



Research Brief

Turning Around a Persistently Low-Performing School

Question: What does the research say about strategies for turning around persistently low-performing schools?

In A Nutshell

Persistently low-performing schools that exited restructuring use several common practices. They include a focus on, and cohesion of, the instructional program, a strong planning process focused on improving student achievement, and a culture of collaboration among the teaching staff and administrators. Schools also addressed the needs of ninth graders, provided more engaging instruction, provided extra support for students, reorganized the school schedule to provide additional time for courses, engaged families in school success, and built explicit links to their feeder school program.

Leaders who successfully lead persistently low-performing schools that exited restructuring also share several characteristics. They possess an unwavering commitment to improved student achievement and hold a clear vision about a high-performing school. Change is not an option and reluctant staff are reassigned or replaced. They also focused on a few early wins, were comfortable challenging and breaking organizational norms, focused on recruiting and retaining the right staff, were fearless data users, and were skilled at motivating and communicating with influential people inside and outside of the school.

Since the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2001 as No Child Left Behind, schools that receive federal assistance through Title I have been expected to make significant progress improving student learning. Failure to do so means schools must restructure. As a result of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds are available to states to make grants to the 5% lowest performing Title I eligible schools.

The models vary from state to state but generally allow the school to choose the strategy to be used for restructuring. The four restructuring models that the US Department of Education requires to be included are:

- **Turnaround Model** – This would include among other actions, replacing the principal and at least 50 percent of the school's staff, adopting a new governance structure and implementing a new or revised instructional program.
- **Restart Model** – School districts would close failing schools and reopen them under the management of a charter school operator, a charter management organization or an educational management organization selected through a rigorous review process. A restart school would be required to admit, within the grades it serves, any former student who wishes to attend.
- **School Closure** – The district would close a failing school and enroll the students who attended that school in other high-achieving schools in the district.
- **Transformational Model** – Districts would address four specific areas: 1) developing teacher and school leader effectiveness, which includes replacing the principal who led the school prior to commencement of the transformational model, 2) implementing comprehensive instructional reform strategies, 3) extending learning and teacher planning time and creating community-oriented schools, and 4) providing operating flexibility and sustained support.

Experience with the Options

The most recent data indicate that more than 3,500 schools are in restructuring due to persistent low student achievement. The number of schools in restructuring is increasing annually because of the rise in state expectations for student performance.



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A study conducted by the Center on Innovation and Improvement (2009) reported on the use of the restructuring options. It found that few schools reopened as charters and few used outside contractors. Most often schools faced with restructuring adopted a version of the transformational model because it provided greater local flexibility. But in nearly 10% of the restructuring efforts all or most of the staff was replaced. Few states have taken over schools for a variety of reasons.

What Works

There is ample literature about effective schools and school improvement. There is little research about successful restructuring, particularly linked to state and federal accountability programs. However, there is evidence about what works to improve student achievement. They include:

- A strong focus on, and cohesion of, the instructional program
 - A strong planning process focused on improving student achievement
 - A culture of collaboration among the teaching staff and administrators
- (<http://www.edvantia.org/products/pdf/WhatWorks.pdf>)

The *High Schools That Work* program of the Southern Regional Education Board (www.sreb.org) found several practices present in low performing schools that raised student achievement.

No More Low-Level Courses – Eliminating low-level courses in one fell swoop meant that schools had to move quickly to establish support systems for students. The change was an impetus for teachers to work together to assure that courses were sufficiently rigorous and at the same time engaging and differentiated.

Support for Ninth Graders – Schools design specific interventions to support ninth graders who are either not prepared for high school or successful in a high school setting. Ninth grade academies and teams are common interventions.

Rigorous Requirements – Schools raised expectations and high school requirements often expecting students to take four years of English, mathematics, science and social studies.

Extra Help to Meet Standards – Students were “surrounded” with options for extra help. School staff mandated the extra help rather than waiting for students to seek assistance. Support was more than just credit recovery and provided students with extra help, and extra time, when needed to complete requirements.

Active Learning – School personnel sought ways to involve students more actively in their learning. They also routinely talked about college and their expectations that every student will attend some form of post-secondary education. Professional development was provided to increase differentiation and make classes more interesting and engaging.

