

Chartering Turnaround:

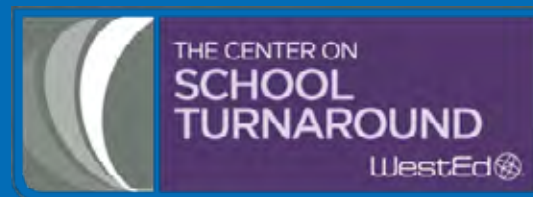
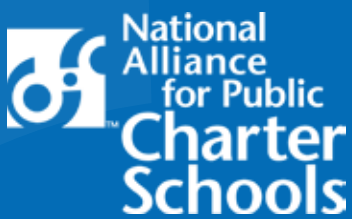
Leveraging Public Charter School
Autonomy to Address Failure

By Julie Corbett

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Since 2007, low-performing schools have received more than \$5.8 billion in funds through the federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) program.¹ Supplementary district and state funds, federal Title I funds, and Race to the Top funds have also been used to turn around the country's lowest-performing schools. Despite some cases of success, our school improvement dollars and programs, as a whole, are not resulting in the substantial improvements that were intended and—more importantly—that are so greatly needed.

With the revision and significant expansion of the federal SIG program and the introduction of the Race to the Top program in 2010, the public charter school model was prioritized as a discrete option for school turnaround. Currently, there are three main avenues through which public charter school autonomy can be leveraged to drive school turnaround efforts:

1. **Traditional public school restart (TPS restart):** Converting a low-performing traditional public school to public charter school status via the SIG restart model or via another accountability mechanism that requires a turnaround strategy;
2. **Closure and replacement:** Starting one or more new charters schools in locations with high concentrations of recently closed low-performing schools; and
3. **Charter school restart (charter restart):** Transferring management of an underperforming public charter school to new management and new board governance.

This paper examines how the autonomies related to staffing, curriculum, and general operations provided by state charter laws can be used to catalyze school turnaround efforts. Specifically, it explores the TPS restart model through brief case studies of three charter management organizations (CMOs)—Green Dot, LEAD, and Mastery—that have restarted traditional public schools in Los Angeles, Nashville, and Philadelphia and Camden, respectively.

“We’re not doing anything magical, we’re just doing the hard work.”

—Chris Reynolds, CEO, LEAD Public Schools

Key Findings

Autonomy

The charter school operators highlighted due to their success in TPS restart efforts consistently noted that when they are given the appropriate autonomy and are able to implement their models with fidelity, students achieve. The charter school autonomies identified as the most beneficial through this report's case studies were:

- **Staffing:** Freedom in hiring, placement, incentives, professional development, and removal of staff;
- **Use of Time:** Freedom to determine the length of the school day or year, and how to allocate student and staff time;
- **Programming:** Freedom to determine the academic program and wraparound services;
- **Finances:** Freedom to allocate district, state, and federal dollars to priority areas that benefit students; and
- **Access to Facilities:** Freedom to own, maintain, and renovate a building, or have the building renovated and maintained by the district according to the operator's standards.

Turning around a Failing School Is More Complex than Starting a New One

Turning around a low-performing school by converting it to charter governance and enlisting new leadership and personnel is more difficult than launching a typical “new start” charter school. Whereas starting a new school from scratch poses notable challenges (e.g., securing a facility, developing a program from scratch, and creating operational systems), restarting an organization that has previously failed presents far more dynamic challenges, including the following:

- **Overlapping accountability systems:** State accountability systems, as well as grant regulations, may stipulate that turnaround providers must develop detailed turnaround plans reflecting prescribed turnaround models and meet reporting and accountability requirements in addition to requirements stipulated by state charter school laws.
- **Transitional costs:** Restarts have “start-up” costs as part of the transition process, such as upgrading facilities, acquiring student records, developing bus routes, and paying for transportation and staff time—which can total millions of dollars.
- **Zoned enrollment:** Unlike a typical new start charter school, TPS restart schools are not selected by parents exercising school choice. A TPS restart serves all students in a zoned location, including students with varying levels of knowledge or investment in the school’s program.
- **Human capital:** Restarting a school can require significant staffing changes. The restaffing process can alienate community members as well as present challenges in finding qualified staff to meet the unique needs of the school. The CMO leaders we interviewed all discussed the challenge associated with recruiting, hiring, and retaining high-quality staff.
- **Facilities:** The quality of the school buildings and confusion over who is responsible for their upkeep can be a major challenge for public charter school operators undertaking a TPS restart.
- **Sustainability:** District and CMO bandwidth and capacity, as well as unrealistic timelines, can undermine efforts to sustain the turnarounds.

Opportunities Outweigh Challenges

Charter school autonomies have the potential to catalyze focused school turnaround efforts. Yet, to date, states and districts have arguably not fully leveraged turnaround strategies that involve granting traditional public schools charter school freedoms as part of the turnaround process. Widespread conversion of persistently low-performing schools to charter governance status, or seeding development of new charter schools in high-needs areas to leverage charter autonomy to create quality schools has been limited by both policy and practice.

While turning around failing schools is difficult and complex work, all three CMO leaders interviewed for this paper highlighted how rewarding the work is and how much turnarounds have positively influenced the efficiency of the district central office and the services provided in all of the operators’ schools. Marco Petruzzi of Green Dot emphasized that “all experienced CMOs should be doing this work. Everyone who has a student enrollment above 5,000 or 6,000 students should be taking this on.”

High-quality public charter school operators, and the freedom they have to implement effective educational programs, could fundamentally change the current thinking about school building–focused turnaround and improvement strategies. Much work remains, however, to ensure that such efforts fully optimize key autonomies that can catalyze change.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2007, low-performing schools have received through the federal School Improvement Grant (SIG program) more than \$5.8 billion in funds, which are allocated to states to make significant investments in improving their lowest-performing schools.² In addition, supplementary district and state funds, federal Title I funds, and federal Race to the Top funds have also been used to turn around the country's lowest-performing schools. Yet, despite all of these sources of funding, many of the schools receiving these various grants have failed to make a dramatic difference in improving student achievement. Some schools made significant improvements, some made incremental improvements, others stagnated, and the student achievement levels in the remaining schools actually declined.³ Despite some cases of success, our school improvement dollars and programs, as a whole, are not resulting in the substantial improvements that were intended and—more importantly—that are so greatly needed.

