California Collaborative on District Reform

Policy and Practice Brief

Beyond the School: Exploring a Systemic Approach to School Turnaround

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About the California Collaborative on District Reform

The California Collaborative on District Reform, an initiative of the American Institutes for Research, was formed in 2006 to join researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and funders in ongoing, evidence-based dialogue to improve instruction and student learning for all students in California's urban school systems.

Introduction

Educators have long grappled with the challenge presented by chronically underperforming schools. Environments that consistently fail to prepare students for higher levels of education threaten opportunities for high school graduation, post-secondary education, and career success. The U.S. Department of Education reinforced the urgency of reversing sustained poor performance in early 2009 when it identified intensive supports and effective interventions in our lowest-achieving schools as one of its four pillars of education reform. However, federal and state policies have often situated the cause—and thus the remedies—for persistent low performance at the school level. This brief uses the experience of eight California school districts—all members of the California Collaborative on District Reform—to suggest a more systemic approach to school turnaround.

We explore the district perspective on school turnaround by describing several broad themes that emerged across the eight districts in the California Collaborative on District Reform. We also profile three of these districts to illustrate specific strategies that can create a coherent district-wide approach to turnaround. Building on these district perspectives, we explore considerations for turnaround efforts in the upcoming reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

The Challenge of Reversing Persistent Low Performance

The U.S. Department of Education has identified school turnaround, defined as dramatic improvement in student performance at schools with consistent trends of low

achievement, as one of the country's highest education priorities. Nearly 13,000 schools nationwide have been identified as needing improvement according to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), and almost half of these have been in federal Program Improvement status for at least five years.[1]

While the number of struggling schools is concerning, so too is the fact that these schools serve disproportionate numbers of low-income students, students of color, and English learners (ELs).[2] Indeed, the list of California's persistently lowest-achieving schools eligible for federal School Improvement Grants (SIG) contains higher proportions of ELs, African Americans, Hispanics, and low-income students than the state average. For example, 44 percent of students in California's 2010 SIG-eligible schools are ELs, compared to 24 percent statewide.[3] Our collective failure to educate these students results in a cycle of low academic performance, limited skills, and poor career prospects.

The need for improvement is thus both substantial and urgent. Yet approaches to dramatic school turnaround have to date yielded mixed results, and the research base on effective turnaround is limited.[4] Indeed, most evidence on school reform highlights the complex interaction of conditions and suggests that a slow, steady improvement process may lead to growth that is more sustained over time.

To contribute to the evolving dialogue, this brief draws on the strategies of eight school districts that participate in the California Collaborative on District Reform:

- Fresno Unified School District
- Long Beach Unified School District
- Los Angeles Unified School District
- Oakland Unified School District
- Sacramento City Unified School District
- San Bernardino Unified School District
- San Jose Unified School District
- Sanger Unified School District

These districts have each designed their own approaches to improving their lowest-performing schools. Yet across the districts, several broad patterns emerge. This brief outlines these cross-district themes while highlighting the individual stories of three districts that have taken different routes to improvement: Sanger, Long Beach, and Los Angeles Unified School Districts. Our hope is that the experiences of these eight California districts will provide lessons both for other local jurisdictions and for the national discourse about how the federal government might best support school turnaround.

This brief is only one contribution to the dialogue around school turnaround. It does not incorporate the perceptions of school administrators, teachers, students, or families. Furthermore, our data do not allow us to establish a connection between these districts' strategies and school- or district-level outcomes. While we fully support a more comprehensive and rigorous examination of school intervention approaches, the primary goal of this brief is to inform a real-time discussion for district leaders who are responding to this challenge right now.

Effective Approaches: Systemic *and* Customized

The experiences of these eight districts suggest two equally central—and interacting—lessons for school turnaround:

1. Long-term and widespread school turnaround often requires systemic, district-level (not just school-level) approaches.
2. Systems attempting to reverse chronic underperformance must customize their efforts to meet the individual needs and conditions of each specific school.

Systemic Approaches to Turnaround

These districts' efforts to improve their most struggling schools focus, in part, on the systemic factors that contribute to low performance in the first place. For example, district-wide policies for staff assignment and transfer combined with system-level inequities in working conditions across schools serving different populations of students can lead to heavy reliance on novice principals and teachers in low-performing schools. A systemic approach—one in which the school district aligns its resources and strategies to confront common challenges and support effective solutions—might best address the needs of struggling schools. Just as the literature on school reform identifies the influence districts can have on teaching, curriculum, and assessment, districts can also assume a critical role in achieving dramatic change that neither the state nor schools alone can match.[5] The role of the district is essential, as is its particular context; the size, relationship with the teachers' union, and structural features of the system in which the school exists will all frame the options for school intervention.

A Customized Approach to Turnaround

Within a systemic approach to improvement, these districts also emphasize the importance of customizing improvement efforts to the specific context of each school. Student population, community, teaching force, reform history, and other contextual factors create challenges and frame opportunities to increase student learning in each school. Given the myriad factors that influence each educational environment, a successful approach in one school may not be replicable in another school in the state, or even within the same district. District leaders must therefore identify the elements that contribute to success in one context, and then adapt them to meet the needs of each individual school.

Themes of District Turnaround Strategies

Several strategies emerged across the eight districts that highlight commonalities in their approaches to low-performing schools:

- Establishing a district culture that supports school turnaround
- Developing and deploying strong leadership
- Fostering and deploying strong teaching
- Using data to identify effective and ineffective practices
- Involving the community
- Piloting promising ideas

These strategies are not limited to the specific purpose of school turnaround. For example, strong school leaders contribute immensely to the success of any school. However, the elements identified here have particular applications to the challenge of school turnaround. Furthermore, no single strategy will solve the problem of chronic low performance. Rather, the combination of several approaches in a coherent system of intervention can help position a district to produce positive change. It is beyond the scope of this brief, however, to suggest a particular combination of strategies that districts should employ or the sequence in which they should be introduced.

In general, these considerations deserve careful attention as districts design their intervention approaches; the broad themes here represent strategies that leaders might consider when developing a comprehensive approach.

Establishing a District Culture that Supports School Turnaround

District leaders described the sense of urgency that must guide school turnaround. Dramatic changes in expectations are often necessary in environments where adults have become accustomed to persistent low performance. These expectations must often come from the top. Sanger Superintendent Marc Johnson described his philosophy by saying, "We have no room on our journey for 'good enough' until every child has reached their full potential." The following examples illustrate ways in which district offices have attempted to reflect this kind of culture.

Orient the District to Serve Student Needs

District culture requires a commitment at all levels to do what is best for kids. Multiple district superintendents cited the flawed tendency of leaders to "play it safe," guiding their strategies by politically palatable decisions rather than approaches that best serve students. These leaders instead advocated engaging in difficult and potentially volatile conversations with teachers or the school board, or even putting one's job at risk in order to make decisions that prioritize children's needs above all else. As former San Jose Superintendent Don Iglesias explained, "Kids only have one shot. You have to put yourself on the line. You need to be brave enough to go out in flames and do the right thing." For instance, one district has rejected funding opportunities inconsistent with the district's approach to student learning, despite a desire for increased resources from the school board.

