



BRIEF 2

Investing for Sustainable Turnaround

This is the second brief in a series produced by Education Resource Strategies (ERS) compiling and analyzing the results of our Sustaining Turnaround at Scale Summit held in October 2011. The first brief provides an overview of the five steps to create a district strategy for school turnaround that improves individual schools as well as the system as a whole and can be sustained over time.

Introduction

The Federal government has brought the issue of low-performing schools to the forefront of public conversation by committing \$3.5 billion over three years to turn around these schools. As of March 2011, over 1200 schools across the country had been awarded School Improvement Grants (SIG).¹ Given the magnitude of this short-term investment and the urgency of the problem, we at Education Resource Strategies (ERS), have been studying how districts are organizing their resources—SIG and other—to turn around their neediest schools. As part of this work, we hosted a summit in October 2011 called *Sustaining Turnaround at Scale* that brought together leaders from districts and schools, partner organizations, and funders. This group worked together over two days to share lessons and challenges involved with district efforts to build sustainable turnaround at scale.

This brief addresses the critical question:

How can districts use SIG and other, often temporary resources to build lasting change that improves both student performance in target schools and district systems to keep schools from failing in the first place?

Based on the experiences of summit participants as well as over ten years of work with our partner districts on strategic resource use, we conclude that many districts are not currently organizing turnaround resources in ways likely to create the dramatic and lasting change they desire. This brief proposes a set of five practices (below) for organizing turnaround resources to ensure that districts and their turnaround schools land in a permanently better place when temporary dollars run out.

SUSTAINABLE TURNAROUND

Five District Practices

1. **Fix broken structures, don't add more on top of them**
2. **Leverage partnerships wisely**
3. **Prioritize turnaround resources toward capacity building**
4. **Create a strategy that learns, using data to continuously adjust interventions**
5. **Change the system to protect and scale success**

¹ *Baseline Analyses of SIG Applications and SIG-Eligible and SIG-Awarded Schools*. Institute of Education Sciences. USDOE May 2011, Hurlbur, Floch, et al.

PRACTICE #1:
Fix broken structures, don't add more on top of them

With the beginning of the SIG program, and with various states and districts focusing on school turnaround independently of SIG, there has been a rapid inflow of new resources for turnaround schools. Many of these resources come with real and perceived constraints, and they often must be spent too quickly, leaving too little time for deliberate and rigorous planning. In this environment, districts around the country have fallen into the trap of layering these new resources on top of existing resources without changing the broken structures underneath. This incremental approach creates a significant risk for long-term school and system improvement—that when temporary resources run out, schools will be no better off than they were at the start of turnaround. Furthermore, in many cases, new layers of resources are not integrated within one comprehensive strategy for change; instead, the stipulations of funding streams or a rigid one-size fits all state or district model often dictate the strategy.

Leading edge districts see new resources as opportunities to fundamentally restructure existing broken systems at turnaround schools, thus building the capacity of the school to sustain improvement post-turnaround. They start their turnaround work by creating a comprehensive strategy based on their understanding of what failing schools need in order to turn around performance. Then, they organize resources to align with their strategy. These districts are reversing the typical relationship between funding streams and strategy by developing their strategy *first* rather than according to the parameters of a funding stream. As one district recently framed it to us, “We treat all dollars as green.” And, they look beyond new funding streams to also reorganize *existing* resources with their turnaround strategy, often changing staff composition, roles, and student and teacher schedules.

Just as importantly, these districts are tailoring implementation of interventions to fit the specific needs of each school. The careful alignment of interventions to school needs means that the implementation details and the way the components combine may look different in each school. For example, achieving effective teaching teams at one school may mean replacing the majority of the staff, while achieving effective teaching teams at another school may require only the addition of one teacher coach. This customization contrasts starkly with the approach that some states and districts are taking to mandate very specific turnaround investments, such as the addition of three teacher coaches or a particular after-school program—as described in the earlier example. Instead, it is important to first think about the reason for the intervention (i.e., how it connects to the overall strategy for what it takes to turn around a failing school), second weigh the existing strengths and weaknesses of the school and community, and finally determine how to best implement the intervention in the school's particular context.