With the revision and significant expansion of the federal SIG program and the introduction of the Race to the Top program in 2010, the public charter school model was prioritized as a discrete option for school turnaround. Currently, there are three main avenues of school turnaround in which public charter school autonomy can be leveraged:

- 1. Traditional public school restart (TPS restart):** Converting a low-performing traditional public school to public charter school status via the SIG restart model or via another accountability mechanism that requires a turnaround strategy;
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Restarting a traditional public school as a public charter school provides a failing school with new leadership that has the autonomy to operate the school, implement educational interventions, and—perhaps most importantly—hire staff with the necessary competencies to succeed in the turnaround environment. Despite recent efforts to encourage this strategy through SIG and Race to the Top, this approach has been relatively underutilized: Of

Key Actors

- Education service providers (ESPs) are nonprofit or for-profit organizations that contract with schools or districts to provide education-related services. These services range from single programs to comprehensive school management.
- Public charter school operators are entities—generally nonprofit boards—that hold the official charter from an authorizer and that operate the school.
- Charter management organizations (CMOs) are nonprofit ESPs that operate or manage multiple public charter schools, under contract with governing boards, by centralizing or sharing certain functions or resources.
- Education management organizations (EMOs) are for-profit ESPs that operate or manage multiple public charter schools by centralizing or sharing certain functions or resources.

the approximately 2,000 schools receiving SIG funds since 2010, only 79 used the restart model that leveraged charter autonomies.

This paper examines how the autonomy related to staffing, curriculum, and general operations provided by state charter laws can be used to catalyze school turnaround efforts. Specifically, it explores the TPS restart model through brief case studies of three charter management organizations (CMOs)—Green Dot, LEAD, and Mastery—that have restarted traditional public schools in Los Angeles, Nashville, and Philadelphia and Camden, respectively. The case studies reveal the key autonomies that can foster turnaround efforts; identify unique challenges associated with turning around persistently low-performing schools via conversion to charter status; and outline opportunities that have yet to be realized fully at the federal, state, and district levels, and by charter opera-

tors. Sources for this brief include federally acquired data, annual reports from public charter school operators, published research studies, interviews with education leaders, and interviews with senior staff from three CMOs.

*Of the approximately 2,000 schools receiving SIG funds since 2010, only 79 used the restart model that leveraged public charter school autonomies. The restart model requires the district to convert the traditional public school to public charter school status and to allow it to be managed by an outside operator, CMO, or education management organization (EMO) selected through a rigorous process.*⁴

STRATEGIES TO LEVERAGE CHARTER AUTONOMY

Turnaround is the action of implementing numerous structural, operational, academic, and wraparound support changes to dramatically improve student achievement in a persistently low-performing school. Over the last 15 years, school districts have utilized various forms of the restart model, sometimes called reconstitution or restructuring, under the No Child Left Behind Act. The restart model is a type of turnaround that occurs when a low-performing school is closed or converted to charter status and a new school, operated by different management and governance, replaces the school in the same building or nearby (if the original building is not suitable). Under the TPS restart model, all of the students who previously attended the low-performing school are automatically eligible for enrollment at the new one.

Although the focus of the case studies of this paper is on TPS restarts, it is helpful to understand the three key strategies available to turn around failing schools through public charter school autonomy; they are discussed below and in Table 1.

TPS Restart Model

TPS restarts are low-performing district-run schools that are converted to charter school status and managed by charter school operators, CMOs, or EMOs. TPS restarts may be triggered by federal, state, or district accountability designations. If applicable, federal SIG funds may support the costs of implementation.

Some TPS restarts that received funding from the SIG program produced, and continue to produce, strong results (as evidenced by the case studies on the following pages). But other TPS restarts failed to show substantial progress.⁵ Several factors may contribute to the less-than-optimal improvements, including but not limited to the following factors:

- Providers may have lacked the capacity to take on the job of turning around a chronically low-performing school.
- Local education agencies (LEAs) may not have been able to recruit or select the best provider to lead the restart.
- LEAs may not have provided adequate support or autonomy for the providers to implement the restart with fidelity.

Due to the limited number of restarts nationally, two national studies of SIG that have been completed thus far were unable to draw statistically significant conclusions on the impact of the TPS restart model.⁶ As a result of the limited national data analysis, case studies of TPS restarts are our best way to learn about the model and its viability as a strategy to catalyze effective turnaround.

Closure/Replacement of Traditional Public Schools

Closing a low-performing traditional public school and launching one or more new public charter schools in the same neighborhood—operated by a charter organization, CMO, or EMO—is another means by which charter school autonomy may be leveraged to support turnaround efforts. In this model, unlike a TPS restart, districts or states close the low-performing schools; authorize one or more new charter schools to operate in the same physical building (or nearby, if more than one charter school is authorized or the original building is in inappropriate condition); and enroll the students from the neighborhood. One example of the widespread implementation of this approach is in state-run extraordinary authority districts, such as Louisiana’s Recovery School District (RSD). Over time, the RSD closed all traditional public schools and replaced them with charter schools. The all-charter school district shows promising results in terms of graduation rates and student proficiency.⁷ But converting an entire district to charter schools requires a great deal of community engagement to help assuage loyalty to the closing school, create political willpower to face systemic changes, and—most importantly—create a

supply of high-quality charter school operators willing to enter the market.

Charter School Restart Model

A relatively new development in the public charter school sector is charter school operators, CMOs, or EMOs taking over the management of other low-performing charter schools. This type of turnaround is called a charter school restart. When existing charter schools fail to meet the performance requirements of their charter or to respond to internal turnaround efforts, the charter school's authorizer can revoke the charter (which essentially closes the school) or the board can turn the school over to another charter school operator, with new governance, in order to improve the quality of education. This type of turnaround is seen mostly in cities with large concentrations of charter schools.

