

Meeting the Turnaround Challenge

Strategies, Resources & Tools to transform a framework into practice

State Policies to Transform Struggling Schools

How various state policies can be used to enable school & district turnaround

Why the State Role is Critical

State governments wield significant authority in the management of public schools. As a nexus for federal funding, state funding, and regulatory authority, states have both the legal and financial power to help drive school change. The *No Child Left Behind Act* has required each state to create a system of standards-based assessment and has empowered states with the ability to restructure and reconstitute those schools not meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

In addition to serving as the main agent of accountability, state legislatures pass laws regulating the instructional, operational, financial, and personnel-related functions of schools. Often such state education regulations can prove to be burdensome to local school districts. To support dramatic school turnaround, state governments have the opportunity to create more flexible operating conditions for schools participating in a Partnership Zones.

Finally, state governments provide the majority of funding for public schools. Often federal grants are distributed by state departments of education. Therefore, states are well-positioned to provide financial incentives and increased investment to support school turnaround.

This memo outlines five important methods that state governments can use to help support school turnaround in a Partnership Zone. They include:

- Developing Systems of Accountability and Performance Management
- Providing Increased Flexibility
- Creating Incentives
- Supporting Lead Partners and Building Coalitions
- Increasing Investment

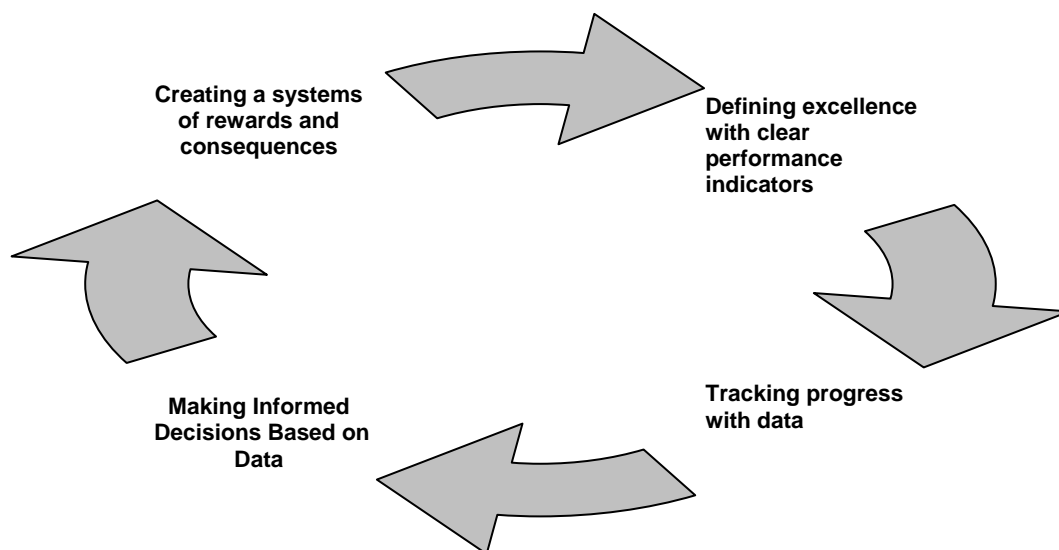
Developing Accountability and Performance Management Systems

As part of the *No Child Left Behind Act*, each state has created a system of standards-based assessments, as well as interventions for those schools not meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). While common interventions include school choice, supplemental education services (SES), restructuring, and reconstitution, some states have also augmented their NCLB accountability framework to add other intervention measures.

While traditionally, school accountability is often viewed as a system of negative consequence and interventions, states also have an opportunity to create more holistic systems of performance management that both reward progress as well as provide needed intervention. Such systems of Performance Management generally include four components:

- ***Defining excellence***
States should communicate clear performance indicators to schools and districts.
- ***Tracking progress***
States should develop comprehensive, longitudinal data tracking systems to help monitor student, school, and district progress.
- ***Making informed decisions***
States should use the data to help inform decisions on school progress.
- ***Creating rewards and consequences***
Based on the data and informed decisions, states can provide rewards and consequences to districts and schools.