PRACTICE #2:
Leverage Partnerships Wisely

Partners are critical in the turnaround process for a variety of reasons: they may be able to quickly provide skills and/or capacities that districts do not have and then help build them for the long term and they may be able to perform functions less expensively than districts. Districts that participated in the ERS summit use partners to play a variety of roles including implementing discrete pieces of turnaround models (e.g., after-school programs, leadership training), operating entire turnaround schools, and building out district-wide systems (e.g. human capital systems, aligned instructional systems). Yet, many districts' relationships with partners pose risks to the sustainability of their turnaround strategy. Such risks include:

- Partners provide a service that will be required beyond the horizon of turnaround funding (e.g. after-school programming), but districts and partners do not plan to build capacity and sustain practices when extra resources run out.
- Partners' services are not well aligned with the district's overall turnaround strategy, thus funds don't achieve their maximum impact relative to the strategy's desired outcomes.

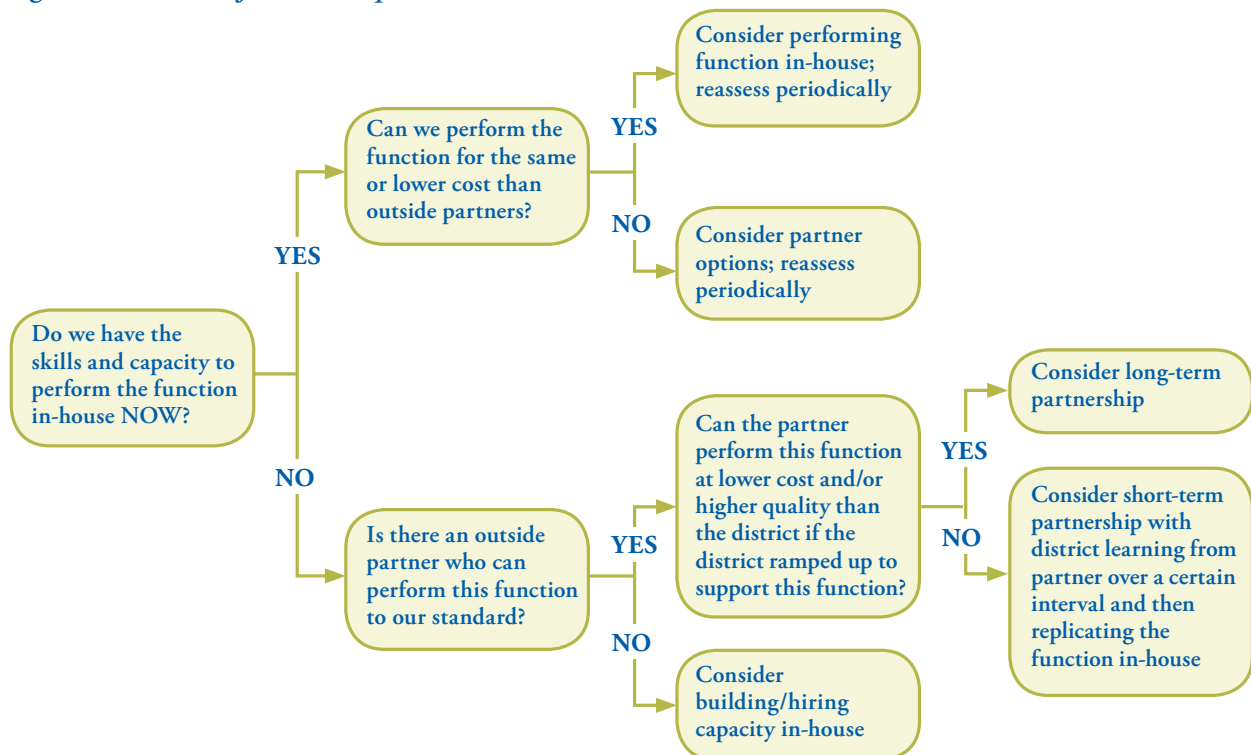
District participants and partners at the summit discussed the importance of being strategic about (1) engaging partners in the right work at the right times (2) managing partners to ensure alignment of their work with the overall turnaround strategy.