While aspects of a charter school restart are similar to a TPS restart, there are a few differences. For example, in some cases, a public charter school restart might be slightly easier than a TPS restart: Underperforming public charter schools have a shorter history of low performance, so the communities are less tied to the failing institution.⁸ In contrast, a difficulty that charter school operators must address is that families chose to apply and attend the original school model. And while the students are automatically accepted to the restarted school, the families lose some of the control they felt in making their initial choice.⁹ For example, a family could have selected a public charter school with classes separated by gender, because the parents thought that would be the best learning environment for their child. The new charter school operator may combine genders in classes. Therefore, the desirable aspect of the original model is lost.

Table 1: New Start Charter Schools Compared to Charter Approaches to School Turnaround

	New Start Charter School	TPS Restart	Charter School Restart ¹⁰	TPS Closure and Replacement with one or more Charters
Operator Management	New operator and staff	LEA(or state education agency [SEA]) selects charter school operator through authorization process; invite staff to reapply for positions; new principal	Authorizer or charter board selects new operator;	New operators selected by LEA/SEA and/or existing schools expanded
Governance	New Board	New Board	New Board	New Board
Students	Open enrollment or lottery if oversubscribed	Existing and neighborhood-zoned students guaranteed seats	Existing students guaranteed seats, lottery if oversubscribed	Students from closed school receive priority in replacement schools

Examples of TPS Restart

In an effort to understand how public charter school autonomy is being used to support turnaround efforts, we identified three examples of charter school operators restarting traditional public schools. The three operators were selected because of their diverse locations across the country and varying organizational size, and all three operators have implemented TPS turnarounds with and without the use of SIG funds. Research included phone interviews and email correspondence with executives of each organization, and review of organizational websites and annual reports. Table 2 includes profiles of the three CMOs researched for this paper.

Table 2: Case Study CMOs – At a Glance

	Green Dot Public Schools	LEAD Public Schools	Mastery Charter Schools
Mission	<i>Help transform public education so all students graduate prepared for college, leadership, and life.</i>	<i>LEAD Public Schools exists to support, educate, and train the next generation of responsible citizens.</i>	<i>All students learn the academic and personal skills they need to succeed in higher education, compete in the global economy, and pursue their dreams.</i>
TPS restart approach	Whole school; focus on quality staff and wraparound services	Grade-by-grade phase-in/out; focus on quality staff and wraparound services	Whole school; focus on quality staff and wraparound services
Total number of schools	22	5	15
Number of TPS restart schools	8 ¹¹	2 ¹²	10
Total # of students enrolled	11,000	1,700	10,500
Grades served	6–12	5–12	K–12
Student retention	91%	N/A ¹³	93%
Graduation rate	88%	100% ¹⁴	95%
Free/Reduced Meals	93%	92%	95%
English Language Learners	18%	15%	5%
Special Education	12%	15%	18%
African American	21%	54%	94%
Latino/ Hispanic	77%	26%	4%
White	0.5%	18%	1%
Asian	0.2%	2%	1%
Number of central office staff	187 ¹⁵	15	90
Percentage of funds to school programming	92%	91%	92%
Headquarters	Los Angeles, CA	Nashville, TN	Philadelphia, PA
Location of schools	Los Angeles, CA; Memphis, TN; and Tacoma, WA ¹⁶	Nashville, TN	Philadelphia, PA and Camden, NJ
Website	www.greendot.org/	www.leadpublicschools.org/	www.masterycharter.org/

GREEN DOT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Green Dot Public Schools is a CMO that manages a large portfolio of middle and high schools; it includes 14 new start charter schools and four TPS restarts (divided into eight smaller schools). The majority of schools are based in Los Angeles, California, with additional clusters of schools launching in Memphis, Tennessee, and the Seattle/Tacoma area of Washington. Some of the Los Angeles schools targeted for turnaround were very large, and Green Dot reconfigured them into smaller academies in order to personalize the school experience for the large number of students and staff, and to improve accountability as it relates to school culture and student outcomes. Although Green Dot was awarded federal SIG funds to assist with the turnaround of one middle school under Title I accountability parameters, the other TPS restarts were driven by district and state public charter school accountability mechanisms. These schools did not receive additional federal funds specifically allocated for turnaround.

Green Dot entered the turnaround space in 2008, when it took over operational control of Locke High School from Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), after more than 51 percent of the tenured teachers—in accordance with California charter school laws—voted to turn over management of the school to Green Dot. The sheer size of Locke, the range of student needs, the culture of low expectations, and a chronic history of low performance catapulted Green Dot into a steep multiyear learning process in terms of what it takes to transform an existing school effectively. The requirements proved categorically different from typical new start charter school practice in which culture is built one grade at a time. The work at Locke informed Green Dot’s best practices organizationwide, leading to significant modifications in school models for both new start charter schools and subsequent TPS restarts.

Green Dot’s Turnaround Approach

Green Dot’s turnaround approach for TPS restarts involves a complete reorganization of the former school, including new leadership and a requirement that all staff members reapply to ensure that they are appropriately qualified and aligned with the new vision for the school. Reflecting on the process, Marco Petruzzi, CEO of Green Dot, explained, “If you’re not doing something incredibly different related to staffing and the instructional model, then you’re not doing a turnaround. This bottom five percent of schools needs radical intervention, not tinkering along the edges.”¹⁸ Green Dot aspires to retain

