BRIEF 1

Series Overview

This is the first brief in a series produced by Education Resource Strategies (ERS) that compiles and analyzes the results of our Sustaining Turnaround at Scale Summit held in October 2011.

The Situation

A major effort is underway in school districts across the country to improve the academic performance of students at the lowest-achieving schools. President Obama focused national attention on these struggling schools during a March 2009 speech: "Because we know that about 12 percent of America's schools produce 50 percent of America's dropouts, we're going to focus on helping states and school districts turn around their 5,000 lowest-performing schools in the next five years."[1] To realize this goal, the U.S. Department of Education provided $3.5 billion in funding under the Title I School Improvement Grant (SIG) program.[2] While the SIG program was not the start of school turnaround efforts and is not by itself a comprehensive district turnaround strategy, it did provide an influx of significant new dollars along with a greater degree of structure through the stipulation that schools use one of four intervention models.[3]

While the turnaround challenge has been aimed at individual schools, urban districts typically have large numbers of low-performing schools, some that qualify for the special SIG funding and others that do not. These districts face two critical questions:

1. How can school systems build turnaround efforts at scale to achieve dramatic improvement that is sustainable over time?

2. How can they leverage short-term funding and the increased sense of urgency surrounding turnaround to do this?

The ERS Turnaround Summit

We at the non-profit organization Education Resource Strategies have worked for over a decade with leaders of urban school systems to help them organize talent, time and technology to support great schools at scale.[4] One year into the Federal program we are noticing significant differences in district turnaround approaches, engagement of partners and spending strategies. Most districts seem to have promising practices to share as well as common challenges. With this backdrop, Education Resource Strategies held the summit, Sustaining Turnaround at Scale that brought together central office leaders and principals from eight districts, as well as attendees from organizations that partner with turnaround schools and influence the conversation about turnaround.

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[1] Speech transcript available from The White House Office of the Press Secretary:
http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-americas-promise-alliance-education-event

[2] http://www2.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2009/08/08262009.html

[3] Four models: Turnaround model, transformation, restart, school closure.
More detail at http://www.ed.gov/blog/2010/03/whats-possible-turning-around-americas-lowest-achieving-schools/

[4] More information about ERS at http://www.erstrategies.org

(See Appendix for list of participating districts and organizations.) The goals for the summit were as follows:

- Explore opportunities and challenges involved in attempting school turnaround at scale

- Begin planning now to sustain turnaround work once transition funding and special exemptions run out

- Identify ways we need to work together to raise the likelihood of success

- Celebrate, honor and support each other's efforts

Over the course of the two-day summit, participants shared their experiences and perspectives on topics ranging from school designs to central office structure and from data usage to principal pipelines. We structured the sessions to enable creation of some common lessons and frameworks that could be shared within and across districts.[5]

Five Steps to Sustainable Turnaround at Scale

Session participants confirmed five critical components of a complete district strategy for sustainable turnaround at scale (see inset at right). We will explore each briefly here, and follow-up briefs will cover the areas that participants identified as providing the greatest challenges or opportunities.

ASSESS: District-wide strategy for measuring school performance, need, and viability

As an initial step in the turnaround process, we have noticed that promising districts are doing district-wide assessments to identify schools for intervention, followed by deeper needs assessments at identified schools to design the overall approach and tailor

interventions. They first assess performance across schools in a way that includes multiple outcomes and weights improvement in student performance highly. Once the high and low performers are identified, these districts will assess need amongst low-performers along three dimensions: student need, teacher and leader capacity, and school practices and environment. Last, a check for viability takes into account whether the neighborhood demographics

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COMPONENTS OF DISTRICT STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABLE TURNAROUND AT SCALE

1. **ASSESS:** District-wide strategy for measuring school performance, need, and viability

2. **TARGET:** Targeting of schools for appropriate action within a structure of differentiated support and autonomy

3. **DEFINE:** Defining an approach to providing key components of turnaround intervention

4. **PLAN RESOURCES:** Reorganizing system and funding to support the model, including an aligned funding system, accountability and support, and removal of barriers

5. **INTEGRATE:** Integrating turnaround with district-wide strategy for sustained improvement, including: (a) Aligning turnaround with spectrum of accountability, autonomy and support (b) Ensuring adequate resources for all students (c) Incorporating lessons learned in turnaround to rest of district

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[5] See the *Sustaining Turnaround at Scale* page on ERS website for summit materials, session summaries, video and other content: http://erstrategies.org/focus/turnaround_at_scale

and condition of the school building will support the emerging strategy for a particular school. This "Assess" step is not just about identifying turnaround schools but is instead about building a complete set of data to inform an overarching system of school accountability and differentiated support and autonomy. And the districts that seem to be moving the needle on student performance are able to use data not just as an initial diagnostic tool, but also in an ongoing way within a cycle of continuous improvement. This means analyzing early indicators of success and failure in order to evolve strategy and resource use.