Engaging partners in the right work at the right times

Ensuring partners are contributing to a sustainable turnaround strategy means deliberately considering a number of factors when deciding to engage partners. Figure 1 diagrams these factors.

Basically, in areas where such districts do not have the requisite skills and capacity, they often seek a partner's expertise. But if engaging that partner is not financially sustainable for the long-term and the need for the service they provide will continue after turnaround, the district may figure out how to learn from that partner over a couple of years in order to be able to replicate that function in-house at the end of those years. Not all partners should be phased out over time, however; some partners may be able to

Figure 1: *Wise Use of Partnerships – Decision Tree*



EFFECTIVE TURNAROUND PARTNERSHIPS IN CINCINNATI

Cincinnati Public Schools' (CPS) partners fill many functions, ranging from student supports (e.g., counseling, pre-school placement, services for homeless students, after-school programming) to staff training (e.g., a program for turnaround leaders, professional development for teachers) to changing district systems (e.g., redesigning the teacher evaluation system). For several years, CPS has closely managed its partners, but with growing attention to turnaround in the last couple of years, CPS wanted to be able to hold partners accountable for aligning with the district turnaround strategy. Therefore, the district is implementing a system to measure the impact of partnerships on student academic achievement. CPS, along with turnaround principals and school-level resource coordinators (there is one at each turnaround school who helps manage external partnerships), now have access to data that tells them which students a specific partner is serving and how performance of those students has changed. While it is impossible to identify the extent to which performance increases are linked to partner services, the district can still get an idea of whether partners are working effectively with turnaround students or not. This is holding partners accountable for their role in turnaround, as schools are starting to identify partnerships that aren't working and those that are contributing positively to school turnaround.

perform a function better and less expensively than the district, and so it makes sense for them to fill that function indefinitely. Note that in addition to financial sustainability, when deciding how to engage partners it is also important for districts to keep in mind that using partners to carry out work that is part of the district's core strategy can make integration across pieces of the strategy more difficult.

Partner Accountability

Regardless of the nature of the partnership, it is important for districts to create accountability for partner performance—related to specific outcome goals that are linked to the overall turnaround strategy—by regularly reviewing outcomes. Thus, both the district and the partner take a problem-solving approach to responding to unmet goals along the way. Managing partner performance relative to the turnaround strategy will also lead to alignment of partners; they will all be working within the same strategic framework. Sustainability will be threatened if there is misalignment between partners and the district's overall strategy such that resources are not well leveraged for success.

PRACTICE #3: Prioritize turnaround resources toward capacity building

Sustainable turnaround requires the deliberate alignment of funding to short-term and long-term needs. As successful districts consider how to use funding that is intended for turnaround, they consider the distinction between short-term turnaround investments designed to break the cycle of failure and build capacity for sustained improvement versus long-term investments required to support high needs student populations. District leaders might find the following framework helpful when thinking how to invest short-term dollars. Turnaround schools invest in three categories of intervention shown in Figure 2: Establishing a productive school culture; building capacity of teachers and leaders; and responding to very high levels and concentrations of student need. The need for investments in creating a productive school cultures and capacity building should be expected to decline significantly over time (how quickly remains a big question) as they aim to break the cycle of failure and set the stage for continuous improvement. However, the majority of investments designed to address high levels of student need will often be required for the

long-term, even after the school exits turnaround status. This is illustrated by the examples noted in the figure—while investments in coaches can be reduced as teacher teams build their expertise, students who enter the school significantly behind grade level and who bring additional challenges related to poverty may always need a longer school day to catch up. Thus, phasing out the extended day investment at the end of turnaround may actually cause a school to slide back into turnaround status if students no longer have access to resources appropriate to their needs.