Organizational Profile

Mission	Help transform public education so all students graduate prepared for college, leadership, and life.
Total Number of Schools	22
TPS Restart Schools	8 ³³
Charter Restart Schools	0
New Start Schools	14
Turnaround Approach	Whole school; focus on quality staff and wraparound services
Number of Students Enrolled	11,000
Grades Served	6–12
Student Retention	91%
Graduation Rate	88%
Free/Reduced Lunch	93%
English Language Learners	18%
Special Education	12%
African-American	21%
Latino/Hispanic	77%
White	0.5%
Asian	0.2%
Number of Central Office Staff	187 (including all three regions)
Percentage of Funds Going to School Programming	92%
Headquarters	Los Angeles, California
Location of schools	Los Angeles, California; Memphis, Tennessee; and Tacoma, Washington (coming fall 2015)
Website	www.greendot.org

closing-school staffers who are aligned to the new vision and who possess the skills to help establish a culture of high expectations and implement new instructional practices. This has an added benefit of safeguarding important threads in institutional and community memory, and generating continuity for families. Experience has shown that the majority of the staff often needs significant retraining and, in most cases, should be replaced. Petruzzi reflected, “If you can keep a few faces that are familiar to the students, then that can be of great benefit. These schools are failing mostly because of the adults, both the ones at the school and the ones supporting them from the district. You need to bring in a whole new

set of programs, supports, values, and energy to deliver a dramatically different experience for the kids, which is what we aim for.”

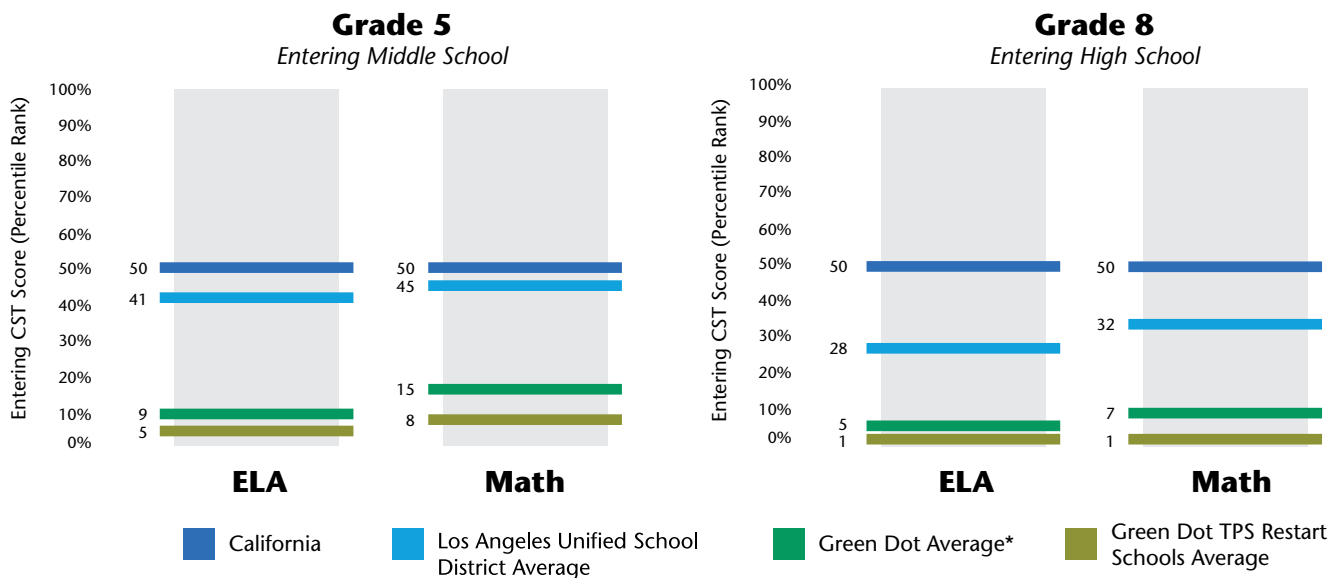
At Locke High School, Green Dot’s first TPS restart, management decided to retain 30 percent of the staff from the closing school. Under California’s teacher trigger law, 51 percent of the teachers had to agree to convert the school to charter school status. Petruzzi commented, “Many of the teachers expected to be hired since they signed the petition. However, not all of them interviewed and some were not considered qualified, so it led to some difficult conversations.”¹⁹ Petruzzi noted that many of the people they rehired did not adjust well to the new culture; however, others remained and are still with the school. Green Dot did not rehire any original staff in the next two turnarounds, in large part because no one applied after undergoing significant pressure from LAUSD’s union. In Memphis, Green Dot plans to rehire as many well-qualified staff as possible at the TPS restart schools, but that number could be low—potentially less than 25 percent. The objective is not to retain or rehire a specific number, but Green Dot leadership noted that hiring quality personnel from the existing staff is a net positive for students.²⁰

With Locke, Green Dot used a phase-in/out approach to transform the school and build a new culture, starting several new ninth grade academies and growing them

one grade at a time while shrinking two larger 10th–12th grade academies year by year. Green Dot managed the entire school; it did not rely on the district to manage the “shrinking” academies. In hindsight, Petruzzi felt that the slow scale-up inadvertently led to tension on campus for an extended period of time: In effect, the phase-out strategy ensured that a “hot topic of conversation for four years was whether the adults in the disappearing grades would be displaced or offered a role in the growing academies.” Learning from the experience, the Green Dot team decided that subsequent turnarounds would be completed by beginning the turnaround throughout the whole school at once in order to maintain staff unity and cohesion from year one. It also ensured a more “normal” experience for the upper grades.

Despite being based in Los Angeles, Green Dot has been unable to lead additional turnarounds or new starts in that area since 2011. This has been due to a changing political climate and negotiations between the superintendent and the teachers union. Consequently, Green Dot began seeking new opportunities elsewhere to apply its turnaround work in other districts seeking to leverage charter school autonomies to drive turnaround. The leadership team remains hopeful that it will have the opportunity to lead additional turnarounds in Los Angeles in the future.

Graph 1: Proficiency Rates for Students Entering Green Dot’s TPS Restart Schools Are Significantly Lower²²



*Average includes new start and TPS restart schools

In order to launch successful turnarounds in other regions, Green Dot has been investing in its infrastructure to build regional hubs to support the schools. Green Dot's operational practices require significant collaboration between schools to share promising practices; operational systems (e.g., hiring, professional development, human resources, facilities, etc.); coaches; and central office personnel across the network. Green Dot invested substantial philanthropic funds to build the CMO's infrastructure in Memphis during negotiations with the district and even before starting the hard work in the schools.