Combine Clear Expectations with Site-Level Flexibility

A systemic approach to improvement should also acknowledge the dangers of top-down reform, where disconnected mandates threaten buy-in and breed resentment or even resistance at school sites. Several district leaders described the importance of establishing clear expectations while giving schools the flexibility to meet those expectations in the way that best addresses the needs of their students. Being tight on goals but loose on the means to achieve these goals allows strong site leaders to take ownership of their role in school improvement. Only when schools fail to meet clear and mutually understood targets should the district utilize more prescriptive interventions.

Establish a School Service Mentality

Multiple district leaders described a reorientation of the central office toward being a support provider rather than a compliance or administrative hub. For example, Oakland's site-based budgeting system gives schools freedom to purchase certain district services that meet their individual school's needs (e.g., instructional coaches, analysis of school improvement plan, data inquiry support, and operational support). Schools can then utilize services they need without being distracted by mandated positions or supports that do not align with their specific turnaround approach.

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– Superintendent Don Iglesias

Remove Systemic Barriers to Improvement

Connected to a school service mentality, district leaders described the need to remove barriers to school improvement. In particular, districts must be aware of the unintended consequences of well-meaning policies. In Oakland, a strategic effort to redesign struggling schools led to the closure of over 25 schools and the opening of 40 new schools. As part of this process, staffing policies in newly opened schools allowed

principals to select their own staff in their first year. However, as additional schools opened in subsequent years, these same schools often became receptacles for teachers that other schools did not want due to contractual seniority-based placements.

In Long Beach, an open enrollment policy allowed a subset of middle schools to attract the highest-achieving elementary school students from across the district, resulting in a pooling of lower-achieving students in another eight middle schools (see the district profile on pages 10-11). By revisiting its school choice policy, the district changed a core factor that had contributed to low performance in some schools. As districts enact various intervention strategies, constant review of these strategies and their impact, both expected and unexpected, is critical for continuous improvement to take place.

Signal Success

Districts can also use short- and long-term successes to help build support and leverage change at individual school sites. In Sacramento, the district conducted a "deep clean" at its six Superintendent Priority Schools to create a campus environment that reflected the district's high expectations. Visually appealing school grounds, combined with a dress code for teachers in these schools, sent the message that the campus should be taken seriously as an environment for student learning. This "quick win" helped the district demonstrate that dramatic change was underway in its struggling schools.[6] From a longer-term perspective, San Jose district leaders encountered resistance in downtown schools that served higher percentages of low income and EL students. By demonstrating success in schools with similar student populations, the district worked to prove to other struggling schools that they too can achieve dramatic growth. In both cases, leveraging success can help build momentum and rally others behind the district's efforts at improvement.

Developing and Deploying Strong Leadership

Echoing the literature on school turnaround, the eight districts consistently identified the essential role of leadership in making dramatic school improvement.[7] While school leadership contributes to the learning environment in all schools, leadership has particular implications in the context of persistent low performance, where challenges like unstable staff, low expectations for students, and the need for a dramatic change in culture might require a specific set of leadership skills. Given the importance of site leadership in these schools, district leaders described the following approaches to ensuring that their strongest principals lead the environments with the greatest need.

The eight districts consistently identified the essential role of leadership in making dramatic school improvement.

Build the Skills of Existing Principals

Several districts described efforts to specifically target resources toward improving the capacity of existing leaders at struggling schools. San Bernardino closely monitors and targets support for principals at its persistently low-achieving schools to hold them accountable for specific short-term goals while providing the necessary support to reach those goals. These principals meet monthly with district personnel to identify student performance goals for the following month and the specific needs for instructional coaches and teacher training.

Sanger Unified School District

District-wide turnaround through targeted professional learning communities

Sanger Unified School District, located in the Central Valley of California, serves approximately 10,500 students, 82 percent of whom are minorities, 76 percent of whom are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and 24 percent of whom are ELs. The district has employed an approach to school turnaround that targets all schools in the district. By doing so, district leaders aim to meet *all* students' learning needs and promote the idea that a rising tide raises all boats.

When Sanger became one of the first 98 districts in the state to be labeled in need of improvement under NCLB, the district experienced a "wake up call" that provided the impetus for dramatic, district-wide change. Nearly half of the district's schools were in Program Improvement status,[1] and district leaders realized that theirs was an environment focused more on the needs of adults than the needs of children. Since then, Sanger has demonstrated remarkable improvement, growing from 599 to 805 on the state's Academic Performance Index (API).[2] Eleven of 13 elementary schools now boast a school API above 800, including three that have emerged from a fourth year of Program Improvement status to earn the California Distinguished School Award.

By implementing a district-wide approach to improvement guided by high expectations and channeled through the work of professional learning communities (PLCs), Sanger has transformed chronic underperformance at the school level into a persistent trend of student performance growth. Change began with a dramatic shift in district culture that follows three guiding principles:

- *Hope is not a strategy*. The district employs concentrated efforts to improve student outcomes and reverse trends of low performance.
- *Don't blame the kids*. The challenges of Sanger's student population are not an acceptable excuse for failure.
- *It's about student learning*. Student learning is generated by high quality instruction; dialogue must constantly focus on the evidence of teacher impact, learning itself.

As a means of translating this culture of high expectations into improved student learning, Sanger employs a "tight-loose" approach to managing schools: the district establishes a tight set of expectations and goals for all schools, but exerts loose control over the steps each school takes to reach them. The tight expectations include the requirements that all schools function as a PLC and use Explicit Direct Instruction (EDI) as the mechanism for delivering content in classrooms. The district expects schools to provide support for *all* learners, with a special focus on ELs. Finally, schools must develop robust systems of interventions for students under the umbrella of Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTI^2). The actual structures of implementation are left to the school sites, allowing schools to utilize the strengths of their staff and meet the specific needs of their children.

The lens of Sanger's PLC activity provides a means of exploring its district-wide approach to student learning. Fundamentally, the district believes that collaborative and shared knowledge is more powerful than isolated individual knowledge. The PLCs foster adult learning, building the capacity of teachers and teacher leaders to improve instruction and drive student learning. However, the PLCs also represent a coherent and carefully structured approach that incorporates each component of the district's plan for student learning.

To guide the school-level PLCs and optimize their effectiveness, the district provides a targeted structure by designing them around four key questions. These questions guide every PLC meeting throughout the year and demonstrate the ways in which Sanger's use of data, instructional techniques, and RTI^2 work together to guide student learning. However, teachers themselves identify the approaches they will use to meet student needs.

[1] In California, schools reach Program Improvement status when they fail to meet federal Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets for two consecutive years.
[2] California's API incorporates state testing results to measure schools' academic performance. API is a numeric scale ranging from 200 to 1000; California has set its statewide performance target at 800.

Sanger Unified School District (continued)

1. *What do we want our students to learn?* At each grade level, the district has identified a set of essential standards deemed most important for students to learn from the larger set of California academic standards. The district uses mastery of these standards as its primary measure of student learning, and PLC teams plan each lesson to meet specific standards.