Link to Middle Schools – Schools recognized that they must work closely with the feeder schools in their district. They aligned curriculum and became clearer about expectations. In many cases they provided a summer program between the eighth and ninth grade for students who were less successful in school.

Short-Term Early Success

While there is evidence that it can take as long as six years for a secondary school to implement changes impacting student achievement (Fullan, 2000) several short-term strategies have been identified that are proven to move schools forward more quickly.

- Align written and taught curricula with standards
- Align classroom assessments with the curriculum and continuously monitor student progress toward achievement of those standards;
- Analyze student achievement data to identify the most critical needs
- Find leadership for putting structures in place to monitor both the instructional program and student progress toward meeting achievement goals



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- Provide professional development directly linked to the needs of faculty to implement the instructional program
- Provide additional learning time for students who need it.

Another study of practices in low-performing schools that successfully exited restructuring, conducted by the Center on Education Policy, found three things in common:

- Persistence in addressing low performance for at least three years
- Use of benchmark assessments frequently (weekly to monthly) to monitor student achievement and make instructional decisions and identify struggling students;
- Use of an instructional coach to work with the principal and with teachers.

(<http://eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED503798.pdf>)

Practices That Support Improved Student Achievement

There is emerging evidence about practices that support improved student achievement and graduation rates. An analysis of several programs and reported by the National High School Center (www.betterhighschools.org/docs/NHSC_EmergingEvidenceBrief_111606Final.pdf) found several common practices among schools that successfully addressed persistent low performance. Those practices include:

- Assisting students who enter high school with poor academic skills;
- Improving instructional content and practice;
- Creating a personalized and orderly learning environment;
- Providing work-based learning opportunities and preparing students for the world beyond high school;
- Stimulating change in overstressed high schools.

Interventions	Examples Identified by National High School Center
Assist Students Who Enter High school with Poor Academic Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide double-blocked class schedules • Implement catch-up courses for students needing help
Improve Instructional Content and Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a well-defined curricula with explicit professional development for teachers • Align curricula with standards • Review assignments for rigor • Implement strategies for making classroom activities more engaging • Use academic departments and small learning communities for instructional improvement and collaboration • Provide training for productive use of meeting time
Create a Personalized and Orderly Learning Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create small learning communities where students work with a consistent set of teachers • Consider theme-based learning communities that encompass all four grade levels where upperclassmen serve as role models for incoming students • Provide a faculty advisor for every student so that students know an adult is looking out for them • Create “Freshman Academies” to provide intense support for incoming students and create a culture of success
Prepare Students for the World Beyond High School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide career awareness activities • Develop structured partnerships with employers • Implement a plan to help students and their families find scholarships and other sources of financial aid for post secondary education



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Stimulate Change in High Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assure each school is lead by a skilled leader comfortable with change and with monitoring improvements• Use an external coach or support person to help monitor progress and suggest resources• Assure support from the district for improvements in the high school program
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Importance of a Skilled and Committed Principal

A leader committed to improved student achievement is key to turning around a school. Every study of school reform has found that principal leadership is key to results. The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (www.centerforcsri.org) (2009) uncovered six leader actions when a turnaround occurred.

- Principals focused on a few high-priority goals with very visible payoffs. These early successes were used to gain momentum, motivate staff and “disempower” resisters. Examples might include increasing attendance, reducing disciplinary rates or using assessments to demonstrate gains in reading or math by the end of the first trimester.
- Principals were comfortable breaking organizational norms. Existing practices contribute to failure. Successful turnaround leaders are not afraid to break norms and rules. Deviating can show that new actions get results.
- Principals pushed rapid-fire experimentation. They pressed for quick adoption of new tactics, discarding failed tactics and investing in what works. They absolutely do not tout progress as “ultimate success.”
- Principals selected and retain the “right” staff. Typical turnaround principals rarely replaced all or even most of the staff but they often replaced key leaders, those who organize and drive change. Change is mandatory, not optional.
- Principals are “focused, fearless data-hounds.” They chose goals based on analysis of data. They report results often and publicly. They require all staff to share periodic results in a public setting, shifting discussions from “excuse making and blaming to problem solving.”
- Principals design and lead a turnaround campaign. They are skilled at motivating others and communicating a vision of success and improved achievement. They help staff work with key community leaders, inside and outside of the school, to nurture and sustain their vision of high-performance.

