Reauthorizing ESEA

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School Turnaround

A POCKET GUIDE

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First introduced in 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) has evolved over nearly five decades, emphasizing education reform priorities that mirror the changing national education policy conversation. The most recent iteration of ESEA, also known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), was enacted in 2001. It emphasized improving outcomes for all students regardless of their race, language, or disability, with a strong focus on accountability for schools and districts. A decade later, ESEA is again due for reauthorization. This Pocket Guide will assist policymakers and educators as they consider changes to this law—particularly changes related to improving low-performing schools.

Overview of the Current Provisions of NCLB

The nationwide focus on student achievement and school accountability has resulted in an effort at the Federal and State levels to identify and turn around the nation's lowest-performing schools. At the Federal level, NCLB requires States to set targets for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as a means of underscoring gaps in achievement among schools and among specific student populations. With the goal of attaining 100 percent proficiency by the end of the 2014 school year, NCLB requires all States to establish annual measurable objectives for student performance, and to assess the progress of districts, schools, and subgroups of students toward those objectives. If a subgroup of students within a school does not meet annual targets for two or more consecutive years, the school is then identified for improvement, corrective action, or restructuring. Each stage of identification under NCLB is associated with consequences that are increasingly serious; the intention is to motivate school stakeholders, build internal capacity, and ultimately improve outcomes for all students.

In particular, the restructuring stage was intended to force schools with a history of chronic low performance to enact major changes that would boost student achievement levels. The interventions associated with restructuring

included a menu of options, including (1) reopening the school as a charter, (2) replacing all of the staff, (3) entering into a contract with an external organization to manage the school, (4) takeover by the State, or (5) "any other" major restructuring action. (Note that these options are not entirely congruent with the models under the later statute, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, or ARRA.) In practice, relatively few schools in restructuring enacted the most dramatic changes, with most opting for the fifth "other" option (Taylor, Stecher, O'Day, Naftel, & Le Floch, 2010).

In addition, NCLB required States and districts to implement strategies to support schools that consistently failed to meet their AYP targets. These mandated "State systems of support" were supposed to include school support teams, distinguished principals and teachers, and other individuals with expertise to guide schools through an improvement process. While some States designed comprehensive and intensive support systems, resources were spread thin as more and more schools were identified for improvement. The few studies of the achievement effects of Statewide systems of support show limited—if any—evidence of improved outcomes (Le Floch et al., 2011; Huberman, Dunn, Stapleton, & Parrish, 2008; Huberman, Shambaugh, Socias, Muraki, Liu, & Parrish, 2008).

Turnaround Under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act

After a decade of NCLB, a subset of schools still had chronically low performance. In this context, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) directed substantial funding to support educational reform. Of the six major education programs in ARRA, two support school turnaround (rapid and dramatic school improvement):

- **Race to the Top (RTT):** Focuses on college and workplace readiness standards and assessments, State longitudinal data systems, effective teachers and leaders, and turnaround schools.

- **Title I School Improvement Grants (SIG):** Focuses on turning around low-performing schools. Note that SIG is targeted to the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools—a narrower focus than NCLB accountability.

Other programs create the conditions that are believed to support turnaround, such as more effective teachers (the Teacher Incentive Fund) and more challenging and consistent assessments (the RTT Assessment Program).

Both RTT and SIG prioritize four models for turning around low-performing schools:

Closure: The school is closed and the students attend other schools in the district. Closure eliminates schools that are considered beyond repair, and is intended to offer students a better chance for success at another school. This is the most extreme option.

Restart: The school is closed and then reopened under the direction of a charter or education management organization (EMO). Restart assumes that private operators will foster greater innovation and improvement than public school districts.

Turnaround: (This specific model, coincidentally, shares a name with the general concept of improving schools rapidly.) The principal and at least half the staff are replaced, and the instructional program is revised. In addition, the school must implement new types of professional development, use data to inform instruction, expand learning time, provide wraparound services, and develop new governance structures. This model also calls for operating flexibility for the school (school-level autonomy over budget and staffing decisions). Turnaround is designed to bring in new, highly qualified staff, and new programs, training, and support.

