on a standardized assessment. The exception was a case study of one school in which the author found that non-test-based indicators of quality, such as classroom learning climate, the level of intellectually challenging academic work, or family and community involvement, did not correlate with the **schools' test scores** from year to year.⁷⁶ Only a handful of analyses also considered graduation or attendance rates.⁷⁷ This pattern shows that a narrow focus on standardized test scores still predominates in this field. It also shows how rarely studies consider multiple forms of effectiveness to either triangulate findings or explore potential areas of contradictions between test performance and other indicators of quality.

De-contextualized turnaround schools.

Our review of the research on turnarounds revealed that authors continue to focus primarily on the within-school factors that may shape the potential of schools to turn around test performance, in place of research that situates schools within their broader socio-political and normative contexts.⁷⁸ By concentrating primarily on technical issues around hiring and firing, curricular changes and the like, this emerging field seems to be developing along the same lines as the previous generations of school and district effectiveness research. It also appears to be perpetuating the same narrowly framed debates about public education that consider changes inside of schools in isolation from **schools' broader institutional conditions**—federal and state funding arrangements, etc.

One minor exception to this pattern of de-contextualization can **be seen in the literature's** treatment of community engagement with the reforms. Most analyses advise leaders to solicit community input. Yet they recommend doing so ***in order to*** generate support for the turnaround. Most analysts are silent on the potential broader purposes of community engagement.⁷⁹ This literature generally fails to recommend soliciting input into the specifics of the turnaround process, facilitating more democratic decision-making in public schools, or advancing notions of the public good. The result, as in the school and district effectiveness literature, is a set of proposals that discount the powerful influence of social, political, and other contexts in shaping school reforms. The next section takes up this question of context by considering the trends that are emerging in the engagement of communities impacted by turnaround reforms.

Engaging Communities in Turnarounds

At present, no systematic analyses had been conducted on the involvement of community organizations in the school turnarounds, transformations, restarts, or closings that were initiated under the SIG program. Yet lessons from comprehensive research on community **organizations' engagement in analogous reforms demonstrate the potentially constructive** roles they can play in turnaround-style efforts. The pockets of community-driven practices that are materializing around turnarounds are also promising.

A small but rapidly growing body of rigorous research points to the ways in which community organizations have effectively become engaged in analogous reforms in low-income communities and communities of color⁸⁰—the populations that are SIG-eligible and most likely to be targeted for turnaround.⁸¹ Analyses of community organizing campaigns have demonstrated how such organizations drive reforms by successfully bringing about not just technical change, but essential political and normative change. For example, researchers have documented how community organizations develop meaningful roles for community members in school decision-making, increase social capital within under-resourced communities, and help shift understandings about the structural causes of educational inequity in high-poverty communities of color.⁸² A national cross-case analysis of more than 140 community organizations identified the specific ways in which

such organizations effectively foster cross-community alliances, develop democratic leadership, and improve civic participation. In-depth case studies have revealed the **organizations' impacts on policy and resource**-allocation decisions, school-level improvements, and student performance.⁸³ More recent research has begun to link community organizing with more equitable school-funding arrangements, effective teacher recruitment and retention, and increased access to rigorous curricula.⁸⁴ Together, these studies suggest a wide range of possible roles for communities in promoting more equitable, democratic school turnarounds.

Recent involvement by community organizations in turnaround efforts is consistent with the implications arising from this research. For example, community organizations in **Chicago are working together to protest the district's plan to turnaround or close several schools. Chicago community organizers are identifying ways to ensure that parents' concerns inform the district's turnaround and closure decisions. Through these efforts,** parents have collectively communicated their concerns that too many schools in low-income neighborhoods that were historically neglected have been either closed or converted into charter schools, thereby creating neighborhood instability and limiting the ability of students to attend local community schools.⁸⁵

In New York City, stakeholders, including citywide coalitions of parents and students, formed the New York City Working Group on School Transformation, which recently released a report showing that as a result of turnaround and closure strategies, the highest-need students are over-**concentrated in the city's most struggling schools. The**

Recent studies suggest a wide range of possible roles for communities in promoting more equitable, democratic school turnarounds.

group argued that instead of closing or **privatizing schools, the city's Department of Education should invest in creating a network of struggling schools, or zone, to support their transformation. This network would highlight the successful practices of the cities'** most effective schools, share validated improvement strategies, provide professional development, and ultimately build the capacity of the school system as a whole to identify and support struggling schools. The Working Group also called for the development of multiple indicators of school effectiveness and early-warning indicators of deteriorating school performance.⁸⁶