Adapted from: <http://www.centerforcsri.org/files/CenterIssueBriefSept09.pdf>

A study conducted for the Chicago Public Education Fund (2008) identified the competencies of leaders who were successful in turning around their schools

(http://www.publicimpact.com/publications/Turnaround_Leader_Compencies.pdf).

Driving for Results – Turnaround leader’s strong desire to achieve outstanding results and the task-oriented actions required for success.

Influencing for Results – Motivating others and influencing their thinking and behavior to obtain results. Turnaround leaders cannot accomplish change alone, but must rely on the work of others.

Problem Solving – Including analysis of data to inform decisions; making clear, logical plans that people can follow; and ensuring a strong connection between school learning goals and classroom activity.

Showing Confidence to Lead – Staying visibly focused, committed, and self-assured despite the barrage of personal and professional attacks common during turnarounds.

What Leaders Can Do

The Center on Innovation & Improvement gathered data from schools that successfully exited restructuring and identified a set of actions that are consistently used by turnaround leaders to positively impact their school.

(<http://www.cenrii.org/survey/downloads/Turnaround%20Actions%20and%20Results%203%2024%2008%20with%20covers.pdf>).



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Initial Analysis and Problem Solving

Leader Action	Strategy
Collect and Analyze Data	Initially, turnaround leaders personally analyze data about the organization's performance to identify high-priority problems that can be fixed quickly. Later, they establish organization routines that include ongoing data analysis
Make Action Plans Based on Data	Turnaround leaders make an action plan so that everyone involved knows specifically what they need to do differently. This allows people to focus on changing what they do, rather than worrying about impending change.

Drive for Results

Leader Action	Strategy
Concentrate on Big, Fast Payoffs in Year One	Successful turnaround leaders first concentrate on a very limited number of changes to achieve early, visible wins for the organization. They do this to achieve success in an important area, to motivate staff for further change, and to reduce resistance by those who oppose change.
Implement Practices Even if They Require Deviation From Established Practice	Turnaround leaders make changes that deviate from organization norms or rules – not just for change's sake, but also to achieve early wins. In a failing organization, existing norms and rules often contribute to failure. Targeted deviations to achieve early wins teach the organization that new practices can lead to success.
Require All Staff to Change	When a turnaround leader implements an action plan, change is mandatory, not optional.
Make Necessary Staff Replacements	Successful turnaround leaders typically do not replace all or most staff. But they often replace some senior staff, particularly those who manage others. After the organization begins to show turnaround success, staff unwilling or unable to make changes that their colleagues have made leave or are removed by the leader.
Focus on Successful Tactics; Halt Others	Successful turnaround leaders are quick to discard tactics that do not work and spend more resources and time on tactics that work. This pruning and growing process focuses limited time and money where they will have the most impact on critical results.
Do Not Tout Progress as Ultimate Success	Turnaround leaders are not satisfied with partial success. They report progress, but keep the organization focused on high goals. When a goal is met, they are likely to raise the bar.

Influence Inside and Outside the Organization

Leader Action	Strategy
Communicate a Positive Vision	Turnaround leaders motivate others inside and outside the organization to contribute their discretionary effort by communicating a clear picture of success and its benefits.



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Help Staff Personally Feel Problems	Turnaround leaders use various tactics to help staff empathize with – or “put themselves in the shoes of” – those whom they serve. This helps staff feel the problems that the status quo is causing and feel motivated to change.
Gain Support of Key Influencers	Turnaround leaders work hard to gain the support of trusted influencers among staff and community. They work through these people to influence those who might oppose change.
Silence Critics with Speedy Success	Early, visible wins are used not just for success in their own right, but to make it harder for others to oppose further change. This reduces leader time spent addressing “politics” and increases time spent managing for results.