TARGET: Targeting of schools for appropriate action within a structure of differentiated support and autonomy

Promising districts are taking a holistic look at all of the charter, special status and traditional schools in the district—using the data described in the section above—and determining which action (including, but not limited to, closure, expansion, turnaround intervention) is appropriate for each school. Denver Public Schools characterizes this as "district-wide response to intervention (RTI) for schools"; based on where each school falls within their school performance framework, it becomes a candidate for a specific set of incentives and interventions. "Red" schools are the lowest rated in the performance framework and are identified for either closure or turnaround intervention based on a regional analysis of demographics and neighboring school performance, a further qualitative need analysis, and an assessment of district capacity to intervene in the school successfully.

Taking this sort of comprehensive approach to differentiated school support and autonomy—of which turnaround is an important piece, but not the only piece—has two benefits. First, designing appropriate responses for schools across the performance spectrum ensures that turnaround status is not an "in or out" designation that touches only a small subset of

the schools that need more intensive interventions. When turnaround status is narrowly defined, there is a risk that it becomes a revolving door: struggling schools that do not receive additional support continue to decline as schools defined as *turnaround* improve. Once the first cohort of turnaround schools exits, there is another cohort that have declined so much that they become the new cohort. Second, the use of closure as a potential intervention for lowest-performing schools ensures that the district is not investing in turnaround at schools that are not good long-term options for the neighborhood, or those that would require an unreasonable level of investment or non-existent district supports to be successful.

DEFINE: Defining an approach to providing key components of turnaround intervention

Before discussing the key components of turnaround intervention and the ways that districts have approached their implementation, it is important to understand the challenges of chronically low-performing schools. The schools that are targeted for turnaround efforts are generally trapped in a cycle of failure that is described in the Figure 1. Thus, turnaround is different from continuous school improvement because it requires specific intervention to break this cycle of failure. Intervention models need to be clear about the specific actions they are taking to do this—and fundamentally change the school climate and culture—versus actions that every school should implement on an ongoing basis. In order to break the cycle and prevent schools from continuing down the path of persistently poor performance, we have found that promising districts are investing in turnaround models with the five common components shown in the table on page four.

These investments usually have one of two purposes: (1) to build school capacity (teacher and leader effectiveness, productive school practices and environment), and (2) to address very high levels of student need. Turnaround model components that address

the former purpose are key targets for temporary turnaround funding streams that can be scaled back as success is realized. While investments to address student need are also a key part of breaking the cycle of failure, it is likely that some significant level of investment in students with higher needs will need to be sustained even after the school exits turnaround status. Therefore, it is important that districts emphasize capacity-building components of turnaround with temporary investments, while organizing their school funding system to distribute resources equitably based on student need for the long-term.

Figure 1: *Cycle of Failure in Low-Performing Schools*
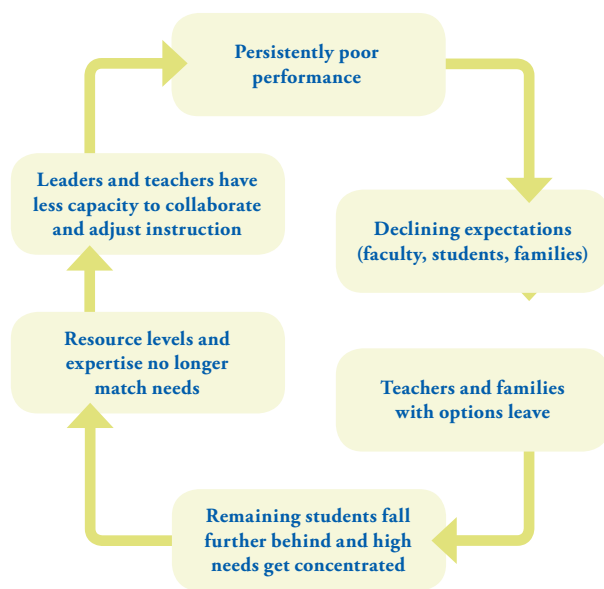
At the ERS Summit, districts and partners discussed the turnaround model (Figure 2), along with common district investments related to each of these interventions. While there was broad consensus around the need for all design components in any successful school turnaround effort, few districts felt that they had a complete model—meaning one that utilizes all interventions—and many have put disproportionate resources against certain investments.