Transformation: The principal is replaced, but staff do not need to be. However, the school must also make changes in professional development, instruction, curriculum, learning time, and operating flexibility. Transformation requires that student growth be part of teacher evaluation. Transformation assumes that the core instructional staff at a failing school is competent but needs new leadership, programs, training, and support.

AIR's "School Restructuring: What Works When" report (http://www.air/school_restructuring_guide.pdf) provides a more detailed description of these models.

The Turnaround and Transformation models are similar. The two primary differences between these two models are that (1) Turnaround requires replacement of at least half of the staff, and (2) Transformation specifically holds teachers accountable for student growth. (The teacher accountability provision is also required of RTT States.)

What We Have Learned Over the Past Decade

In the decade since the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was introduced, a great deal has been learned from research and experience about approaches to improving low-performing schools.

Although educators and administrators have engaged in school reform efforts for decades, school "turnaround" is a more recent endeavor. Turnaround has many of the same goals as the broader category of school reform (e.g., improve student outcomes, reduce achievement gaps) and uses many similar strategies (e.g., embedded professional development). However, turnaround differs from other types of school reform in that it (1) pushes for rapid improvement in outcomes (within 1 to 3 years) and (2) emphasizes a "start from scratch" approach designed to overcome a history of resistance to change.

Over the past 10 years, researchers have learned that turnaround involves (1) putting in place the right leadership and staff, (2) setting, and tracking progress toward, instructional goals, and (3) accelerating reform efforts by removing barriers. We have also learned that the challenges that face most reforming schools are also critical for turnaround schools. Unfortunately, success rates for school turnaround are low (Stuit, 2010; Rhim, Kowal, Hassel, & Hassel, 2007).

Leaders matter. Strong leadership, helping set and maintain direction, is at the heart of turnaround and many other approaches to school reform (Aladjem et al., 2010; Bryk et al., 2010; Herman et al., 2008; Picucci et al., 2002). Case studies of turnaround schools (Herman et al., 2008) indicate that schools that dramatically improve student achievement quickly have tended to use "turnaround principals," and that there are common characteristics among these turnaround leaders (Steiner & Hassel, 2011). Often these are new principals, selected for leadership qualities common to turnaround leaders in education and other sectors (e.g., they thrive on challenge, and they can stay focused on goals and motivate others towards those goals). Sometimes existing principals can lead schools to turnaround, but these principals generally have turnaround-specific training and make a visible break from their previous leadership strategies (Herman et al., 2008); these principals become much more involved in classroom instruction, and make very public commitments to change.

Leaders often need flexibility and autonomy to turn around schools. There are two perspectives on autonomy for struggling schools: (1) provide more structure and oversight to compensate for lack of leadership or expertise within the school, or (2) provide more autonomy to the school to allow staff to make necessary changes. There are proponents at either end of this spectrum and at points in between. The solution put forth in ARRA, and found in many turnaround school case studies, is to provide more operating flexibility, but require greater school accountability in return. In their study of high-poverty, high-performing schools, Mass Insight found benefits to providing chronically low-performing schools with the flexibility to enact changes to improve the school (Calkins et al., 2007). Specifically, allowing schools more control over staffing and budget may enable them to focus human and financial resources where they are most needed.

Turnarounds require a committed staff. Effective, committed staff are also central to successful schools (Bryk et al., 2010; Lachat and Smith, 2005). Case studies suggest that successful turnaround schools evaluate and selectively prune their instructional staff. Wholesale staff replacement is not always warranted, but selective replacement of staff who cannot or will not support the turnaround is almost always necessary. Successful turnaround schools tend to build a committed staff by identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the existing staff relative to the schools' reform strategies, redeploying or counseling out staff who are not functioning effectively, and purposefully selecting staff with the key qualifications and a commitment to the reform effort.