2. *How will we know when they have learned it?* Sanger requires all teachers in the district to use EDI as a mechanism for improving student learning. Through faithful implementation of EDI, the district expects teachers to generate high levels of student engagement and routinely check for understanding. Constant assessment gives teachers additional feedback on students' command of the material. Beyond school-level classroom assessments, Sanger created the District Performance Assessment, a benchmark assessment tied directly to the district's essential standards and highly correlated to the state's California Standards Test. The district administers the test three times per year, providing regular data on student progress and helping to predict student success on the state's summative assessment.

3. *How will we respond when learning has not occurred?* Sanger has modeled its instructional approach on the RTI^2 model. The first support, Response to Instruction, takes place in the classroom. Because teachers routinely check for understanding as a part of EDI, they can intervene immediately with struggling students. The second step, Response to Intervention, occurs when a formative assessment identifies students who have not demonstrated mastery. When this happens, the grade-level PLC team works together by grouping struggling students across different classrooms to re-teach the material—usually with instruction from the teacher who achieved the highest levels of mastery the first time around.

4. *How will we respond when learning has already occurred?* Just as the PLC operates to address students who struggle with course material, it also works to expand learning opportunities for students who have demonstrated mastery. While struggling students spend additional time with material, students who have already achieved proficiency work in groups on enrichment or frontloading activities that deepen their understanding and prepare them for upcoming content.

While Sanger's PLCs leverage teacher knowledge to build capacity, the work also recognizes the pivotal role of school leaders. The district has therefore directed supports and interventions toward leadership development as well. In 2005, the district developed the Alternative Governance Board (AGB) as an advisory group to address the needs of the schools that had reached a fourth year of Program Improvement. The group—composed of district leaders, parents, administrators from neighboring districts, and professors from nearby Fresno State University—worked with school leaders to drive reform efforts. In each AGB meeting, the principal and PLC leaders from the school shared their progress in meeting district expectations, responded to questions, and outlined their goals and next steps. Minutes from the meetings were published as a means of achieving transparency and ensuring accountability for school improvement. District leaders saw conversations with the AGB as an effective mechanism for guiding honest conversations about the challenges and solutions at school sites.

As district schools have improved and emerged from Program Improvement status, however, Sanger has used annual principal summits as the primary vehicles to strengthen school leadership. During the summits, teams of principals present to district leaders their school's data trends over seven years, PLC work, practice in EDI, intervention models, and support for ELs. The summits provide an opportunity for principals to share their work, defend the progress of their school site, and learn from approaches used in other schools. The summits also introduce the element of mutual accountability by helping district leaders learn what principals are struggling with and then developing appropriate supports for these principals. The summits reinforce the notion that principals need to know as much as teachers about instruction. In fact, three principals recently pursued their English Language Development certification independently so they could be seen as a competent voice for meeting EL needs in their schools.

District leaders recognize that their strategy is in many ways a factor of Sanger's size. A smaller district allows for faster organizational response time. In addition, a district-wide focus helps initiatives that rely heavily on collaboration, common standards, and a common instructional platform function effectively. Nevertheless, Sanger leaders espouse the belief that strong and focused PLCs guided by essential standards can improve the performance of *any* school, regardless of the district context.

Principals who demonstrate growth work collaboratively with the district office to establish new targets and maintain their upward trajectory, while leaders who do not meet expectations receive more direct and prescriptive intervention. The Alternative Governance Board in Sanger and the Middle School Professional Learning Community in Long Beach represent similar strategies of direct work with principals to support them in turning around their schools. (See the district profiles starting on pages 6 and 10.)

Place Strong Principals in Schools with the Highest Need

In cases where the existing principal cannot meet the needs of a challenging school, these districts frequently look to other principals with strong track records within the district. For instance, Fresno sends its strongest principals, who have already demonstrated an ability to achieve dramatic growth in student performance, to work with its neediest schools. Sacramento has taken a similar approach by assigning principals with a track record of success to its six Superintendent Priority Schools for the 2010-11 school year, and has taken the additional step of inviting these principals to bring their leadership teams with them to their new school to help guide the improvement process. In short, these districts have tackled their most difficult challenges by deploying their most talented resources.

Develop a Pipeline of New Leaders

District leaders noted that the number of principals with demonstrated success in high-need schools is often not sufficient to meet the needs of all low-performing schools in a district, especially in small or rural districts with fewer available leaders and limited recruiting power. If districts are to answer the need for high quality school leaders, central offices must also address the supply of those leaders.

In recognition of this ongoing need, several districts have created pipelines for school leaders through training programs. Fresno has provided training for several cohorts of new leaders around five leadership standards: (1) skillful supervision of staff, (2) use of evidence to improve instruction, (3) decision-making and change management, (4) appropriate allocation of resources, and (5) effective communication. Entering its third year of this training program, the district feels that many school leaders now understand and buy into the district's approach to school leadership. Oakland, after identifying inadequate principal leadership as a problem in its low-performing schools, developed a pipeline partnership with two programs—New Leaders for New Schools and the University of California at Berkeley's Principal Leadership Institute—that produce more than half of the district's principals. In addition, experienced principals mentor beginning principals in their first two years, and the district is also piloting a peer mentoring program that focuses on specific areas like operations, data analysis, or community engagement. Through these programs, the district has aligned principal development to reflect its local context and needs.

Fostering and Deploying Strong Teaching

The influence of individual teachers on student performance is substantial, so ensuring effective teaching must be a central component of school turnaround efforts. As with other areas of improvement, however, no single strategy will transform classroom instruction, and otherwise successful strategies may not work if the necessary systemic supports are not in place. These district leaders suggested the following strategies for improving the quality of teaching in low-performing schools.

Improve Teacher Capacity through Collaboration

Recognizing that high quality educators are often made, not born, and that collaboration enhances professional learning, many districts are turning to professional learning communities (PLCs) to maximize the capacities of teachers and principals already teaching in their schools. PLCs provide time for teachers within and/or across grade levels to engage in targeted collaboration.

In addition to Sanger's use of PLCs as a district-wide improvement strategy (see the district's profile on pages 6-7), several other districts mentioned the use of PLCs as a systemic strategy for improvement. In San Bernardino, PLCs take the form of collaborative dialogue around student data at each school during the weekly early dismissal day; the district has observed the greatest success when PLC work is guided by clear targets for teaching and student learning outcomes. In Oakland, the district has mandated collaborative planning time for teachers within the contractual day, supporting its PLC work by providing sustained professional development and encouraging strong principal guidance by making the support of high quality PLCs a part of the principal evaluation process.

"The concept of the PLC is to empower teachers and the administration to improve the performance of schools."

– Superintendent Art Delgado

PLCs can also operate across the district, as principals and teachers from different schools learn from one another and use the experiences from other sites to make improvements within their own school. In Long Beach, representatives from each high school participate in one of two district-wide PLCs, one focused on English/language arts and the other on mathematics. Using PLCs in this way allows individuals within a school to transfer and expand the use of good ideas, helping both teachers and students improve. In contrast to a top-down intervention in which teachers and administrators are told what to do, a PLC strategy seeks to achieve buy-in from adults through their contributions to group learning and mutual commitment to collective goals. As San Bernardino Superintendent Art Delgado explained, "The concept of the PLC is to empower teachers and the administration to improve the performance of schools."