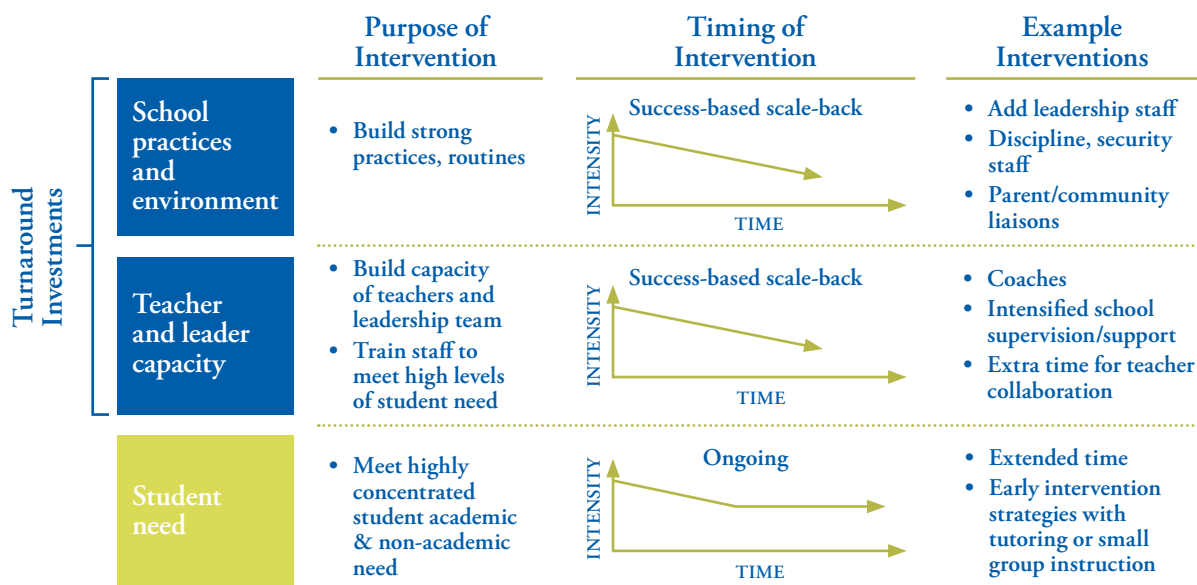
As illustrated, sustainable turnaround investment requires aligning the timing of investments with expectations about trajectories of need over time (i.e. short-term funding sources put against short-term needs) and scale back investment only when needs diminish. We have seen districts make three funding mistakes that threaten sustainability:

- Failing to restructure pre-existing resources or to raise new revenue to support ongoing student needs.
- Scaling back investments when extra funding runs out instead of linking resources to an

ongoing assessment of school need (e.g. districts remove coaches before teacher capacity is strong enough to independently sustain improvement).

The only path to sustained improvement in turnaround schools is fundamentally changing the school's capacity to educate students. Imagine a school in which temporary turnaround dollars are invested primarily in an extended day program that brings in a second shift of very high capacity adults who support students academically and through strengthened adult relationships. This school might see significant improvement over a three-year period, even without any change in its underlying practices or improvement in regular-day teaching. However, when the funding for the program is discontinued, the school will be no better off than when it entered turnaround; students will no longer have the support they need, and performance will likely begin to decline. While this is a stark example, and most districts have chosen to invest a portion of their resources in capacity building, many have chosen to emphasize investments in student need such as the ones in this example.

Figure 2: Sustainable Turnaround Investment



The challenge confronting districts is often that schools entering turnaround do not have enough resources to meet the needs of their students. Therefore, investing in both student need *and* capacity building is important. Leading edge districts are addressing this challenge by reorganizing their district-wide funding systems to fund or staff schools at consistent levels relative to the needs of their students, rather than using turnaround add-ons for this purpose. For example, we have worked with a number of districts that have moved to Weighted Student Funding (WSF) systems. Under WSF, schools are allocated funds based on student need—using certain indicators—rather than enrollment; each student is given a “weight” that estimates his/her academic need, and this computes into a weighted enrollment that then translates to funding. Meanwhile, these districts use their shorter-term turnaround resources to invest in building school capacity, intervening to improve school practices and environment, as well as teacher and leader capacity.