Successful turnaround schools improve instruction first and foremost. Descriptive research on effective schools and organizations consistently finds that instruction (including curriculum) matters most, and other changes (e.g., leadership, resources) also relate to student achievement when they facilitate changes in instruction (Gamoran et al., 2000). Studies show that successful turnaround schools consistently focus on two activities that are directly related to improving instruction: (1) using data to improve instruction and (2) involving teachers in aligning the curriculum to the State standards (Herman et al., 2008). Successful turnaround schools conduct formative assessments and use data to shape and track progress toward school goals, identify needs for individualized teacher professional development, and identify needs for reteaching individual students specific content and skills (Herman et al., 2008). These schools also use rigorous, standards-based curricula. They actively involve teachers in aligning the curriculum, which seems to help teachers in the case study schools be more critical of their own instruction (Aladjem et al., 2010; Tung & Ouimette, 2007).

The quality and level of implementation is critical to successful school improvement. How the practices are implemented, their coherence, and their fit with school needs may spell the difference between success and failure. A key element of implementation is getting the right fit between the specific strategies used in the school and the school's context—including the school's history with reform efforts, level of autonomy in decision making, student population needs, and many other factors. Case study research shows that no single intervention consistently works in every case, and that strategies that enable one school to improve may not succeed elsewhere (Scott & Kober, 2009). In part, this may be a result of the unique challenges and context for each school. A recent study of 11 low-performing schools found that matching the approach and implementation strategy to the school is critical for success (Aladjem et al., 2010).

Reforms as implemented can differ from what was intended. Under ESEA, we have learned about the critical role of context—and sometimes unanticipated consequences—in implementation. Although Federal policy may be straightforward, implementation in the context of varied State, district, and school policies, contexts, and history can create unique situations. Often, the intended reform and outcomes are derailed by the time the district engages in implementation.

Districts tend to choose the most flexible reform option. Under ARRA, we have learned—as with ESEA—that districts will opt for the reform options that provide them with the most flexibility, the least structural change, and the least staff disruption. Of the schools implementing the four ARRA turnaround models under SIG, 94 percent are using transformation or turnaround, and only 6 percent are using restart or closure (Hurlburt, Le Floch, Therriault, & Cole, 2011). It is too early to report the level of implementation or impact.

Many turnarounds are short-lived. Studies of turnaround schools, as well as anecdotal evidence collected from hundreds of turnaround leaders,[1] consistently show challenges in maintaining and building on the early successes. The "Achieving Dramatic School Improvement" study found substantial fluctuation in test scores of schools that initially appeared to be turnaround successes—some met the targets one year only to fail the next. Some schools lost additional funding when they met performance targets, and had to abandon the extended learning time programs that had helped them raise student achievement. The turnaround case study research suggests that sustainability might be aided by continued support after initial turnaround, and by district and State policies that institutionalize supports (e.g., initiatives under RTT to establish and maintain a State longitudinal database; embedded professional development supported by the district).

"Quick wins" can accelerate reform. Effective school reform models typically take 3 to 5 years to affect student learning. Schools that are able to turn around more quickly than this consistently show certain strategies that accelerate reform. Turnaround schools often make one or a few visible improvements ("quick wins") early in the improvement process to generate buy-in and motivate school stakeholders (Herman et al., 2008). Quick wins are very focused accomplishments within the first weeks (or few months) of reform, and may include changes to the physical structure (e.g., landscaping, painting), learning time (e.g., dedicated blocks for instruction), behavior (e.g., uniforms, consistently enforced hallway rules), or student and teacher attendance.

[1] In over 20 presentations on the IES Turnaround Practice Guide, to audiences of 30 to 100 (or more) teachers, principals, districts administrators, and State policymakers, these findings were consistently affirmed by meeting participants.