The following diagram illustrates a Performance Management system:



Notable Practice: Florida's Accountability System

Defining Excellence

- Districts get letter grades A-F based on both absolute performance and improvement
- Schools get letter Grades A-F based on absolute performance and improvement

Tracking Progress

- Robust data warehouse with longitudinal data
- Common measures across districts
- Links K-12 system with post-secondary system
- Ability to connect value added with students
- Can track drop-outs across districts

Making Informed Decisions/Rewards and Consequences

- Provides monetary incentive for "A" schools or schools that increase a grade level
- Bonuses accrued to entire school (as a collective)

Provide Increased Flexibility

A second policy approach for states working to transform low-performing schools is to guarantee maximal flexibility from funding restrictions and regulatory requirements. Potential flexibilities include:

Regulatory Waivers

State Education Codes often spell out very detailed rules and regulations for the instructional, operational, financial, and personnel aspects of schools. States can create waiver processes for districts to waive certain provisions allowing districts and schools room to create programs that best meet the needs of the students.

Notable Practice: Long Beach-Fresno Pilot Funding Flexibility

"The time for action is now; we needn't wait for further study or legislation. I intend to bring before the State Board of Education a pilot program allowing Long Beach and Fresno unified school districts — the third and fourth largest districts in the state — significant new flexibility in how they allocate their resources. This flexibility will allow them to be more innovative in designing programs to close the achievement gap. In exchange for the increased flexibility, the two districts have agreed to form a partnership to learn together, model, and replicate effective practices.

- California Secretary of Education Jack O'Connell, January 2008

Single Plans

Too often, under-performing schools spend a disproportionate amount of time completing multiple accountability plans. Mandated reports are often burdensome and compliance driven, rather than strategic documents. States can help by consolidating all plans into one “Single or Master Plan” to help reduce time spent on reporting and compliance.

Amending Collective Bargaining Agreements Protections

Whereas collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) are traditionally negotiated between local labor unions and local district management, many state education codes contain provisions protecting certain CBA rights. A common protection contained in state education code involves seniority provisions. State legislators have the power to amend certain education codes, especially for schools who have failed to make AYP. For example, states could exempt low-performing schools from having to comply with seniority provisions contained in state education law.

Block Grants

Many states fund schools through categorical funding streams, with each funding stream designated for a specific purpose and use. States can help schools engaged in school turnaround by providing block grants based on per pupil allocations of funding. Such block grants are similar to the types of grants many states provide to charter schools.

The policies outlined above will require significant political courage on behalf of state legislators, boards of education, and other elected officials. The involvement and support of community and parent organizations, professional unions, institutions of higher education, and other stakeholders will increase the chance sustainability and provide important coalitions in favor of reform. Passing reform-minded policies is a good first step, but making sure that the state leadership has the will to implement those policies is the next crucial piece.

Create Incentives for Change

Turning around schools should not be a top-down mandate. States need to create an environment where districts are encouraged and motivated to engage in significant and dramatic reform.

States can provide a monetary incentive, in conjunction with the Lead Turnaround Partners, for Districts willing to participate in the Partnership Zone. In exchange, Districts and their community and Labor partners will agree to create the necessary flexible operating conditions needed for a Zone structure to work.

Notable Practices: Virginia's Focused Distribution of School Improvement Grants

Virginia has developed a stringent list of conditions for award of all 1003(g) funding. If a school does not commit to each of the specified conditions, it will not receive funding. The Department of Education is also using its 1003(a) dollars to provide \$900,000 to hire external operating partners to lead change in two schools in one district.

The state could also use flexibility from state laws and funding flexibility as an incentive in and of itself for those districts interested in creating Partnership Zones. Those participating districts would be exempt from certain compliance reporting obligations and receive funding through block grants rather than through restricted dollars. Such an incentive, while not monetary, would reward districts that are willing to engage in turnaround.