Districts at the summit also discussed the related challenge of deciding when to scale back short-term capacity-building resources and officially exit schools from turnaround status. Currently, many districts have organized funding such that this decision will be made for them when short-term funding streams like SIG run out. But, what if schools still need additional resources at the end of SIG funding? If districts scale back investments based only on the timing of funding they may end up stunting capacity and leaving the school in a tenuous state. Promising districts have created ongoing needs assessments that allow them to determine (1) if the interventions in place are working and (2) when the need for them is diminishing. Thus, they can be strategic about scaling back funding only as the area of need that the funds target diminishes. Critically, these districts also use their ongoing assessment of need to redirect funding when strategies don't work. It is

important to note that scaling back funding based on diminished need versus the timing of funding streams often requires seeking a different funding source (whether through private partnerships or regular district funds) to continue an intervention beyond the period of the initial turnaround funding streams. Districts may be able to use early success to generate momentum for continued funding from local funders, which makes the practice of tracking early indicators very important.

PRACTICE #4:
Create a strategy that learns, using data to continuously adjust interventions²

Ongoing monitoring systems with early indicators of longer-term success let district leaders know whether they are on track and allow them to adjust as they go. Such systems are critical to creating sustainable turnaround; districts risk wasting resources if they are not regularly assessing progress and making alterations. Over an extended period without monitoring, a district could end up investing significant resources against interventions that are just not working.

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) has been deliberate about using data to continuously adjust turnaround strategy. Schools collect data that feed into the creation of a weekly KPI (key performance indicator) dashboard—showing metrics such as attendance and percent of students on target within each grade level. These dashboards are reviewed in weekly project meetings with the school leadership team, lead partner team and the district's Office of School Improvement (OSI). By keeping a close eye on these metrics, OSI and the school are able to identify areas of concern and make adjustments before a problem becomes more serious. In addition to these weekly check-ins, OSI does quarterly performance reviews to evaluate school progress against a larger set of KPIs than tracked in the weekly meetings.

² Another resource on this topic is “Leading Indicators of School Turnarounds: How to Know When Dramatic Change is on Track” by Julie Kowal and Joe Ableidinger (2011) which can be found at http://www.darden.virginia.edu/web/uploadedFiles/Darden/Darden_Curry_PLE/UVA_School_Turnaround/Leading_Indicators_of_School_Turnarounds.pdf

CONTINUOUS LEARNING PRACTICE— CHICAGO'S MARSHALL HIGH SCHOOL

At Marshall High School, attendance has been a challenge; two years ago, only about half of students were attending school on any given day. A story in the *Wall Street Journal* reports how the head of the attendance office “tried a number of tactics to boost attendance, from calling kids at home before school to dangling common attendance rewards such as bus passes and MP3 players. She also hired “student advocates,” to cruise neighborhoods searching for students. Each of these efforts was measured, evaluated and, when warranted, adjusted or dropped.” At weekly meetings with OSI, the Marshall team reported on what was working versus not, and noticed that they were “most effective with the most chronic absentees.” As a result, they focused on those students—calling them, sending advocates to find them—and increased attendance to 75% by the end of the year.³

PRACTICE #5: Change the system to protect and scale success

We are seeing that successful districts also have a *system* that learns, meaning that they're using their increased understanding of and experience with transforming low-performing schools to change the system more broadly. In most urban districts, there are still many high-needs students that are *not* attending the few schools targeted for turnaround intervention and receiving SIG funding. These students can also benefit from the district's lessons about how to improve the performance of a high-needs population. Even the schools that are receiving turnaround interventions and SIG funding will not always be functioning in an environment where extra funding and the removal of barriers has created an atypical setting. When these schools exit

turnaround status, they need to exit into a district that has thoughtfully arranged for that transition.

