Education Commission of the States

What's Inside

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What Works in Improving Low-performing Schools and Districts?

The goal of state intervention in a school or district designated as low-performing is not to punish. It is to help figure out how to improve student learning. The challenge, particularly for a chief state school officer or state board of education, is how best to leverage assistance to schools that have varying degrees of need. Most state legislatures have provided the state board the authority to act. How to proceed with limited funding and staffing is the truly difficult question. This Progress of Reform examines what is being learned from research and looks at the subsequent implications for state policy.

Among these studies, several themes are apparent:

- ◉ The need for supported and aligned systems; for greater performance management; and for community engagement – all of which are flexibly geared to the needs of a given school

- ◉ The need to improve instructional capacity and conditions

- ◉ The need to empower strong leadership.

What the studies also indicate is that more rigorous research is needed on the factors that influence the success of schools in need of improvement. The good news, however, is that there are principles and features of leadership, instructional conditions and capacity; and governance and organizational structures that can make a difference.

Eight Lessons:

- Sanctions for schools and districts are not the fallback solution.

- No single reform strategy has been universally successful.

- Staging (setting up the conditions for change) should be handled with flexibility.

- Intensive capacity building is necessary (state, district and school).

- A comprehensive bundle of strategies is the key (stronger curriculum; focus on discipline; expert advice, coaching; new leadership or leadership training, etc.).

- Relationship-building needs to complement powerful (academic, curricular) programs.

- Competence reduces conflict.

- Strong state commitment is needed to create system capacity.

Corrective Action in Low-Performing Schools: Lessons for NCLB Implementation from State and District Strategies in First-Generation Accountability Systems

(Heinrich Mintrop, University of California, Berkeley; Tina Trujillo, University of California, Los Angeles; National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST), July 2005)
http://gse.berkeley.edu/faculty/HMintrop/CRESSTReportNCLB.pdf

The requirements of NCLB mandate that states create accountability systems by "formulating standards, defining a baseline and setting a level of proficiency." Low-performing schools are subject to a three-stage intervention process: improvement, corrective action and restructuring. This paper takes lessons from the last two stages (corrective action, restructuring) from schools that implemented accountability systems before NCLB was passed (called first-generation systems). The purpose of this study is to make recommendations as to how states and districts can most effectively and efficiently undergo the corrective action and restructuring phases of intervention.

The researchers looked at three smaller states (Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina) and four larger ones (California, Florida, New York, Texas) – and also at Chicago's and Philadelphia's approach to low-performing schools. These systems were selected for five reasons: they are first-generation systems that have spearheaded high stakes accountability in the U.S.; have been in existence for some time; have figured prominently in the public discussion on high stakes accountability prior to NCLB; have gained experiences with corrective action and school redesign; and are covered by some research material.

This study highlights eight lessons learned (see box on left). In addition, the researchers suggest that state and local leaders consider the following implications for policy.

Policy Implications

States need to construct powerful low-performing schools programs that make corrective action and school redesign an uncommon occurrence.

Accountability systems need to set goals that are deemed realistic, use assessments that are educationally meaningful, facilitate school evaluations that allow schools to see their contribution to the performance problem, offer suggestions on how schools can improve, and identify barriers to performance that can be addressed through policies.

States and districts need flexibility in designing measures that are appropriate to the developmental needs of a given school.

Low-performing schools programs need a management structure that allows for careful recruitment and quality control of service providers.

Intervention strategies need to create a balanced effect on instructional programs, educators' professional norms of performance, commitment to stay in the low-performing school and trust among school actors.

School Turnarounds: A Review of the Cross-Sector Evidence on Dramatic Organizational Improvement
(Bryan Hassel, Emily Hassel, Julie Kowal, Lauren Morando Rhim, Public Impact; Center on Innovation & Improvement, 2007)
http://www.centerii.org/restructuring/resources/Turnarounds-BlackWhite.pdf

A 2006 study synthesized the literature from the education sector and across multiple other sectors – public, nonprofit and private – related to successful turnarounds. This evidence review is adapted from that publication with substantial updates and new analysis. Findings are presented according to two broad themes that provide an analytic framework to synthesize the cross-sector literature: environmental context and leadership.

While this examination of the cross-sector literature does not provide a rigid blueprint for successful turnarounds, it could serve as a foundation for subsequent research on actual school turnarounds.

Environmental Context

Timetable

- A year of planning is important. Schools that make major staff and leadership changes over a summer often struggle with chaos and poor results in the following year.