How a TPS Restart Is Different from Opening a New School

Petruzzi reflected how different and challenging TPS restarts are compared with launching new public charter schools. He commented, "It's a different animal. The lift is much heavier. With [new start public charter schools], it's difficult to be successful all the time, but we have made great progress towards a more consistently replicable and successful school model." In the turnaround space, there are many more variables; flexibility and problem solving on the fly is key. For example, in TPS restarts, students can enroll at any point during the year, with massive variance in levels of credits, and with a wide range of abilities and disabilities, which is not always the case in new start charter schools. Students are accepted year-round in any grade and with as many or as few credits as they hold, and with any disability; students are rarely expelled, and only for egregious acts; students are enrolled as they register to attend the school, regardless of whether there are openings; and no application or lottery is required. In a recent blog posting, Petruzzi discussed the challenges of unlimited inbound enrollment of students:

At Locke HS we receive 10–15 new students a week every week, all the way until the last week of school. ... [This] is indeed disruptive to the culture and classroom structures that have been set up. It is certainly difficult on the adults and often disruptive for other students. But high transiency rates are endemic in [high-poverty] communities and we need to learn to cope with the issues. It has forced us to rethink dramatically how we onboard students into a new school; and how we create thorough but quick assessments to create the best possible class schedule for that student, [rather than] just fit him/her wherever there's room; and forced us to create a system of supports, including peer mentors to help the new students adapt.²¹

In addition, students in turnaround schools have academic, emotional, and behavioral needs that tend to be more extreme and more prevalent than those of the student populations at both new starts and the district-run traditional public schools that the restarts replace. When Green Dot analyzed the data of incoming TPS restart students, the differences in students were notable. While a majority of students attending its charter schools are academically behind several grade levels, the students at the TPS restarts were even further behind: Higher percentages of students had special education needs and more severe needs, and the level of mental health needs was more acute. The differences in student academic proficiency are noted in Graph 1, which shows student proficiency rates on California's Standardized Test (CST) for the state, the district, Green Dot's average, and the subset of TPS restart schools.

Petruzzi hypothesized that many of the students attending the TPS restart schools lack parental advocacy. Simply having an adult understand the possibility of applying to a public charter school and taking the action to apply to a lottery demonstrates some level of family engagement and commitment that, in theory, is an asset to the student as he or she navigates school. In contrast, some of the students in the schools identified for turnaround

lack strong parental advocacy that may put them out of reach of charters. These "most wanting" students [as Green Dot refers to them], some of [whom] have extreme academic, social, emotional, mental health, or behavioral needs, might account for only 20 percent of the population in a turnaround school—with the rest of the student population likely similar to those [of] "new start" charters in similar neighborhoods—but they substantially impact the culture of the campus and have a powerful influence on how we must consequently serve all of our students.

Before doing turnarounds, we thought we served the highest-need students, but we learned differently.²³

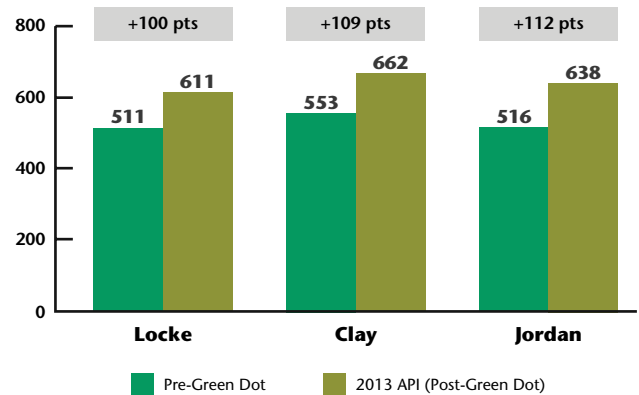
Yet these differences have forced Green Dot to become a better, more nimble, and stronger organization. The lessons learned about how to support students with severe academic deficiencies and emotional needs have filtered into Green Dot's work in new start charter schools. All of Green Dot's schools are now more inclusive of all students, utilize different enrollment procedures, include enhanced and improved special education supports, provide better transition programs, provide additional supports to students with emotional and behavioral needs, and offer additional credit recovery and remediation programs. Petruzzi reflected, "I would be lying to you if I told you we have figured it all out. We just embrace the

challenge, evaluate objectively what we do every year, and try to adapt and do it better the next year. But it is working: we have learned things in turnarounds that, in turn, we have adopted in our [new start public charter] schools and made those schools better and more inclusive.”²⁴

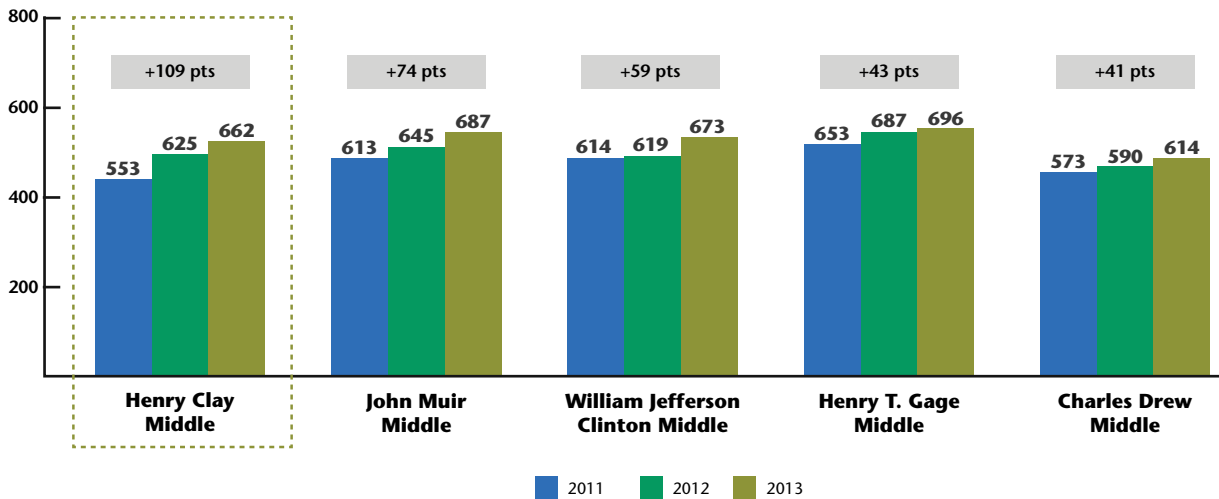
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—Marco Petruzzi, CEO, Green Dot Public Schools