Assemble a Committed Teaching Staff in Struggling Schools

Districts must also assemble effective teaching staff in their schools. The establishment of clear district-wide expectations can help influence the teaching force at a school requiring district intervention. Some districts have outlined specific expectations for teachers working in the lowest-performing schools and have then allowed the existing staff to decide whether they wish to remain under the changed conditions. Teachers who stay then commit themselves to realizing those expectations and to faithfully implementing any new approach to the school's improvement. Alternatively, staff members have the option to move to other schools in the district where a concentrated effort towards dramatic change is not expected.

Prepare New Teachers for the Demands of Struggling Schools

Due to seniority rules in many districts, the teachers charged with achieving dramatic improvement in struggling schools are often those with the least teaching experience.[8]

Long Beach Unified School District

Applying a culture of continuous improvement in struggling schools

Long Beach Unified School District serves 87,000 students, 83 percent of whom are minority, 70 percent of whom are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and 24 percent of whom are ELs. Over many years of consistent leadership, a culture of constant data use and system responsiveness have become ingrained across the district; central office and school staff regularly talk about "the Long Beach way" when describing their work. By promoting ongoing reflection and collaborative planning and problem solving, the district seeks to achieve a culture in which improvement efforts sustain themselves.

While Long Beach's stability and consistency have contributed to a long history of improvement, a subset of schools nevertheless struggles to faithfully implement district initiatives and increase student achievement. Therefore, the district responds immediately to trends of low performance through constant data use. District assessments, teacher surveys, attendance data, professional development attendance information, and state tests provide ongoing information about school progress. District and school staff have grown to expect a culture of responsiveness in which personnel are distributed to meet specific school needs. When California releases state test data each August, Long Beach assigns assistant principals, academic coaches, and PLC coaches based on their personal strengths and the needs of individual sites. The district also pairs the principals of low-performing and high-performing schools as a means of building leadership capacity and supporting struggling schools.

While these district-wide approaches reflect Long Beach's overall approach to continuous improvement, recent work with struggling middle schools provides a more detailed example. In the 2009-10 school year, eight district middle schools were in at least their fifth year of federal Program Improvement. The central office closely examined school data to identify causes for this performance trend and realized that a small number of strong middle schools routinely selected the top students from elementary schools across the district, creating pockets of low performance in schools that were unable to recruit students with the highest scores. Long Beach revised its school choice policy to remedy this problem, introducing an element of random selection to improve the student balance, and also enacted additional intensive intervention to dramatically improve these schools' performance.

The central structure guiding improvement efforts in these eight middle schools is the Middle School PLC (MSPLC). The MSPLC includes all eight schools, each of whom must report directly to the superintendent. Within the framework of three core expectations—using data to monitor progress and guide decisions, using research and local examples to justify and drive improvement efforts, and nurturing teacher leadership—MSPLC work features *increased accountability, increased support, changes in roles*, and a *change in the organizational structure of sixth grade classrooms.*

> *Increased accountability*. Long Beach operates on the principle that schools demonstrating success receive greater flexibility to meet student needs in the ways the site deems most appropriate. Because these middle schools have struggled to improve student performance, however, they are subject to high levels of scrutiny for their site decisions. Each school must create and follow an action plan, plus receive approval for their budgets directly from, and report directly to, the superintendent. Schools are also subject to increased monitoring and use of site data. The Data Assistant Principal at each site regularly reviews the school's data to guide school-level activity, and also delivers the data to PLC coaches to inform their ongoing work with the MSPLC.
>
> *Increased support*. To build the capacity of site-based educators and leverage the knowledge and skills of experienced leaders, Long Beach has assigned three of the district's most effective middle school principals as full-time coaches for the MSPLC. These coaches provide on-site support to principals and teachers, collaborate with principals on their action plans, participate in walkthroughs, attend school meetings, and serve as a liaison to the superintendent. The district also provides additional training to these sites. For principals, training takes the form of district-wide initiatives, including SUCCEED, a supervision model used successfully in the district for several years, and the Math Achievement Program and Professional Development (MAP^2D), the district's mathematics curriculum, pedagogical, and professional development program designed to accelerate the progress of low-achieving students. For teachers, training is aligned to their area of instruction.

Long Beach Unified School District (continued)

Changes in roles. The organizational structure of the MSPLC, where schools report directly to the superintendent and where PLC coaches take on roles specific to the support of struggling schools, represents a shift in roles for district and school staff. At the school site, the new Data Assistant Principal role represents a change in the responsibilities of school administration. This individual, often selected from the district's Leadership Development Pipeline program, is devoted specifically to identifying trends in the data and addressing critical issues to improve the school. The Data Assistant Principal role also frees the principal to spend more time monitoring in classrooms as an instructional leader. Finally, the system features reciprocal accountability designed to support the learning of all players in the system. While PLC coaches provide constant feedback to principals and teachers, they also receive anonymous feedback three times per year through the Coaching Effectiveness Survey, which provides input they can use to improve their support to schools.

Self-contained sixth grade. Each of the eight middle schools began self-contained sixth grade classrooms in the 2010-11 school year. This change represents a strategy of piloting new approaches in the district. In analyzing test score changes between fifth and sixth grade, Long Beach noticed that other districts using different grade level configurations experienced a smaller drop in test scores. As a result, Long Beach transitioned from its traditional approach of using four to five different teachers per student to using self-contained sixth grade classrooms in the eight MSPLC schools. This data-driven transition recognizes the failure of the status quo and responds to an urgent problem through dramatic change. At the same time, it provides an opportunity to pilot different approaches to the new grade level configuration. Each school must meet certain conditions defined by the central office, but can otherwise establish their own program design to best utilize the skills of their staff and meet the needs of their students. The superintendent therefore expects to see eight different programs; the district will evaluate each to drive future decisions about potential expansion of and guidance for self-contained middle school classrooms.

Long Beach's work with its MSPLC represents an approach to working with persistently low-achieving schools that mirrors the district's overall philosophy. As part of its systemic self-reflection, the district first identified and corrected school choice policies that were resulting in unequal student distribution, and then established a set of interventions to reverse trends of low performance in eight middle schools. In an environment where high performing schools receive greater flexibility, the district enacted tighter control over its struggling schools, increasing oversight for sites that have been unable to achieve growth by themselves. However, it has also infused supports and resources to build the capacity of site leaders and classroom teachers. Ultimately, the district has designed all of its school improvement efforts to achieve self-sustaining reform that persists even when key individuals move on.

To help prepare teachers to meet these demands, some districts have developed relationships with teacher preparation organizations to bridge the gap between novice teachers' formal training and the actual practice of teaching. California State University at Long Beach trains the vast majority of teachers in Long Beach, and has worked to align its teacher preparation activities with the expectations and student needs of the district. Teacher shortages present an additional problem in low-performing schools. San Jose has enjoyed a successful relationship with Teach for America for many years that places energetic young teachers with a commitment to improving the achievement of marginalized students in difficult-to-staff environments. By fostering these relationships, districts can help prepare teachers before and during their time in schools.

Work with Teacher Unions

Improving struggling schools often requires difficult conversations about teacher performance or contract issues. Seniority

provisions in collective bargaining agreements can present particular challenges in times of fiscal crisis, as promising young teachers lose their jobs to layoffs. “Last hired-first fired” practices tend to disproportionately affect persistently low-performing schools because of the high proportion of novice teachers in these settings.