- There is no definite time period to guarantee success: some turnarounds in the public sector may take only a few months. On the other hand, many corporate turnarounds take between three and five years to complete.

- Fast, focused results during the initial year are important in part to help establish credibility, create momentum for change, and break down resistance.

Freedom to Act

- Schools undertaking significant school reform appear to have a higher chance of success when the district allows as much freedom as possible from regulations regarding scheduling, transportation, discipline and curriculum.

- Research in the public sector reveals that without an extraordinary leader, lack of freedom to act quickly and decisively can severely hinder an organization's ability to change.

- Authority to hire and fire personnel or, alternatively, alter their working conditions was identified in multiple cases as an important freedom that influences effective turnaround.

Support and Aligned Systems

- Most organizations in which turnarounds are successful have a supportive governing body that provides assistance to new management while giving the organization freedom to initiate real change.

- Regardless of the degree of support the school or organization receives initially, support may need to be ongoing.

- Documented, successful turnarounds across sectors (including, notably, public turnarounds) suggest that existing resources can support necessary change if they are concentrated on the factors that are most in need of change and offer the biggest possible pay-offs.

Performance Monitoring

- External performance expectations characteristic of current accountability systems alone are insufficient to spur substantial school improvement in many schools.

Community Engagement

- Successful organizations frequently develop a turnaround "campaign" to ensure that restructuring takes place in an environment that is receptive to change.

- Low customer trust is a common element of failure leading to turnaround efforts across sectors. In schools, students, parents and the broader community are all "customers" with a stake in school success.

- The key lesson from prior turnaround efforts is to engage teachers, parents and the surrounding community in a way that encourages them to become part of the changes in the school, rather than critical observers who watch from the sidelines.

Turnaround Leadership

The literature suggests that the process of turning around a failing organization is very different from the process of incremental improvement within an organization that is already performing at satisfactory levels. As a result, it is not surprising that the literature finds that leadership in the turnaround setting is also different. First, leaders appear to take a common set of actions during successful turnarounds. Second, effective turnaround leaders likely have different pre-existing capabilities from leaders who are successful in more general realms of organizational leadership.

1. **Analyze and problem-solve**. One action is concentrating on big, fast payoffs in year one. Two others are 1) collecting and personally analyzing organization performance data; and 2) making an action plan based on data.

2. **Drive for results**. One recurring element is implementing strategies even when they deviate from established organizational practices. A second action is requiring all staff to change, rather than making it optional; and the third is making necessary but limited staff replacements, replacing those staff who cannot or do not make needed changes. A related action is funneling more time and money into successful tactics while halting unsuccessful tactics. Finally, research suggests that leaders in successful turnarounds act in relentless pursuit of goals, rather than touting progress as ultimate success.

Best Policies and Practices in Urban Educational Reform: A Summary of Empirical Analysis Focusing on Student Achievement and Equity
(Linda M. Crasco, Jason J. Kim, Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 2006)

Beginning in 1994, the National Science Foundation supported 22 urban districts in long-term educational reform. Called the Urban Systemic Initiative (USI), the reform model evolved based on six "educational reform drivers." Some of these "drivers" are process-oriented and some are outcome-oriented. This study sought to evaluate how well the "drivers" or levers worked by looking for best policies and practices focusing on student achievement in math and science.

This study confirms that the following six educational reform drivers do have a positive effect on student achievement:

1. **Implementation of comprehensive, standards-based curricula** – as represented in instructional practice – including student assessments in every classroom, laboratory and other learning experience provided through the system and its partners.

2. **Development of a coherent, consistent set of policies** that support provision of high-quality mathematics and science education for each student; excellent preparation, continuing education, and support for each mathematics and science teacher (including all elementary teachers); and administrative support for all persons who work to dramatically improve achievement among all students served by the system.

3. **Convergence in the usage of all resources** that are designed for or that reasonably could be used to support science and mathematics education – fiscal, intellectual, material, curricular and extracurricular – into a focused and unitary program to constantly upgrade, renew, and to improve the educational program in mathematics and science for all students.

4. **Broad-based support** from parents, policymakers, institutions of higher education, business and industry, foundations and other segments of the community for the goals and collective value of the program, based on rich presentations of the ideas behind the program, the evidence gathered about its successes and its failures, and critical discussions of its efforts.

5. **Accumulation of a broad and deep array of evidence** that the program is enhancing student achievement through a set of indexes that might include achievement test scores, higher-level courses passed, college admission rates, college majors, Advanced Placement tests taken, portfolio assessment, and ratings from summer employers, and that demonstrate that students are generally achieving at a significantly higher level in science and math.