While districts share a common vision around the essential components of turnaround models, they vary significantly in terms of their approach to ensuring these components are in place. Key choices that systems make include:

- The degree to which the model is tightly defined and who (i.e. district or school) has responsibility for which pieces of it

- The use of partners to support the turnaround model or its components

Districts at the turnaround summit felt that there is no one right approach to these choices; rather, the approach must be consistent with accurate information on existing system capacities. Where the district does not have enough internal capacity to implement some or all components of turnaround, partners can provide key support. Similarly, decisions about school leader autonomy must be matched to leader capacity to plan and implement strategic interventions across the model components.

Finally, in addition to these variations, we noted that these school districts looked very different to begin with—in terms of size, student demographics, funding levels, political environment, existing systems, and so on—and each district's unique context affected the implementation of turnaround initiatives.

We heard that among these interventions, those related to human capital are most critical: schools need to be able to prioritize investments that build the capacity of teachers and leaders and maximize investments in teacher capacity (e.g. coaches, instructional systems) by organizing teacher teams with differentiated expertise and roles that meet regularly to improve instruction based on data. However, per federal mandate, schools using the "Turnaround Model" are required to replace the majority of teachers.[6] Many summit participants noted that this requirement needs to be refined to reflect the importance of building a teaching team with the right combination of teacher leadership skills and expertise to meet student needs. In some cases, a strict 50% replacement wouldn't be necessary to achieve the right combination of teachers; the mandate to replace at

Figure 2: *Components of District School Turnaround*

Level	Turnaround Model Design Component	Common District Investments (examples) (above the standard school allocation)[6]
School Level	Strong leaders: Ensure a transformational principal in every school	Replace leadership if required
		Provide additional compensation or incentives
		Add leadership staff (AP, school business manager)
		Provide training and ongoing coaching
	Effective teaching teams with expert support: Ensure needed expertise and provide support for teams to continuously improve instruction	Replace teachers if required
		Provide additional compensation or incentives
		Extra time for teacher collaboration
		New instructional systems
		Teacher professional development
		Teacher leaders or coaches
		Support for analyzing student data
	Individual attention and time for accelerated learning: Vary and extend individual and small group opportunities to meet needs	Early intervention strategies with tutoring or small group instruction
		Restructured student schedule
		Extended time (day, week or school year)
		Targeted small class sizes
	Productive school culture: Invest school community in high expectations for learning and behavior	Facilities renovation
		Discipline systems, security staff
		Parent/community outreach
		Student motivation approaches
	Health, social and emotional support: Guarantee baseline health, social, and emotional support to students to ensure readiness for learning	Professional staff
		Community partnerships
System Level	Central support and accountability: Define clear goals, measure progress and provide support	Smaller supervisory "zones"
		Data and support staff
	District removal of barriers to effective turnaround practices (e.g., staffing, scheduling, use of time constraints)	District policies and practices
		Contract modifications
		State policies

[6] The federal turnaround model is one of four federal intervention models.
     More detail at http://www.ed.gov/blog/2010/03/whats-possible-turning-around-americas-lowest-achieving-schools/

[7] The investments listed are examples of common district investments, rather than a set of investments that must all be in place for turnaround.
     Note that these investments are on top of certain foundational elements, such as aligned instructional systems, that we assume to be in place.

least half of the staff can result in more chaos than necessary. Also, the requirement to replace 50% of staff focuses attention on terminating under-performing teachers, with minimal emphasis on the capacities of those who replace the terminated teachers. Turnaround school leaders wanted a nimble hiring and replacement process to enable adjustment of staff as needed.

Another challenge mentioned by participants is the onerous task of turning around a high school (as compared to an elementary or middle school), given a student population that is often lagging significantly behind grade level and may have more behavioral challenges. However, the national turnaround conversations and funding levels don't reflect this discrepancy in difficulty. We plan to cover this challenge, along with the human capital challenge discussed above, in more detail in future briefs.

PLAN RESOURCES: Reorganizing system and funding to support the model

After defining their approach to turnaround intervention, all districts participating in the summit had taken on significant work to redesign their system to better support the approach. Districts had taken on this type of reorganization in three categories:

- *Repositioning of school support and accountability as a tool to advocate for, build, and support successful strategies.*
  This often involved the creation of new systems for ongoing monitoring of early indicators of success, as well as lower supervisory ratios and new structures for support relationships that focused on collaborative problem-solving versus one-size-fits-all mandates. Districts also spoke to the importance of empowering school support providers (whether district- or partner-run) to authorize and facilitate quick changes to schools' strategies and tactics in response to early indicator data.

- *Removal of barriers.* Districts described several common types of barriers to the effective

implementation of components of their turn-around model: inefficient or ineffective district policies and systems, external constraints such as state/federal policy, and collective bargaining agreements.