Yet many districts are not stepping back and applying lessons learned in turnaround schools to the rest of their system. Many have characterized the sustainability risks in this area as the “revolving door” of turnaround:

- If the system isn't improved to better support low-performing schools through the lessons learned from turnaround work then low-performing schools that border “turnaround” status may decline into turnaround even as turnaround schools exit.
- Schools exiting from turnaround may quickly slide back into turnaround status if broader district systems have not been revised to better support the strategies that drove improvements during turnaround.

Denver Public Schools (DPS) has worked to change the system overall to accommodate turnaround lessons in several ways. DPS has had extended time as a core component of its turnaround model for its Denver Summit Schools Network (DSSN). Based on lessons learned this year and early indicators of success in the DSSN, DPS is building on this in two ways. First, it is working with a cohort of middle schools (the level at which DPS is facing the greatest performance challenges overall) to revamp school schedules to extend the school day strategically. Second, it is mounting an information campaign to build a public case for additional revenue to fund extended time district-wide. Also, they are working now to expand flexibilities around staffing to more schools each year as well as to provide greater incentive to teachers and leaders who have the level and combination of expertise required to turn schools around and serve high concentrations of students with exceptional learning needs.

³ “School Reform, Chicago Style”, *Wall Street Journal*, June 25, 2011.

Overall, we see that leading edge districts are asking themselves several questions during this period of SIG funding:

1. What have we learned from this intensive focus on turnaround about how to be successful with our population of high-needs students (including appropriate levels of funding for ongoing student needs)?
2. What have we learned about how to best support school leaders and teachers to make dramatic improvement in performance?
3. Which barriers did we have to remove and/or which supports did we have to create for schools to be able to do this work?
4. Given our answer to the previous questions, what broad changes do we need to make across our system for *all schools* to be successful—both schools with high-needs students that never received SIG funding and schools that will be losing SIG funding when the period ends?

Conclusion

Investing for sustainable turnaround is critical so that districts do not relapse—and schools do not resume the cycle of failure—when short-term funding runs out. We know that districts are under tremendous stress as they attempt to dramatically change schools with an unprecedented influx of dollars and in the short timeframe outlined by the SIG program. Not all turnaround strategies will work; like anything, there will be hits and misses and mistakes. But the important thing is that districts—along with their partners and stakeholders—are deliberately learning from this experience and redesigning their funding systems to keep the work going.

Additional Resources

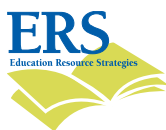
The ERS website provides many additional resources on the topic of turnaround, including:

- Turnaround Summit Brief #1: The first in this series that compiles and analyzes the results of our *Sustaining Turnaround at Scale* Summit held in October 2011.
- Content from the *Sustaining Turnaround at Scale* summit: session summaries, posters, video excerpts⁴
- Turnaround resource guide (called *Turnaround Schools: District Strategies for Success and Sustainability*)⁵ provides a self-assessment tool and worksheets to guide you through a four-step process for identifying whether your district has an effective turnaround program, and whether you are investing in the most important interventions
- Case study: “Breaking the Cycle of Failure in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools”⁶
- Article: “Turning Around the Nation’s Lowest Performing Schools.”⁷
- Video: “Turnaround in Action” the stories of two turnaround schools in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, NC district that having success with different approaches.⁸

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⁴ Available at http://erstrategies.org/focus/turnaround_at_scale/; ⁵ Available at http://erstrategies.org/documents/pdf/turnaround_Oct25.pdf;

⁶ Download: http://erstrategies.org/resources/details/breaking_the_cycle_of_failure_in_charlotte_schools/; ⁷ Download: http://erstrategies.org/resources/details/turning_around_the_nations_lowest_performing_schools/; ⁸ Available at: http://erstrategies.org/resources/details/turnaround_in_action



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