At the national level, the two largest teachers unions are developing strategies to put community priorities at the center of policy and collaboratively design turnaround partnerships to reinvigorate both struggling school systems and whole communities. For example, the American Federation of Teachers has enlisted the support of more than 40 partners—government, non-profits, labor, foundations, and business—to bolster the social **and economic contexts in which West Virginia's McDowell County public schools are** situated.⁸⁷ Each partner has agreed to provide services and financial support to the schools **and students' families**—including integrated health care, teacher recruitment and development, housing, and literacy support. The National Education Association recently

launched the Priority Schools Campaign, a collaborative partnership among community members, parents, teachers, and administrators intended to leverage local resources and expertise to cultivate meaningful, sustainable turnarounds in SIG schools serving large numbers of English learners, students of color, and low-income children.⁸⁸ **The partnership aims to learn from community members' wisdom and experience in order to design turnaround efforts that emphasize social justice, teacher professionalism, and reforms that are unique to each community's specific conditions. Though these initiatives** are relatively new, both offer examples of the ways in which communities might play leading roles in designing, planning, and implementing more equitable, democratic turnarounds under the current federal policy structure.

Finally, since the SIG policy's implementation, parents, students and community members from turnaround-targeted schools have publicly voiced their concerns about the program. For example, in 2010, 34 grassroots community organizations from around the nation joined together to form a national campaign called Communities for Excellent Public Schools (CEPS)⁸⁹ to influence SIG implementation and future legislation. In a report called **"Our Communities Left Behind," the CEPS criticized the administration for not focusing** the SIG program on teaching, learning, and community engagement, as well as for the **program's disproportionate** impact on schools serving low-income communities of color. The coalition proposed three revisions to the federal policy: replace the four mandated **turnaround "options" with research-**proven strategies to improve teaching and learning; require turnaround schools to provide wrap-around social supports; and engage communities, parents, students and educators in developing school-assessment processes and improvement plans.⁹⁰

Discussion

Lessons derived from the empirical research on educational effectiveness and high-stakes accountability, as well as from the growing literature on community engagement in reform, suggest that the current SIG policies will require different funding structures, focuses, guidelines, and measures of success if they are to promote more equitable, democratic turnarounds. Indeed, the overwhelming reliance of SIG policies on market-based **strategies to improve the nation's most struggling schools shows how the administration is** banking on tools like competition, standardization, and test-based accountability to improve performance, despite what research tells us about their consistent lack of success in the corporate sector.

The market-based character of turnaround policies diverts public attention from fundamental questions about adequate, equitable funding and the insidious effects on schools of socioeconomic and racial isolation. In doing so, SIG policies and the literature **promoting them misrepresent how powerfully students' opportunities to learn are shaped** by structural conditions related to poverty, race, and government spending.

Because the early literature on turnarounds repeats many of the methodological and conceptual errors that characterized previous generations of effectiveness research, these

analyses have ended up calling for policies that are framed as challenging the status quo, but which in fact perpetuate the **inequalities in conditions and resources in the nation's** neediest schools.

These policies are also limited by their reliance on test-based indicators of effectiveness. In this way, they carry on a long tradition of policies that promote narrowly economic purposes for schools, edging out other academic, social, and democratic purposes, purposes that are not easily measured by standardized tests.

The absence of community voices in the SIG policy and its literature also speak volumes about the lack of democratic input into both the development of these policies and their implementation. While individual cases of community engagement in turnarounds are emerging, researchers and policymakers have been largely silent on this democratic deficit. The result is a policy that is driven almost solely by elites, and which excludes crucial perspectives of those most impacted by the policies —families and educators in turnaround-targeted schools.

Meanwhile, public education's current fiscal crisis is pressuring the nation's most impoverished, least resourced schools to opt into the SIG program in order to offset deficits in their basic operating funds. While the program provides temporary financial resources for those schools that are willing—or driven—to participate in turnaround-style reform, it does little to alter the long-term financial and social constraints within which these schools must try to function.

The result of all of this is another round of federal policies that continue to reproduce the same inequitable, undemocratic distribution of resources, conditions, and reforms in those schools in greatest need of fundamental change.

Recommendations

We outline six recommendations that are intended to guide federal, state, and local policymakers toward more equitable, democratic turnaround processes. Each recommendation stems from the provisional lessons that are emerging from current SIG-inspired turnarounds, from research on earlier efforts to improve school and district effectiveness, and from pockets of promising community-based practices that are developing at local and national levels.