To navigate these issues successfully, multiple superintendents cited the need to foster a positive union relationship at all times, not just in times of conflict or crisis. In one district, regular meetings between the superintendent’s cabinet and union leadership have fostered a relationship in which players who trust one another can better navigate times of tension and difficult decisions. Regular communication helps build this trust and reinforce the shared understanding that all adults in the district share the primary goal of serving children. In Los Angeles, the district, teacher union, and administrator union have developed a non-profit organization—the Los Angeles School Development Institute—

Superintendents cited the need to foster a positive union relationship at all times, not just in times of conflict or crisis.

specifically oriented to support persistently low achieving schools through workshops, seminars, and expert consultants that focus on areas like implementing instructional strategies and analyzing data.

Neutralize Negative Influences

Persistently struggling schools sometimes house teachers who resist change and threaten the success of an intervention by affecting other teachers’ perceptions of reform. District leaders described some creative approaches they have used to neutralize negative influences in their schools. In one district, mediocre teachers were transferred to affluent and high-performing schools. In these environments, the pressure of peers who valued collaborative activity and the high performance levels they were able to achieve with students eventually caused those teachers to improve their performance or leave the district. In another district, problematic teachers were sometimes moved to the high school level, where the school’s larger size meant that the teacher’s negative attitude was not as influential. A third district tried yet another approach, making challenging teachers full-time substitutes and minimizing the sustained impact of their attitude on any single site or group of students.

Using Data to Identify Effective and Ineffective Practices

The urgent need to fix underperforming schools requires that districts identify and respond to problems immediately. Leaders described ongoing data use as critical for this kind of responsiveness, as it enables them to examine the effectiveness of their interventions in struggling schools and change course immediately when an approach does not work. Furthermore, an agile and responsive system allows districts to address all schools’ needs before they balloon into intractable patterns of mediocre practice and create new batches of struggling schools. Ultimately, consistent data use helps districts spread effective practice while eliminating ineffective practice, a goal that is particularly important in a tight fiscal environment. The eight districts provided several examples of how they use data to identify underlying issues and make critical decisions.

Draw on Multiple Sources of Data

While the federal and state accountability environment highlight the results of annual state tests, district leaders identified multiple measures of school success that also included benchmark assessments, climate surveys, attendance patterns, teacher participation in professional development, and school observation. District leaders stressed

the need to use data sources that reflect areas of concern in the district.

For example, the California Standards Test (CST) may not capture the extent to which ELs understand the curriculum; low test scores may only reflect a poor command of the English language, and not of the content. To this end, Sanger developed a formative assessment that is aligned to the state's English proficiency assessment. This data source, used in conjunction with the district's benchmark assessment on content, allows teachers to more deeply monitor and address ELs' academic needs in both content and language.

Fresno has developed a data dashboard that chronicles the district's performance throughout the school year using indicators like student proficiency rates, EL redesignation rates, attendance rates, and student perceptions of their school. The Cycle of Review that takes place around the dashboard four times per year allows Fresno to address problems without waiting for state test scores that arrive in late summer. Furthermore, the superintendent's evaluation is tied to the dashboard, ensuring accountability at the highest levels for the district's ongoing improvement.

Explore Data across Levels of the System

Just as multiple sources of data are important, multiple means of *exploring* those data can help reveal underlying problems that simple comparisons of test scores might otherwise obscure. For example, Sacramento identified six schools for intervention in the 2010-11 school year; of the two middle schools, one was *not* among the lowest performing middle schools in the district in absolute terms. It was only when district leadership took into account the high performance of the elementary schools feeding into this mediocre middle school that they were able to identify a need for improvement and more targeted intervention. Another example, as previously mentioned, was the district leaders in Long Beach changing the school choice policy that was actually contributing to low performance in a subset of middle schools.

Extend Data Use to School Sites

Just as various forms of data inform *district* decisions for working with schools, such data can also contribute to ongoing *school* efforts to improve instruction and student learning. Several districts have targeted training activities to build this capacity in their school staffs. In San Bernardino, when high school principals exhibited confusion and inconsistency in their data use, the district began training these principals to interpret and use data more effectively. Similarly,

The school community can often help pinpoint school needs and possible approaches to meet those needs.

Sacramento employs the Data Wise improvement process to engage the data inquiry teams of struggling schools in effective use of student assessment data.[9] Emphasizing that data use is not simply about understanding trends, but about working continuously and collaboratively to improve teaching practice, Sacramento's Chief Accountability Officer Mary Shelton described the goal of their district trainings: "What I would expect to see is staff that are agile, and as they begin to look at their data that they can make adjustments and changes to teaching strategies."

Involving the Community

In tailoring intervention efforts to each school's specific context, district leaders recognized that the school community can often help pinpoint school needs and possible approaches to meet those needs.

Los Angeles Unified School District

An emerging approach of collaboration and community engagement to drive dramatic school change

Los Angeles Unified School District is the largest school district in California, serving more than 618,000 students who represent a wide variety of racial, socioeconomic, and language backgrounds. The district's 800-plus schools include some of the highest-achieving and lowest-achieving schools in the state. To meet the needs of its struggling schools, Los Angeles has developed a tiered system of interventions that increase in intensity as schools demonstrate greater degrees of underperformance. The Public School Choice (PSC) Resolution is an emerging strategy of school redesign that seeks to engage the community in a system of choice where the strongest school plans will drive transformation efforts in the schools of greatest need. Given its sheer size and diverse community, the district believes that no single program will meet the needs of all struggling schools, and that the central office is not best positioned for the personalization that each site demands. With PSC, the district espouses the belief that opening up the turnaround effort to multiple quality providers can spur innovation and generate the most effective solutions to educational challenges. By introducing the elements of transparency and openness into school transformation efforts, Los Angeles aims to engage the community and leverage individual and organizational capacity to deliver optimal learning environments for students.

PSC is a process in which applicant groups seek to design or redesign a school to best meet the needs of its students. Three guiding principles drive the approach:

1. *Educational quality.* Los Angeles already boasts a wide variety of school types that include traditional schools, pilot schools, network partner schools, and charters. District leaders see the new initiative as an opportunity to take the most effective approaches and offer them to all communities.

2. *Parent and community engagement.* By providing information that helps community members understand their school, explicitly including them in the planning process and ongoing accountability efforts, and providing time for individuals to participate, the district hopes to leverage the community's knowledge and support to better meet student needs.

3. *Urgency.* Modest interventions are not sufficient to reverse the trend of underperformance at schools where achievement has remained stagnant for several years. Therefore, collaboration and strong accountability mechanisms driving school redesign efforts seek to achieve dramatic school change.

For each PSC cycle, Los Angeles identifies a specific set of Focus Schools eligible for the process through review of school achievement data.[1] The specific identification criteria continue to evolve with each cycle, but include absolute measures of overall student achievement, measures of achievement growth, measures of persistent low achievement, and dropout rates in high schools.