Measuring, Reporting and Improving

Leader Action	Strategy
Measure and Report Progress Frequently	Turnaround leaders set up systems to measure and report interim results often. This enables the rapid discard of failed tactics and increase of successful tactics essential for fast results.
Require all Decision Makers to Share Data and Problem Solve	Sharing of results in open-air meetings allows turnaround leaders to hold staff who make key decisions accountable for results, creating discomfort for those who do not make needed changes and providing kudos to those who are achieving success. This shifts the focus of the organization’s meetings from power plays, blaming, and excuses to problem solving.

High Schools That Work

One of the most respected high school reform models is *High Schools That Work* (HSTW), a program of the Southern Regional Education Board (www.sreb.org). There is a solid body of research showing the positive impact of the key practices recommended by the program (www.sreb.org/page/1141/other_research_on_hstw.html). Those practices include:

- High expectations:** Motivate more students to meet higher standards by integrating high expectations into classroom practices and providing frequent feedback.
- Program of study:** Require each student to complete an upgraded academic core and a concentration.
- Academic studies:** Teach more students the essential concepts of the college-preparatory curriculum by encouraging them to apply academic content and skills to real-world problems and projects.
- Career/technical studies:** Provide more students access to intellectually challenging career/technical studies in high-demand fields that emphasize the higher-level academic and problem-solving skills needed in the workplace and in further education.
- Work-based learning:** Enable students and their parents to choose from programs that integrate challenging high school studies and work-based learning and are planned by educators, employers and students.
- Teachers work together:** Provide cross-disciplinary teams of teachers time and support to work together to help students succeed in challenging academic and career/technical studies.
- Students actively engaged:** Engage students in academic and career/technical classrooms in rigorous and challenging proficient-level assignments using research-based instructional strategies and technology.



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Guidance: Involve students and their parents in a guidance and advisement system that develops positive relationships and ensures completion of an accelerated program of study with an academic or career/technical concentration.

Extra help: Provide a structured system of extra help to assist students in completing accelerated programs of study with high-level academic and technical content.

Culture of continuous improvement: Use data continually to improve school culture, organization, management, curriculum and instruction to advance student learning.

From: http://www.sreb.org/page/1139/key_practices.html

High Schools That Work also identified several conditions that accelerate student achievement. They include:

- **A clear, functional mission statement:** Each school has a clear, functional mission statement to prepare high school students for success in postsecondary education and the workplace.
- **Strong leadership:** Each district and school has strong and committed leaders to improve, align and benchmark curricula to high standards, to improve the quality of instruction, and to raise student achievement and graduation rates.
- **Plan for continuous improvement:** District and school leaders create an organizational structure and process that ensures continuous involvement with faculty on what to teach; how to teach it; what students are expected to learn; how to assess what they have learned; and how they relate to each other, to the students and to the home and community.
- **Qualified teachers:** Teachers have in-depth knowledge of their subject areas and of teaching strategies appropriate to students' grade levels. The school and district employ teachers who have depth in their teaching fields and support them in learning how to teach well.
- **Commitment to goals:** School leaders and teachers are committed to achieving the *HSTW* Goals and implementing the Key Practices. School boards are committed to having all students complete a demanding academic core and an academic or career/technical concentration, or both.
- **Flexible scheduling:** School superintendents and school boards permit high schools to adopt flexible schedules enabling students to earn more credits and redo work until it meets at least grade-level standards.
- **Support for professional development:** District and school leaders provide teachers with instructional materials, planning time and professional development for implementing new curriculums and research-based instructional methods. (www.sreb.org/page/1140/goalsconditions_for_continuous_improvement.html)

Case Studies of Persistently Low-Performing Schools That Exited Restructuring

Many low-performing high schools have successfully improved performance. Each school is unique and approached the task differently. They do, however, provide compelling evidence about ways to improve student achievement.