Graph 2: The API Shows Gains in TPS Restart Schools Operated by Green Dot (Locke since 2008, Clay and Jordan since 2011)³⁰



Graph 3: API Performance of LAUSD’s SIG Cohort Demonstrates Strong Improvements in Green Dot’s Henry Clay Middle School³¹



Impact of Green Dot's Turnarounds

Despite significant obstacles, TPS restarts have made dramatic gains under Green Dot Operation. Green Dot conducts frequent data analyses to track progress and address issues as they arise in its schools. Like all schools, Green Dot struggles to track growth rates while state testing systems transition to Common Core-aligned tests; nevertheless, data demonstrate strong growth for Green Dot's portfolio:

- Green Dot's TPS restart schools have made measurable gains in student achievement. Graph 2 demonstrates the changes in the Academic Performance Index (API)²⁵ of three of Green Dot's TPS restarts. The graph shows the API scores before Green Dot management and again in 2013.
- When Green Dot's TPS restart model is compared with the four other Los Angeles middle schools that were part of the same SIG funding cohort (2011), Green Dot's Henry Clay outperforms across a variety of metrics (Graph 3).²⁶
- A University of California – Los Angeles study found that the first two cohorts of Locke students were more than 1.5 times more likely to graduate and 3.7 times more likely to graduate college-ready than students were before the restart.²⁷
- The four-year cohort retention rate has doubled at Locke, which has the longest track record under Green Dot operation, and its students are 12 times more likely to go to college.²⁸
- Student retention rates for SY13–14 are 83 percent, 92 percent, and 85 percent for Locke, Clay, and Jordan, respectively.²⁹

Furthermore, the impact of the TPS restarts goes beyond the turning around of individual schools: Green Dot learned a great deal from the Locke turnaround and significantly modified its school models both for new start schools and for subsequent turnarounds in order to better reflect the needs of the most at-risk students in all of its schools.³²



Photo by Nora Kern

LEAD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

LEAD Public Schools is a CMO currently managing two TPS restarts in Nashville. It is in the process of launching a third this summer. In addition, LEAD manages three new start charter schools. LEAD’s first new start charter school included lottery enrollment and was designed to serve the same percentage of special education students that districts do (10–15 percent). LEAD provides transportation for its students to ensure that getting to and from school is not a barrier to families.

LEAD’s first TPS restart school, Cameron College Prep, predated the creation of Tennessee’s state extraordinary authority district—the Achievement School District (ASD)³⁴—but the ASD existed in statute. In anticipation of Cameron being identified as one of the lowest 5 percent schools in the state and subject to state takeover under the ASD, the district and LEAD began conversations about how they could proactively improve the school. The district determined that initiating a turnaround by restarting the school as a charter school, under LEAD’s management, was preferable to a potential ASD takeover. In 2011, this TPS restart became LEAD’s first turnaround school and was initiated under partnership between the district and charter school. Shortly thereafter, LEAD applied to the ASD to operate additional TPS restart schools identified for turnaround and converted to public charter school status. Based on LEAD’s application and initial refinements to their model with Cameron College Prep, the ASD approved LEAD as the CMO to turn around another school. LEAD assumed management of Brick Church College Prep and opened a fifth grade in summer 2012, with plans to expand one grade at a time. LEAD received SIG funds to support the costs of turning around Brick Church. In fall 2015, LEAD will launch a second turnaround via the ASD. In addition, LEAD is in discussions with Nashville Public Schools to turn around additional low-performing schools.³⁵

LEAD’s Turnaround Approach

LEAD uses a grade-by-grade phase-in/out approach to turn around low-performing schools. For example, if LEAD restarts a middle school of fifth to eighth graders, it will start the turnaround process with the incoming fifth grade class; the following year, the school would include another class of incoming fifth graders and the now sixth graders. It takes four years to fully phase-in/out a four-grade school. During the transition, LEAD must collaborate and align with the district to maintain a sense of continuity and coordination between the two coexisting schools sharing the same building. Based on conversa-

Organizational Profile

Mission	LEAD public schools exists to support, educate, and train the next generation of responsible citizens.
Total Number of Schools	5
TPS Restart Schools	2 ⁴²
Charter Restart Schools	0
New Start Schools	3
Turnaround Approach	Grade-by-grade phase-in/out; focus on quality staff and wraparound services
Number of Students Enrolled	1,700
Grades Served	5–12
Student Retention	N/A ⁴³
Graduation Rate	100% ⁴⁴
Free/Reduced Lunch	92%
English Language Learners	15%
Special Education	15%
African-American	54%
Latino/Hispanic	26%
White	18%
Asian	2%
Number of Central Office Staff	15
Percentage of Funds Going to School Programming	91%
Headquarters	Nashville, Tennessee
Location of schools	Nashville, Tennessee
Website	www.leadpublicschools.org

tions with the leadership team at LEAD, the CMO uses the phase-in/out model for a variety of reasons, including the following:

- The slower scale-up allows for a principal to grow into the position.
- Hiring one grade level of staff at a time is more feasible than hiring staff for an entire school.
- The district is able to absorb and reassign one phasing-out grade level of teachers each year.
- It provides the phasing-out teachers the opportunity to choose to apply for positions at the TPS restart.