The PSC process itself seeks to capitalize on a transparent application and selection process. Applicant teams of educators, parents, community members, non-profits, and/or charter management organizations are encouraged, regardless of whether they have existing relationships within the district. All completed applications are available on the PSC website, and a multi-tiered review process encourages the review and feedback of teachers, parents, principals, and higher education representatives. After careful review of the applications and advice from various reviewers, the superintendent submits a recommendation to the district's Board of Education, which determines the best applicant group for each Focus School.

PSC relies on motivated applicant teams to produce the best plans for school improvement. However, the district also recognizes that teams must have the capacity to develop and implement these plans effectively. Therefore, Los Angeles hosts several workshops to support teams in their proposal development. In addition, the Los Angeles School Development Institute (LASDI), a partnership among the district's teacher and administrator unions and several community organizations, provides support for

[1] PSC is a mechanism that serves two purposes: (1) designing new district schools ("Relief Schools") and (2) redesigning struggling schools ("Focus Schools"). While the process is the same for both types of schools, this profile highlights the use of PSC to address chronic low achievement.

Los Angeles Unified School District (continued)

applicant teams with their proposal writing, school design, and budgeting, and with plan implementation once selected.[2] The district is also actively seeking partnership with external organizations to build a cadre of coaching support for applicant teams.

The PSC application itself demands a thoughtful and comprehensive approach to achieving dramatic change in the identified Focus Schools. The application also requires detailed information about the school's instructional program, governance structure, finances, implementation plan, and accountability and performance goals. Indeed, PSC was developed in part because the district identified a trend of opening new schools that did not always have detailed instructional plans in place. The application requirements are designed to ensure that learning opportunities that take place in the school will result in improved student performance.

Several components of the PSC process explicitly relate to the district's guiding principle of parent and community engagement. First, a series of community workshops throughout the application process aim to thoughtfully guide and authentically engage parents so they can make informed decisions about the schools in their community. Workshops cover a review of a school's data, a discussion of draft plans, a moderated discussion about the content of each completed application, and a presentation before the community by each applicant team when final applications are submitted. Furthermore, four parent representatives and one community representative compose the 12-member Superintendent's Review Panel that makes recommendations to the superintendent. In addition to the community outreach required in the application process, the teams must demonstrate in their application an understanding of the community and the ways in which the school plan will meet its needs. Finally, by making a school's goals and progress towards those goals clear and publicly available, the district hopes to give parents and community members the opportunity to monitor and react to the ongoing growth of the school. In recognition of the fact that each school requires a carefully targeted intervention that meets its individual needs, the explicit incorporation of the community throughout the design process seeks to ensure that those who understand these needs have a major role in the process.

Provisions after the PSC selection process seek to ensure ongoing accountability for schools. All Focus Schools will undergo two walkthroughs per year, and the superintendent and school board will receive annual reports on each school. An accountability matrix, posted on the PSC website, will outline each school's performance goals and its progress toward meeting them throughout the implementation process. All schools will be up for renewal on a five-year basis, providing sites with sufficient time to demonstrate growth while establishing a concrete timeline for demonstrating improvements in student learning.

In February 2010, the school board selected the first set of applicants to run eight Focus Schools beginning in fall 2010 and opening in fall 2011, awarding control of the schools to many teacher groups. Critics claimed that by rewarding teachers rather than charter school operators, the district failed to capitalize on an opportunity for real reform. District leaders, in contrast, felt that the decisions rewarded exactly what the PSC process sought to attract: thoughtful plans to dramatically improve the conditions of struggling schools.

The PSC approach will continue to evolve as Los Angeles learns from its PSC experiences. Already, the district has identified the need to give applicant teams more time to write their plans, and will eventually give teams a full year to prepare a comprehensive proposal and an additional year to implement the plan after being selected. In addition, the district is making efforts to improve its responsiveness to the needs of applicant teams. During the application process, this means having a point person in the central office that can respond directly to questions and provide timely answers. After teams are selected, the district will provide enhanced support for plan implementation as school teams focus on their instructional plans, and navigate the California Education Code, human resources policies, and collective bargaining agreements that impact their ability to enact their plan.

Los Angeles hopes to leverage its experiences to further refine its approach to school development. A best practices conference and accompanying binder seek to highlight the most promising approaches. Furthermore, the student outcomes observed in existing PSC sites will inform future applicants and reviewers as they create and identify school plans most likely to succeed. As it moves forward, the district hopes to create a culture in which knowledge sharing among those most successful with district schools will drive the most effective means of meeting student needs.

[2] In August 2010, the district received a federal Investing in Innovation (i3) grant to support the LASDI's work.

In Oakland and Los Angeles, district leaders have explicitly included community participation in new school design teams. As new school leaders develop organizational and instructional plans for each school, community members contribute to decisions about how to best align these plans to the school's student needs. Los Angeles' school redesign work is still in its early stages (see the Los Angeles profile on pages 14-15), but Oakland has found that such involvement helps catalyze significantly greater parent and community participation and support for the news schools once they open. In Long Beach and Sanger, community members systematically contribute to new principal selection; Sanger asks the community about their priorities before selecting a new principal and includes parents on the selection panel. In San Jose, the district office consistently seeks feedback about its performance and ways that it can better advocate for all students; in the first two months of the 2010-11 school year, the district had already held five district-wide community meetings to gather input. Engaging the community in school improvement efforts helps build a constituency for the work and counteract the perception that things are being done *to* the school. Furthermore, the community that has already invested in its school often acts to hold it accountable for results.

Community involvement can also extend beyond the families whose neighborhoods house schools. Several districts boast partnerships with local institutions of higher education, business groups, or foundations. These partnerships can support training activities, fund new district initiatives, or even provide new personnel to staff and lead struggling schools.

Piloting Promising Ideas

In school turnaround, districts constantly try to balance the urgency of addressing issues immediately and the need to develop thoughtful school plans. Piloting can help navigate this challenge, appropriately providing immediate intervention in response to an urgent problem while allowing systems to learn from and expand their most successful ideas, ensuring that urgent efforts are not wasteful efforts.

With a limited research base available to guide educators toward successful system-wide transformative work, several districts have taken the approach of piloting ideas on a small scale and then scaling up the most effective approaches. In Sanger, schools used state funding for low-performing schools to guide reform efforts they felt best met their site needs. After one school experienced great success using Explicit Direct Instruction (EDI) as a platform to reach its students, the district decided to adopt EDI across the district as its primary instructional approach. The beginning stages of a similar strategy are underway in Long Beach, where eight middle schools are creating their own programs for self-contained sixth grade classrooms; the district will evaluate results of this pilot to establish its priorities moving forward. Similarly, Los Angeles is supporting its Public School Choice work by developing a best practices conference and materials to share the most promising practices in transformed schools.

Cross-district collaboration also expands the power of piloting activities. Fresno recently employed a new strategy to increase the number of students with access to Algebra I in eighth grade. The district lowered the seventh grade math score students need to enter Algebra I, increasing the number of students enrolled, but also provided additional supports to the students near the cutoff score to facilitate their success in the course. After receiving early reports of effectiveness from Fresno, Long Beach adopted a similar policy for the 2010-11 school year. As a result, 800 additional students are taking Algebra I.

District formative assessments indicate that proficiency rates are being maintained despite increased enrollment.