Westwood High School, Memphis, TN -

http://www.centerii.org/survey/downloads/Breaking_the_habit_of_low_performance.pdf (p. 33)

Box Elder Secondary School, Box Elder, MT -

http://www.centerii.org/survey/downloads/Breaking_the_habit_of_low_performance.pdf (p. 23)

Dalton High School, Dalton, GA - http://publications.sreb.org/2009/09V13w_Three_High_Schools.pdf (p. 1)

Dawson County High School, Dawsonville, GA -

http://publications.sreb.org/2009/09V13w_Three_High_Schools.pdf (p. 4)



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Camden County High School, Camden, GA - http://publications.sreb.org/2009/09V13w_Three_High_Schools.pdf
(p. 6)

Online and Print Resources:

- A Tale of Three High Schools that Work. Southern Regional Education Board, 2009.
http://publications.sreb.org/2009/09V13w_Three_High_Schools.pdf
- Breaking the Habit of Low Performance, A report from the Center on Innovation and Improvement (2009).
http://www.centerii.org/survey/downloads/Breaking_the_habit_of_low_performance.pdf
- *Breaking Ranks*, Resources National Association of Secondary School Principals
School Satisfaction Survey - <http://www.principals.org/Portals/0/Content/51952.pdf>
School Academic Rigor and Support Assessment - <http://www.principals.org/Portals/0/Content/47558.pdf>
Strategies for High School Reform Assessment - <http://www.principals.org/Portals/0/Content/47558.pdf>
Progress Assessment - <http://www.principals.org/Portals/0/Content/51953.pdf>
- Center on Education Policy (2008). A call to restructure restructuring: Lessons from the No Child Left Behind Act in Five States.
<http://eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED503798.pdf>
- Emerging Evidence on Improving High Schools Student Achievement and Graduation Rates: The Effects of Four Popular Improvement Programs, National High School Center (2006)
http://www.betterhighschools.org/docs/NHSC_EmergingEvidenceBrief_111606Final.pdf
- High Schools That Work, a school reform model from the Southern Regional Education Board
http://www.sreb.org/page/1078/high_schools_that_work.html
- High Schools That Work Key Practices, Southern Regional Education Board.
http://www.sreb.org/page/1139/key_practices.html
- High Schools That Work, Conditions for Success, Southern Regional Education Board
http://www.sreb.org/page/1140/goalsconditions_for_continuous_improvement.html
- Institute of Education Sciences. (2007, September). Organizing instruction and study to improve student learning. Retrieved online <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/20072004.pdf>
This guide provides numerous ideas and suggestions on ways in which instruction can be modified in order to help student learning improve.
- Institute of Education Sciences. (2009). Turning around chronically low-performing schools. Retrieved online http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/Turnaround_pg_04181.pdf
A descriptive handbook that provides suggestions on ways in which to use data to help students at low-performing schools achieve at higher rates.
- Institute of Education Sciences. (2009, September). Using student achievement data to support instructional decision making. Retrieved online http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/dddm_pg_092909.pdf
This is an extensive guide with numerous ideas and suggestions on ways in which to use student data to strengthen student achievement.



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- Improving the Distribution of Teachers in Low-Performing High Schools, Alliance for Excellent Education Policy Brief (2008)
http://www.all4ed.org/files/TeachDist_PolicyBrief.pdf
- Improving Low-Performing High Schools: Searching for Evidence of Promise, S. Fleischman & J. Heppen (2009).
http://www.princeton.edu/futureofchildren/publications/docs/19_01_06.pdf
- Raising the Achievement of Low-Performing Students: What High Schools Can Do, G. Bottoms (2002).
<http://www.earlycolleges.org/Downloads/RaisingAchievementBottoms.pdf>
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http://www.publicimpact.com/publications/Turnaround_Leader_Competencies.pdf
- School Turnarounds: Actions and Results, A report from the Center on Innovation and Improvement (2008).
<http://www.centerii.org/survey/downloads/Turnaround%20Actions%20and%20Results%203%2024%2008%20with%20covers.pdf>
- Successful School Turnarounds: Seven Steps for District Leaders, (2009) by J. Kowal, E. Hassell and B. Hassel. An Issue Brief provided by The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (www.centerforcsri.org) and Learning Points Associates (www.learningpt.org).
<http://www.centerforcsri.org/files/CenterIssueBriefSept09.pdf>
- US Department of Education (2010). Guidance on School Improvement Grants
<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/nastid1.pdf>
- US Department of Education (2010). Examples of successful turnarounds for each of the four options.
<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/examples.html>
- What Works with Low-Performing Schools: A Review of the Research. AEL, ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools (2002).
<http://www.edvantia.org/products/pdf/WhatWorks.pdf>

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