6. **Improvement in the achievement of all students**, including those historically underserved.

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3. Influence inside and outside. Several leader actions include: 1) Communicating a positive vision for future results; 2) helping staff personally see and feel the problems their " "customers" face; 3) getting key influencers to support change; and 4) silencing change naysayers indirectly by showing speedy successes.

4. Measure and report. One specific tactic in this category is gathering staff in frequent open-air meetings, requiring all involved in decision-making to disclose results and problem solve.

The Role of Districts in Fostering Instructional Improvement

(Heather Barney, Hilary Darilek, Gina Ikemoto, Kerri Kerr, Julie Marsh, Marika Suttorp, Ron Zimmer, RAND, 2005)

http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG361.pdf

The current high-stakes accountability environment brought on by the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) places great pressure on school districts to demonstrate success by meeting yearly progress goals and eventually demonstrating that all students achieve high standards. The purpose of this three-year study was primarily to provide feedback to three districts and intermediary organizations to improve reform efforts geared at improving instructional quality and performance. The study also offers insights into how to improve teaching and learning (strategies; constraints/enablers; implications for improvement and partnerships).

Findings

Districts benefited from focusing on a small number of initiatives. Success also was tied to the degree to which strategies:

- ⊙ Were aligned with other existing or new programs

- ⊙ Enabled multiple stakeholders to engage in reform

- ⊙ Found an appropriate balance between standardization and flexibility

- ⊙ Were enforced by local accountability incentives for meaningful change to instructional practice.

Several common factors influenced partnerships and impacted the districts:

- ⊙ Leadership buy-in, trust in and perceived credibility of the intermediary group

- ⊙ Alignment between intermediary expertise and district needs

- ⊙ Availability of practical tools

- ⊙ The degree to which the intermediary group was viewed as a vendor

- ⊙ Intermediary organization's capacity

- ⊙ Staff turnover.

Policy Implications/Recommendations

Lessons for instructional improvement

- ⊙ Instituting local accountability policies that create incentives for meaningful change can promote implementation.

- ⊙ Aligning and developing a comprehensive set of strategies can reinforce overarching instructional improvement goals.

- ⊙ Designing instructional improvement efforts to reinforce one another and communicating this intended alignment can result in school staff being more inclined to see how multiple demands on their time could collectively further the goal of improving student achievement.

The Role of Districts *cont. from inside page*

Policy Implications/Recommendations

Lessons for leadership

Free up leaders for instructional leadership. Remove all the structural barriers to achieving new leadership vision. Consider investing in strategies that free up principals' time to engage in instructional leadership practices or redefine job descriptions and responsibilities so that other individuals share responsibilities for leading the school. For example:

- ◉ Reduce off-site meetings and paperwork requirements

- ◉ Assign assistant principals or office managers to student discipline and administrative tasks

- ◉ Make coaching available.

Assistance/Coaching. Make available on-site instructional experts. Consider investing in such a strategy by creating clearly defined, site-specific coaching positions to promote school-level instructional capacity. Investing in the professional development of central office staff can enhance their capacity to lead instructional reform.

Curriculum. Get buy-in for curriculum guides. Although guides were reported to yield several benefits (e.g., greater consistency of instruction), taken alone, they were not said to meaningfully influence the "craft" of teaching. Consider involving teachers in the development and revisions of these documents, delivering the guides in a timely manner, and providing ongoing professional development to assist teachers in building the pedagogical skills to support the effective use of guides in classrooms.

Lessons for external partnerships and/or intermediary organizations

- ◉ Consider the extent to which intermediary staffs provide sufficient scaffolding – training, follow-up, mentoring, and concrete tools – to enable administrators and teachers to translate intermediary ideas and theory into deep meaning and practice.

- ◉ Get buy-in and support from top-level leaders to affect partnership viability.

- ◉ Consider building relationships over time not only with superintendents but also with other top- and mid-level administrators to develop trust and a shared sense of responsibility.

- ◉ Consider pre-existing reform initiatives and partnerships. Take into account the breadth and array of reform efforts and partners already existing in the district.

- ◉ Define and measure partnership goals and progress to facilitate improvements and sustained partnerships over time. Consider identifying interim and long-term measures of success at the outset of the partnership.

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ECS Education Commission of the States

The Education Commission of the States is a nationwide nonprofit organization formed in 1965 to help governors, state legislators, state education officials and others develop policies to improve the quality of education.

Helping State Leaders Shape Education Policy