- *Revision of funding system to support student need.* Districts have taken different approaches to increasing levels of funding in turnaround schools to appropriately match the needs of their students. Many have used short-term funding (e.g., SIG) to this end. However, this funding is almost never enough to meet the needs of the entire group of schools in the district needing the turnaround intervention. Furthermore, while short-term funds have a discrete time horizon, schools that serve high-needs populations of students permanently require additional funding to meet those needs; students who begin further behind need more time and attention to catch up to their peers. To ensure funding levels match need across the district's portfolio of schools and over the long-term, districts have revised their school funding systems to include mechanisms for allocating dollars on the basis of student need.

Most districts are approaching reorganization of systems in these areas through the creation of turn-around zones with autonomy from some district rules, exceptions to specific collective bargaining provisions, and a different school supervisory and support structure. To ensure that turnaround schools sustain success upon exiting the turnaround environment, and that all schools have access to innovations in system design generated in the turnaround environment, it is critical that districts also consider how to make changes system-wide that have been successful in the turnaround environment.

INTEGRATE: Integrating turnaround with district-wide strategy for sustained improvement

Scaling successful system changes, such as new contract provisions and improved district support,

is just one way districts can use resources invested in turnaround to effect broader change. Urgency around improvement in the turnaround environment often opens the door to bold revision of traditional systems. And most districts are making a significant effort to concentrate their top talent in turnaround schools. This means that turnaround schools are ripe for innovating new ways to serve high-needs populations of students. Districts have an important role to play in positioning turnaround schools in this light, and in capturing and scaling the successful strategies for serving high-needs students that are developed in turnaround schools.

Conclusion

Renewed focus on our nation's lowest performing schools has created a critical opportunity to improve opportunities and outcomes for students that have historically been underserved by schools in the United States. Many elements are combining to create this key moment for change: a federal government focus on turnaround, backed by a significant funding stream; public outcry and scrutiny; partner organizations that have expertise in working with large, urban districts; a growing understanding of what it takes to truly transform high-needs schools. Districts are the critical players in this landscape, because they are best positioned to leverage turnaround resources to create sustainable change at scale. This will mean creating systems to assess their schools, determine which actions are best suited to each one, and help those in turnaround to implement models that include the necessary components for change. Furthermore, it will mean using their authority to make systemic changes that will not only support turnaround schools as they go through the difficult process of transforming, but also foster learning among turnaround schools and across the whole system. Districts must seize this moment, guide their schools through turnaround, and incorporate lessons learned system-wide, thus enabling all students to prepare for promising futures.

Future ERS Turnaround Briefs

In the next few months we will follow this first brief with others that delve into the topics we learned were most vital to the community of districts, schools and organizations that are involved in turnaround. We hope that the series will add to the conversation on turnaround and encourage districts and their partners to examine and refine their approaches. Please feel free to share this with colleagues and let us know if we should add any others to our distribution list.

More Information

The ERS website (erstrategies.org) provides many additional resources on the topic of turnaround, including:

- Content from the *Sustaining Turnaround at Scale* summit: session summaries, posters, video excerpts[8]

- *Turnaround Schools: District Strategies for Success and Sustainability*[9]: A self-assessment tool and worksheets to guide you through a four-step process for identifying whether your district has an effective turnaround program and whether you are investing in the most important interventions

- Case study: "Breaking the Cycle of Failure in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools"[10]

- Article: "Turning Around the Nation's Lowest Performing Schools"[11]

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[8] Available at http://erstrategies.org/focus/turnaround_at_scale/

[9] Available at http://erstrategies.org/documents/pdf/turnaround_Oct25.pdf

[10] Download: http://erstrategies.org/resources/details/breaking_the_cycle_of_failure_in_charlotte_schools/

[11] Download: http://erstrategies.org/resources/details/turning_around_the_nations_lowest_performing_schools/

Appendix: Participants in Sustaining Turnaround at Scale Summit
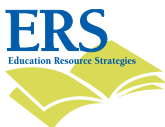
Districts:

- Boston Public Schools
- Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools
- Chicago Public Schools
- Cincinnati Public Schools
- Denver Public Schools
- District of Columbia Public Schools
- Duval County Public Schools
- Providence Public School Department

Partners:

- Academy of Urban School Leadership
- Achievement Network
- The Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University
- The Aspen Institute
- Blueprint Schools Network
- Citizen Schools
- City Connects
- City Year
- Corporation for National and Community Service
- Council of Chief State School Officers
- The Education Trust
- Mass Insight Education
- National Center for Time and Learning
- New Leaders for New Schools
- New Schools Venture Fund
- The New Teacher Project
- ReNEW
- Say Yes to Education
- Strategic Grant Partners
- TeachPlus
- Turnaround for Children
- U.S. Department of Education
- University of Virginia

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ERS is a non-profit organization dedicated to helping urban school systems organize talent, time and money to create great schools at scale. **For more information see ERStrategies.org**