- It's the least disruptive approach for the students and the community:
 - The incoming fifth graders already anticipate attending a new school with new teachers.
 - The remaining sixth through eighth graders continue to have the same teachers.
 - No students are displaced.

The phase-in/out approach, however, can be controversial, as some parents questioned the quality of education for those students in phasing-out grades. Chris Reynolds, CEO of LEAD, understood this concern but believed that the phase-in/out approach was the best way to do a TPS restart for LEAD because, he said, "Running a charter school is a big lift, running a high-poverty charter is an even bigger lift, running a high-poverty charter turnaround is even more so. We needed to structure the transition in a way that it's sustainable and the least disruptive to kids."³⁶ LEAD managed the lower grade levels and grew one grade level each year; the district managed the remaining grade level and shrunk one grade level each year.

Ensuring that both schools coexist and coordinate to share the same physical space can be challenging. LEAD learned a great deal from its first TPS restart and is implementing those lessons in subsequent turnaround efforts. For instance, it now has weekly planning meetings between the LEAD principal and the phase-out principal to discuss any shared needs, how to share space, and how to coordinate shared electives (e.g., art, music, etc.).

Beyond this need for coordination, the phase-in/out process can be complicated by the length of the school day. The LEAD students attend school an extra 1.5 hours a day and an extra week each year. Reynolds stated, "We consider all the kids our kids, so we try to support the students in the phase-out grades as well." For example, in cases of siblings split between the phase-in/out, LEAD works with families to run different bus routes, provide before- or afterschool study halls, or offer additional activities for the siblings in the shorter school days. Reynolds commented that there can be some parental frustration in the first semester due to the coordination issues, but by the end of the year, the frustration shifts, and parents are more focused on the lack of quality education the older kids receive from the phasing-out traditional public school.³⁷

"We're not doing anything magical, we're just doing the hard work."

—Chris Reynolds, CEO, LEAD Public Schools

When asked about his approach to turning around failing schools, Reynolds reflected, "We're not doing anything magical, we're just doing the hard work. Our kids go to school a little longer, we use time efficiently during the day, we select staff based on their mindset, and we train staff a lot. If we do all those things, while still building a culture that honors individual student interests, then the conditions are right for kids to learn." LEAD staff is provided three weeks of training each summer, an additional eight days of professional development during the year, and additional job-embedded professional development. Reynolds views professional development as a crucial component of LEAD's work. He remarked, "The phasing-out teachers aren't bad teachers, but they need more training. We have to invest in the adults to help the kids. We can't import talent at the quantity we need to solve problems, like cities such as Boston or New Orleans can, due to the size and attractiveness of the city for recent graduates. We imported some staff, but we need to develop strong staff already in Nashville through strong professional development or through alternative certification and better teacher preparation programs."³⁸

LEAD encourages every teacher in the phase-out grades to apply for a job in the upcoming phase-in grades. All existing teachers are guaranteed to make it through the first round of the application process and to receive an interview and the ability to present a demonstration lesson. In addition, existing teachers are screened before LEAD opens up the candidate pool to the public. During the phase-out years, teachers and staff have the opportunity to share space, observe how the new teachers work, see how the new school operates, and observe how the new principal leads. Those teachers in the phase-out grades have a year or more to digest the changes and make their own decisions about applying or leaving. Reynolds commented that LEAD is open to rehiring some of the teachers who are phasing out, but to date, very few have applied. At Cameron, two phase-out teachers were hired in year one, and the LEAD team has since hired five other teachers from the phase-out grades. He said, "Teachers take it personally when their school is restarted. We've tried to get over that that by saying, 'We'd like you to apply.' There's some emotional baggage of sharing space and there's a [perception] that the phase-in teachers work harder [due to the longer days and years]. Over time, it's likely that we'll see an increase in applicants, but we don't know how to fix it right now."³⁹

LEAD places a strong emphasis on professional development, hiring strong administrators and teachers, and ensuring that the adult culture is conducive to success. Reynolds stated, “We really value our adult culture as much as our student culture. The entity matters; if the entity is healthy, it’ll feed the people.” In effect, by focusing on getting the right people in the right seats on the bus, and providing them the right skills and supports they need to do their jobs well, the organization can recruit strong new talent, build from within, and ultimately serve students well.

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How a Restart Is Different from Opening a New School

LEAD learned quickly that the communities did not know how low-performing the schools really were until it started engaging the families and community leaders about the status of the schools and the forthcoming changes. Reynolds stated that it was a shock to the neighborhood to learn the truth about the quality of education their students had been receiving. As a result, despite the promises of a better school launching in the same building and LEAD’s efforts to enroll all of the previous students, many parents opted their children out—in some cases reportedly due to the family’s new recognition of how poorly the school had performed previously. As a result of student departures, many of which came to pass simply because families were involved enough to learn that an opt-out was possible, the overall average proficiency rates of returning students were lower and the proportion of students with disabilities who qualify for special education doubled. Reynolds noted,

Due to opting out and the new perceptions of the former school, the readiness of the incoming students dropped significantly from prior years. Our student population included the most vulnerable kids, who were the furthest behind. In some cases, we found that the pre-conversion poverty proportion for a school was 94–96 percent. Post-conversion, the proportion increased to 98 percent. Special education rates jumped from 18 percent to 34 percent in year one before stabilizing at about 25 percent in later years.

In effect, a LEAD turnaround school serves a population of students even further behind and more disadvantaged than did the traditional public school it replaced.