- **Recommendation #1. Increase current federal and state spending for public education, particularly as it is allocated for turnaround-style reforms.**
 - Increase and equitably distribute federal and state education funding based on **districts' and schools' demonstrated needs (based on poverty levels, communities' economic and racial isolation, etc.)**.
 - Maintain these spending arrangements in order to ensure that basic levels of financial capacity exist across all schools and districts. Federal accountability

policies currently hold all schools and districts accountable for particular outcomes, regardless of local capacity.

- **Recommendation #2. Focus school turnaround policies on improving the quality of teaching and learning rather than on technical-structural changes.**

- Outline a set of options for schools and districts focused on improving the quality of teaching and learning through efforts to systematically recruit and retain qualified teachers in turnaround schools, which historically tend to be difficult to staff.
- Provide guidelines for ongoing, cumulative professional development that **deepens teachers' knowledge of pedagogy and** of the community in which their schools are embedded.
- Grant schools and districts greater autonomy to determine the details of each **school's turnaround plans.**

Provisions such as these would give schools and districts the authority to implement intense, dramatic improvements without undercutting the democratic nature of their efforts.

- **Recommendation #3. Engage a broad cross-section of schools' communities—teachers, students, parents, and community organizations—in planning and implementing turnaround strategies that are tailored to each school and district context.**

- Require school and district leaders to solicit and incorporate teachers' professional expertise as well as parent, student and community input into decisions.
- Specify the required timelines, financial and non-financial resources, and accountability structures for meaningful community engagement.
- Offer school, district, and state leaders training on authentic community engagement and models of best engagement practices at the federal, state, and district levels.
- At the school level, develop a representative oversight body that can solicit **teachers' professional judgments and** the community's ideas, concerns, and shared values and vision about what they want their schools to look like.
- Use parent surveys and hold multiple, accessible meetings (i.e., meetings held at times and locations that parents can attend and that provide free childcare and simultaneous translations) for community input.
- At the district level, establish a SIG advisory committee for stakeholders from multiple school sites to share experience and wisdom on school turnaround.

- **Recommendation #4. Surround struggling schools with comprehensive, wrap-around supports that stabilize schools and communities.**
 - Help struggling schools and districts sort through the SIG guidance by identifying existing community resources that can be integrated into the improvement process. For instance, provide specific examples of community-based organizations that can partner with districts and schools to provide non-academic supports related to health, nutrition, and other social services.
- **Recommendation # 5. Incorporate multiple indicators of effectiveness—apart from test scores—that reflect the multiple purposes of schools.**
 - Develop indicators of schools’ progress in setting and working toward other academic, social, and democratic goals for their students.
 - **Measure students’ preparation for long-term academic success** by tracking access to highly credentialed teachers and college-preparatory and/or advanced courses. Track English Learner re-classification, graduation and college-enrollment rates. Disaggregate these indicators by race, family income, and language status, as well as by students’ access to highly credentialed, experienced teachers.
 - **Measure schools’ development of students’ social skills and awareness by assessing students’ work in group-based learning tasks, problem-based projects, and curricula that relate directly to students’ communities.** Track suspension and expulsion rates. Disaggregate these indicators by race, family income, and language status, and access to highly credentialed, experienced teachers.
 - **Measure schools’ democratic effectiveness by tracking the degree to which schools engage members of the public in school governance and improvement planning.** Also examine whether schools make transparent certain information and decisions about schools’ budget, resources, and programs.
 - Track these indicators longitudinally to assess whether outcomes and conditions for particular groups of students and schools are improving over time.
 - Commission a diverse panel, composed of educational experts and practitioners from SIG sites, to select and define these broader indicators.
 - Support SIG schools to track their progress toward non-test-based goals in order to bring energy and resources to bear on those student and community outcomes that are not easily monitored through standardized tests but that nonetheless represent meaningful goals for public education and equity-oriented reform.

Incorporating these other conceptualizations of effectiveness is another means by which the federal policy can promote more democratic norms and processes in turnaround schools, in place of narrowly market-oriented ones.

- **Recommendation #6. Support ongoing, systematic research, evaluation, and dissemination examining all aspects of turnaround processes in schools and districts.**

- Solicit and fund research and evaluations that incorporate multiple points-of-view—teachers, students, and parents—to better understand what schools gained and where they experienced challenges when attempting to turn themselves around.
- Complement these more complete perspectives with information from classroom observations that reveals how these reforms are associated with different forms of instructional quality—beyond those reflected in standardized test scores.
- Support long-term research that illuminates the evolution of school and district turnarounds, including the rich historical and social legacies that aid successful turnarounds or thwart them, and that considers how such patterns unfold at the state, district, school, and community levels.
- Disseminate research and evaluation findings in formats useful to those leading turnaround efforts (e.g. accessible reports, guides, case studies, webinars, clearinghouses, and presentations).

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