In the end, piloting also speaks to the central role of the district in school reform. As discussed earlier, prescriptive top-down approaches may not serve schools nearly as well as a central office that sees itself as a school support provider. Sacramento Superintendent Jonathan Raymond connected this perspective to the piloting of effective ideas by saying, "The role of the district is not to deliver mandates, but to find things that work and bring them to scale."

"The role of the district is not to deliver mandates, but to find things that work and bring them to scale."

– Superintendent Jonathan Raymond

Implications for the Reauthorization of ESEA

The lessons that emerged from the eight districts have important implications for federal policy as well as local action. Returning to our core theme of being both *systemic* and *customized* in the approach to school turnaround, we offer the following considerations for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

Creating a Systemic Approach to Turnaround

Since being introduced in the 1988 reauthorization, school accountability and improvement provisions have taken on increasing importance in ESEA. Targeting persistently low-performing schools, NCLB, (the 2001 authorization of ESEA) identified five general options for schools that had missed performance targets for five or more years. Zeroing in further on the lowest-performing schools, two programs of the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)—the School Improvement Grants (SIG) and Race to the Top (RTT) programs—required jurisdictions receiving these funds to select one of four specific intervention models (see *Current Federal Intervention Models* sidebar). These four models are currently under consideration in proposals for reauthorizing ESEA.

These federal programs, as well as various state approaches in California over the past two decades, focus almost exclusively on changes at the targeted school sites. The implication is that the performance problems of these schools reside in the schools themselves and must therefore be addressed through school-based interventions. However, as we have seen in the stories above, districts can have a dramatic impact that schools alone cannot accomplish, not only through providing supports but also in addressing problems that are rooted in the district systems in which the schools exist. To this end, ESEA should incorporate the following elements toward a more systemic approach to turning around struggling schools.

Remove Barriers to Allow Districts to Be More Systemic in their Turnaround Efforts

The federal government can ensure a more systemic approach to school turnaround by removing barriers that make it difficult for districts to act systemically. For instance, complicated funding streams and restrictive requirements for spending the different funding streams often make it difficult for districts to apply funding to the areas of greatest need. As one example, districts are required to spend at least 10 percent of their Title I funds on professional development.

However, a district's strategy for human capital development may not allow them to access this proportion of funding if their approach to improving teacher capacity emphasizes elements like collaboration over traditional conceptions of "professional development." **ESEA should take a more comprehensive view of funding for the districts, and provide fewer, but larger and more flexible, funding streams for areas integral to student success.** Increased supports and guidance on blending funding from the federal government would give states and districts flexibility to focus on local needs for improvement (while maintaining the accountability for results) and would reduce time spent on bureaucratic paperwork that takes time away from instruction.

Create Incentives for Districts to Be More Systemic in their Turnaround Efforts

In addition to removing barriers, the federal government can also provide incentives for districts to institute more systemic approaches to school turnaround. For instance, competitive grants can encourage districts to pursue dramatic and innovative district-level reforms (such as new teacher evaluation systems) that address systemic contributors to low performance in some schools. **We therefore urge that the next authorization of ESEA include competitive grants in addition to formula grants, with a portion of the competitive funds targeted specifically at developing new systemic approaches for school turnaround**. Such an approach could motivate districts, their governing boards, and their unions to work together toward ensuring improved performance in all of their schools, including those that have historically been the most challenged.

Current Federal Intervention Models

The federal government has defined four school intervention models for working with the lowest-achieving five percent of schools in each state. These schools must adopt one of these models to receive federal funding through federal SIG and RTT awards.

Turnaround model: Replace the principal, rehire no more than 50 percent of the school's staff, and make other key changes at the school site (including adopting a new governance structure for the school, providing job-embedded professional development, offering staff financial and career-advancement incentives, implementing a standards-based instructional program, extending learning time, involving the community, and creating more operating flexibility).

Transformation model: Replace the principal and make other key changes at the school site (including providing job-embedded professional development, offering staff financial and career-advancement incentives, implementing a standards-based instructional program, implementing a teacher evaluation and reward system, extending learning time, involving the community, and creating more operating flexibility.)

Restart model: Convert a school to be run by a charter school operator, a charter management organization, or an educational management organization.

School closure: Close a school and enroll the students in other, higher-achieving schools.

The U.S. Department of Education has signaled an interest in pursuing similar interventions in the next reauthorization of ESEA.

Incorporate a District Role Explicitly into the Improvement Process

As we see in the profiles of the districts above, improvements in the lowest-performing schools can and should be part of a more coordinated district strategy. To this end, **the requirements for school improvement planning and implementation should include explicit acknowledgement of the district's role.** ESEA should require that the improvement plans provide both school *and* district-level implementation benchmarks and performance outcomes related to turning around their lowest-performing schools. With a clear plan for providing supports to schools, removing barriers to improvement, and soliciting community input, the district has a greater chance of leading to sustainable change.

Reward and Build Capacity of Districts to Do this Work

While we believe that the role of the district must receive a greater focus, we also recognize that not all districts are ready to effectively take on the toughest problems facing their schools and their district. Therefore, if ESEA moves toward a stronger district role in turnaround, it must also recognize the varying levels of district capacity for and commitment to change. With a differentiated accountability policy, districts with higher levels of capacity would have more discretion to develop their own approaches, while districts with lower capacity would receive more guidance and supports for this work.

Such a differentiated system, of course, requires that federal, state, and local actors share an understanding of what district "capacity" actually means. While student performance is one measure of district effectiveness, other elements—such as the relationship with the school board and unions, the amount of teacher/leader turnover, or the effectiveness of district leaders—can also signify a district's readiness for reform. Therefore, as a first step toward developing this differentiated system in ESEA, **the federal government should issue guidance (developed by a panel of experts) on criteria for districts to demonstrate their capacity**.

Even with guidance on the meaning of district capacity, a large question remains regarding *who* will assess that capacity. State education agencies would most logically be in a position to do this work. However, certain states—including California—may not have the wherewithal to undertake this assessment themselves, especially at scale. Herein lies another potential role for the federal government: to provide implementation support rather than just compliance monitoring—be it through the existing network of comprehensive and content centers or through a new system of support—to build state and local capacity to foster and sustain improvement in their most challenged schools. To be clear, this approach would require a shift in the work, mentality, and overall capacity of both state departments of education and the U.S. Department of Education, but it could result in a more successful federal and state system for school improvement.

Allowing for a More Customized Approach to Turnaround

Even if ESEA were to emphasize systemic approaches to school turnaround, the four intervention models as currently designed present problems for districts. We understand that the allocation of additional federal monies to improve districts' lowest-performing schools will (and should) entail requirements and conditions attached to those funds. However, the current intervention models do not offer the only, nor necessarily the best, solutions for improving the most struggling schools. These models have been ineffective in many previous efforts and have an insufficient

evidence base to warrant their use as the sole options. Indeed, several of the districts we spoke with did not pursue SIG funding for some or all of their eligible schools in 2010 because the models did not align with the specific needs of the schools.

Struggling schools face a variety of issues that contribute to their chronic underperformance; no single approach (or even four approaches) will work for everyone. For example, as we noted above, the most struggling schools often have a disproportionate number of English learners. Districts should first examine the school's unique context and factors contributing to its chronic underperformance and then select an intervention model that is appropriate to the school's needs.