Finally, states can create incentives for nationally-based and local partner to take on the role of *Lead Turnaround Partners* (LTPs) in order to encourage high-capacity organizations to come to a particular state or district. States may want to issue an RFP calling on certain organizations to come work in their state.

Supporting Lead Partners and Building Coalitions

Schools and districts cannot continue to work on their own. External partners, such as LTPs, can provide additional capacity, new strategies, and access to best practices. Lead partners are often high-capacity, mission-oriented organizations with experience working in schools and/or managing schools. Lead Partners sign performance agreements with school districts to turnaround schools.

The state could take on a few different roles in developing a pool of partners. The state could release an RFP to encourage lead partners to either develop within the state or to encourage a national organization to enter the state. In some states, it may be necessary to amend laws regulating external contracts in order to attract the right partners to come work in the state.

While LTPs manage school turnaround, states can also help develop coalitions of strategic partners that can help advocate for turnaround policies. Such coalitions may include parent groups, community-based organizations, institutions of higher education, business leaders, and others. Such coalitions can help protect those elected officials who support greater flexibility in operating conditions and amendments to Collective Bargaining Agreements for Partnership Zones.

Increase Investments

In many states, school improvement funds are divided among a host of categorical programs, often creating an incoherent system of funding to districts and schools. As an initial first step in preparing for turnaround, states should conduct an analysis of all funding streams that potentially could be combined as a source of funding for high need schools and grant maximal flexibilities to districts and schools in using such funds.

Besides seeking greater flexibilities in existing funds, school turnaround, will ultimately necessitate the infusion of additional funds, especially given the budget cuts that are currently crippling many states and districts. On average, the cost of turning around a cluster of schools ranges from \$500,000 to \$1 million per year for at least three years. Most state policymakers and district leaders balk at those numbers, and instead of targeting money in a few place, they sprinkle resources more evenly across a greater number of constituents and schools. If the funds are spread over too many schools, only incremental improvements will occur and investments may not generate maximal efficiency.

One option is for states to target 1003(g) school improvement funds (under Title I) towards a select number of schools (and districts) that demonstrate readiness to implement dramatic change. States should be encouraged to invest funds in small clusters of schools to concentrate financial resources and strategic and operating support.

Conclusion

State departments of education, legislators, and other elected officials have a tremendous opportunity to help support school turnaround in Partnership Zones. State governments are ideally situated as both the main regulatory, accountability, and fiduciary agent responsible for schools. Relying on coalitions of supportive partners, states should use their authority to increase investments, develop incentives, and create greater flexibility for local districts and schools.

Additional materials available in *The Turnaround Challenge Resource Center*

- Evaluation Metrics: Goals and Benchmarks
- Funding Flexibility and Waiver Options
- Recommended State Criteria for Operating & Instructional Conditions
- Sample Real-World CBA Language Supporting Major School Reform
- Zone Creation Legislation Examples:
 - Colorado, [Innovation Schools Act of 2008](#) (SB 130)
 - Louisiana, [Recovery School District 2003](#), (Act 9, SB 710, HB 1660)
 - Mississippi, [Children First Act of 2009](#) (SB 2628)
- Additional examples from states will be added as they are publically available

For More Information on School Turnaround Strategies

- This document is part of a Research & Development process led by Mass Insight and various partners including Apollo Philanthropy Partners, Cambridge Education, Education Counsel, Holland + Knight, and The Parthenon Group.
- It should be used in conjunction with the Main Report, *The Turnaround Challenge: Why America's best opportunity to dramatically improve student achievement lies in our worst performing schools*, and a variety of other resources distributed throughout the spring and summer of 2009.
- The report and related Research & Development were generously funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.
- For more information on *The Turnaround Challenge*, please visit our website at www.massinsight.org or contact us at turnaround@massinsight.org.

Turnaround is a dramatic and comprehensive intervention in a low-performing school that a) produces significant gains in achievement within two years; and b) readies the school for the longer process of transformation into a high-performing organization. Successful turnaround requires strong partnerships and flexible operating conditions, and is best conducted across small clusters of schools in ways that can lead to whole-district redesign.

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