By the Numbers: Characteristics of the Universe of Schools, SIG Eligible Schools, and SIG Awarded Schools

Characteristics	Universe of Schools	SIG Eligible Schools	SIG Awarded Schools
School level (percent of schools)			
Elementary	54.3%	55.3%	32.2%
Middle	17.0%	20.1%	22.1%
High	20.6%	19.1%	40.4%
Nonstandard	8.1%	5.5%	5.2%
School type (percent of schools)			
Regular	90.0%	93.9%	92.3%
Alternative	6.3%	5.0%	6.1%
Special Education	2.3%	0.8%	0.9%
Vocational	1.4%	0.3%	0.7%
Charter School	4.7%	6.3%	5.5%
Urbanicity (percent of schools)			
Large or Middle Sized City	26.0%	44.9%	52.5%
Urban Fringe and Large Town	41.9%	35.2%	24.3%
Small Town and Rural Area	32.1%	19.9%	23.2%
Free and Reduced Price Lunch (school average percent of students)[a]	44.7%	68.3%	68.4%
Race/Ethnicity (school average percent of students)[a]			
White	55.0%	26.7%	26.5%
African American	17.0%	28.0%	41.9%
Hispanic	21.5%	39.6%	26.9%
Native American	1.3%	1.5%	2.1%
Asian	4.7%	3.7%	2.4%
Total school enrollment (school average)	**516**	**597**	**664**

[a] Student characteristics are weighted in proportion to the number of students enrolled in a school.

Source: 2008–09 Common Core of Data; Approved State SIG applications; SEA Web sites.

Moving Forward: Key Considerations for Reauthorization

The research suggests that it is very hard—and relatively infrequent—for a school to successfully sustain a turnaround. However, the approaches consistently found among the successful schools suggest that there are replicable strategies. The reauthorization of ESEA should consider not only models such as those laid out in ARRA, but also the policy and practice context that makes it possible to make substantive changes in low-performing schools.

In moving forward with the reauthorization of ESEA, some key considerations include the following:

1. **Make failing schools more attractive to the most effective teachers and leaders.** Turnaround research underscores the importance of a principal who is well suited to the task of turnaround, as well as a teaching staff that buys in to the school's mission and strategies. Barriers to recruiting and retaining the necessary human capital should be considered in ESEA reauthorization.

2. **Continue to build State and district capacity to support school-level reform.** NCLB required that State education agencies assume substantial responsibilities, which strained their capacity to support districts and schools. Reauthorization might consider some of the initiatives under ARRA that address the challenges States and districts face in supporting school-level reform. For example, the reauthorization might further encourage the use of State longitudinal data systems developed under RTT. Likewise, a revised ESEA could focus on ensuring the quality of external support providers under contract with State education agencies.

3. **Identify policy levers that foster reforms that are both research-proven and aligned with the school's individual needs.** The current ARRA approach, using four broad models but not mandating specific programs or curricula, provides States, districts, and schools with the flexibility to match interventions with school needs and history. ESEA can continue that flexibility, while maintaining the prior emphasis on using research-proven interventions.

4. **Extend support beyond initial turnaround to enable the school to sustain and build on early gains.** As research has shown, current policy too often ends support when recently turned around schools are still fragile. Continued ESEA support might stabilize these schools and prevent backsliding.

The following **key questions** may help guide thinking about the future direction for school turnaround:

- How can districts and schools integrate local context, unique needs, and reform history in the planning of turnaround?
- What supports can help maintain and build on initial turnaround success, and how can Federal policy and programs balance support for initial turnaround with sustaining turnaround?
- How can districts balance increased flexibility at the school level with school accountability? What State and Federal guidance would be useful?
- How can States and districts foster a coherent approach to turnaround in struggling schools—particularly in difficult economic times, when schools are grateful for any source of support?
- How can existing reporting structures (e.g., State- or district-mandated school improvement plans) and plans for school turnaround be integrated to reduce the overall reporting burden and focus more resources on implementation?

The result of significant bipartisan collaboration, NCLB was one of the most substantive changes in Federal education law since the initial ESEA legislation was passed in 1965. While the law arguably had a number of flaws, it led to considerable improvements in educators' and policymakers' access to and use of data and research. Further, the NCLB and ARRA both recognize the challenges of turning around schools with a history of entrenched failure, and put forward models for dramatic rather than incremental change. These reforms have the potential to succeed where prior efforts were not enough, especially if ESEA reauthorization acknowledges and addresses turnaround challenges and successes as seen in the research.

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