We therefore urge federal legislators, while still holding districts accountable for results, to modify and expand the turnaround intervention models in ESEA to allow approaches that best suit the needs of individual districts and schools.

Allow Flexibility to Identify the Appropriate Schools for Intervention

The rigid definition for persistently low-performing schools in the 2010 SIG application proved too restrictive, resulting in a list of eligible schools in California that did not match what many district and state administrators knew to be the schools most in need of intervention. On the one hand, this mismatch of federally and locally identified need suggests that districts should have greater flexibility in school identification. On the other hand, our district superintendents acknowledged that placing all decisions in the hands of district leaders might not be productive. Indeed, local superintendents can sometimes leverage outside pressure from both federal and state governments to pursue dramatic change where there might otherwise be intractable resistance. Having the state name a school as persistently low achieving could provide the leverage needed to make changes that the school, the community, or the staff had previously resisted.

To this end, **ESEA should allow the state greater flexibility in defining its lowest-performing schools**. The federal government could provide general parameters for defining the lowest-performing schools (e.g., use both a measurement of growth and overall performance, including both ELA and math scores and graduation rates for high schools) but allow the state to specify the exact criteria within the parameters. States could solicit input from their districts to determine the most appropriate criteria, and engage in a collaborative dialogue on what best fits the districts' needs. With this input, the state would ultimately be responsible (and held accountable) for determining the persistently lowest-performing schools.

Remove the Overly Prescriptive Elements of the Four Intervention Models

There are several stringent requirements in the four intervention models currently required for RTT and SIG that do not allow district or school needs to be taken into account. While maintaining clear accountability for results, the federal government should provide districts with modified versions of the existing intervention models.

For instance, strong principals are clearly important to school improvement. However, **the notion that the principal must be removed in all four models is fundamentally flawed and should not be a requirement in every intervention model**. While strong leadership in these schools is absolutely essential to their improvement process, requiring the replacement of the principal assumes the problems of persistently low-performing schools are solely due to poor school leadership, which is not always the case. Furthermore, removing the existing leader does not mean a qualified individual is

available to take his or her place. In districts with limited capacity, this policy could lead to a "musical chairs" approach in which ineffective principals are simply moved from one troubled school to another. A carefully planned leadership pipeline across the district that constantly develops new leaders to work in low-performing schools might be a more appropriate approach to developing strong leaders, but this takes time and requires a systemic, rather than simply a school-by-school, approach.

High-quality teachers are also essential to improving student learning. However, **the current SIG requirement in the turnaround model that 50 percent of teachers be replaced is arbitrary and should be modified**. There is no evidence that one-half of the staff is the "tipping point" needed to turn around a school's learning environment. In some schools, it may be that only a few ineffective or resistant teachers are contributing a culture of low performance. In other schools, it may be many more. The district and the school leader must be able to determine the appropriate proportion of teacher replacement needed in any given school.

Third, in the current provisions, districts serving nine or more SIG schools can only use the transformation model in, at most, half of those schools. **This restriction on the number of schools in a district that can use the transformation model has no research base and should not be included in ESEA.** While at present this restriction has not substantially limited district action because so few districts have more than nine SIG schools, this could change if the definition of the lowest-performing schools in ESEA expands beyond the SIG definition. Given the limited research base for all of the models, arbitrary limits on the use of any one are uncalled for. Indeed, by explicitly constraining the number of schools in a district that can use the transformation model, the federal government may actually be *creating* barriers to a systemic approach to improvement. A large district, for example, may want to implement the transformation model in all of its lowest-performing schools in order to create a learning community of schools experiencing the same conditions, and to create supports, personnel, and resources that can be shared across all of these sites. The current provision would prevent the implementation of this district-wide vision.

Allow for More Systemic Interventions

In addition to changes in the existing four models, **ESEA should move beyond these four intervention models and allow higher-capacity districts to submit plans for a "fifth option" focused on a district's systemic strategy for turnaround**. Districts that demonstrate success in improving their lowest-performing schools could receive additional flexibility to pursue other systemic reforms to improve student learning. In one district, this might be the implementation of a "Promise Neighborhood" for the lowest-performing school. In another district, the intervention might be an in-depth implementation of PLCs, coupled with instructional coaches deployed for intensive treatments.

On the one hand, we recognize that federal lawmakers want to avoid continued overutilization of the "other" restructuring option under NCLB, which they believe provided a loophole for schools wishing to duck accountability and avoid dramatic change. However, the tendency to select the "other" restructuring model under ESEA or the "transformation" model under ARRA may be less a matter of avoidance of change and more a recognition of the need for customizing turnaround efforts to the particular school and district context. What's more, the effectiveness of the more "severe" options in both ARRA and NCLB has yet to be

established. Indeed, if a district can provide a comprehensive, evidence-based justification for a proposed district intervention other than the specified four models *and* the state serves as an effective monitor and support provider for these schools, the resulting efforts can be both rigorous and intensive.

Allow for the Planning Time Needed For Any Intervention Model

We all feel the urgency of improving learning environments for students in schools with performance that has languished for many years. However, as shown by the eight districts interviewed for this brief, implementing a thoughtful turnaround approach takes time. For instance, Oakland has used school closure (either to close a school completely or to reopen it as a new school) as a key district strategy for addressing chronic underperformance and has seen success with many of the reopened schools. The district's process—which allows one year of design and planning before the school opens—involves soliciting community involvement driven by the school design team (made up of the principal, selected staff, parents, community members, and even student leadership in the high schools).

While the current SIG process allows three years for implementation, the district only has a few months between notification of funding and full implementation of an intervention model (and even less time in some states with a longer review process of the district or state's applications). We have already seen that the condensed timeline for the SIG models, coupled with a delay in funding to California districts to implement the model, has created problems for districts attempting to implement interventions well. For instance, after deciding to convert one of their SIG schools to a charter, San Bernardino had to halt the plans for conversion because of this delay.[10] Therefore, **ESEA should ensure that districts with chronically low-performing schools have adequate planning time (up to one year depending on the model and the needs of the district) to incorporate feedback, select the appropriate school leader and staff, and design the vision and plan for the school.**

Summary

Learning from the lessons of eight California districts and from existing research, we argue that conventional approaches to school turnaround inappropriately focus narrowly on the school level. We suggest that effective efforts at school turnaround can benefit from a systemic approach that leverages resources and expertise while addressing barriers to improvement that are bigger than an individual school site. Furthermore, we stress that a single approach will not be appropriate for every environment; turnaround efforts must be customized to the individual needs of a given school.

With that perspective, we have outlined a core set of considerations that the California Collaborative on District Reform believes are key to supporting effective turnaround efforts at the federal level. We recognize that many of the details will need to be worked out to determine how ESEA can best accommodate a revised version of school—and district—reform. Nevertheless, we believe a systemic and flexible vision for school turnaround, coupled with strong accountability for results, can help to frame the conversations during the reauthorization of ESEA, and when practitioners and policymakers are faced with the challenge of improving all schools for all students.

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California Collaborative on District Reform

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The California Collaborative on District Reform, an initiative of the American Institutes for Research, was formed in 2006 to join researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and funders in ongoing, evidence-based dialogue to improve instruction and student learning for all students in California's urban school systems.

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