LEAD also faced new enrollment challenges in its TPS restarts, even though it had experience with enrolling students throughout the school year in its new start charter schools. As an organization, LEAD determined that it would increase access to its new start schools by backfilling open seats through ninth grade and throughout the school year, by grouping students into cohorts (i.e., each month new students would enroll together to ease the transition for both the students and the schools). However, unlike new start charter schools—which determine enrollment through lottery if there are insufficient seats available and can choose whether or not to backfill empty seats—TPS restart schools enroll students based on neighborhood zones, and they are required to enroll at any time during the year. Consequently, LEAD must enroll students any day and in any grade throughout the year at the TPS restart schools. Combining unlimited inbound enrollment and high mobility rates due to poverty, LEAD found that 20 percent to 30 percent of test takers in April were not enrolled in the school in the early fall.⁴⁰

Impact of LEAD’s Turnarounds

It is still too early to determine if LEAD’s turnaround schools are a success—and if their improvements are sustainable—but the initial findings are promising:

- Cameron College Prep (a TPS restart launched in 2011) was recognized as a Reward School for Progress, meaning it was in the top 5 percent of schools statewide in year-over-year growth.
- Brick Church College prep (a TPS restart launched in 2012) showed the largest gains in the entire ASD. In just two years, it has moved from a bottom 5 percent school to being on track to become a top 25 percent school within five years.
- The Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System ranks every school in the state based on growth on a scale of 1 to 5. All of LEAD’s campuses exceed the state norm for growth; three have Level 5, the top ranking available; and one is rated Level 4.⁴¹

In addition to the data on LEAD’s TPS restarts, LEAD’s new start charter school campuses also continue to demonstrate strong student growth, and early benchmark indicators suggest that the LEAD model is working and effectively educating some of Nashville’s most at-risk students.

Mastery Charter Schools

Mastery Charter Schools is a CMO that manages 12 charter schools located in 15 buildings in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Camden, New Jersey. Ten of the schools are TPS restarts and seven of them received SIG restart funds to support their turnaround efforts. Mastery opened its first new start charter school in 2001 and its first TPS restart in 2006. Mastery launched TPS restarts under two different district superintendents:

- The Turnaround Initiative, created under former Philadelphia Superintendent Paul Vallas in 2005, targeted chronically low-performing middle schools to bring about dramatic improvement in student achievement.⁴⁵
- Introduced in 2010 by former Philadelphia Superintendent Arlene Ackerman, the Renaissance Schools Initiative was designed to turn around the city's lowest-performing schools by working with school communities that select the school operator that has a proven track record of operating and supporting high-achieving schools.⁴⁶ Schools are converted to charter school status and managed by a charter school operator, EMO, or CMO. Each school also had a school advisory council to help select the operator, support the charter school transition, and monitor progress.

While the district leadership and strategies varied, the need for turnaround and Mastery's model for implementation remained similar. Mastery defines turnaround schools as "neighborhood schools that take the same students from the same neighborhood in the same building while changing the management of the school, implementing new systems, and bringing in new staff."⁴⁷

Mastery's approach to turnaround focuses on using rigorous curriculum and engaging instructional techniques to bring students up to grade level as quickly as possible. Mastery school leaders place significant attention on school culture, creating respectful learning environments and providing appropriate social-emotional supports to students. Staff members collaborate regularly and make data-informed decisions to target resources to both students and support staff.⁴⁸

While Mastery's initial new starts expanded one grade at time, the TPS restarts—and all new starts going forward—employ a whole-school takeover model to make dramatic changes quickly. Scott Gordon, CEO of Mastery, remarked, "We love turnaround work. It's certainly chal-

Organizational Profile

Mission	All students learn the academic and personal skills they need to succeed in higher education, compete in the global economy, and pursue their dreams.
Total Number of Schools	15
TPS Restart Schools	10
Charter Restart Schools	0
New Start Schools	5
Turnaround Approach	Whole school; focus on quality staff and wraparound services
Number of Students Enrolled	10,500
Grades Served	K–12
Student Retention	93%
Graduation Rate	95%
Free/Reduced Lunch	95%
English Language Learners	5%
Special Education	18%
African-American	94%
Latino/Hispanic	4%
White	1%
Asian	1%
Number of Central Office Staff	90
Percentage of Funds Going to School Programming	91.5%
Headquarters	Philadelphia, PA
Location of schools	Philadelphia, PA, and Camden, NJ
Website	www.masterycharter.org

lenging, and we're definitely working with many of the kids with the greatest needs, but it's very satisfying and important work."⁴⁹

How a Restart Is Different from Opening a New School

Compared with Mastery's new starts, the TPS restarts have open enrollment from the surrounding neighborhoods, the schools enroll higher percentages of low-income and special education students, students are enrolled any day of the year via unlimited inbound

enrollment, and the organization makes a concerted effort to retain all of the students. Expulsions rarely occur, but when they are necessary, Mastery follows relevant state law and district disciplinary policies. Also, Mastery offers additional mental health supports to meet student needs.⁵⁰ Gordon reflected, “The higher concentration of students with needs [e.g., special education, behavioral, emotional, and mental] is one of the reasons these schools haven’t been successful in the past. Students frequently didn’t receive the coordinated services and supports they need to be successful. Oftentimes, staff tried to meet those needs but was unable to shift from putting out emergencies to proactive strategies.” Security concerns in the high schools also present new issues and costs. Gordon continued, “A violent high school culture can put kids and teachers at serious risk. In addition, the older students are often much further behind academically. It’s a very different undertaking than [with] the younger grades. [For the high schools,] we need to provide more security, safety, and student support strategies upfront compared to the younger grades, and we need to provide additional programs for students to catch up academically. Both of those items carry significant costs.”

In neighborhood schools, students often enroll in the school based on where they live, rather than proactively seeking out the school—as in a traditional public charter school with a lottery. Gordon noted, “In a [new] start charter, you’re essentially presenting your school and the families can choose you ... or not. In a turnaround situation, we need to reach out to the communities and build trust. It is important to listen to the community and understand what they need. We needed to develop our capacity to do additional engagement work and earn the communities’ trust and acceptance.”

Operationally, there are several big differences for Mastery between new starts and TPS restarts. First, the scale is different. Mastery built its initial new start charter schools using a phase-in process, one grade at a time, but the TPS restarts were done with the whole school at once. Gordon feels that the whole-school turnaround at once is the least disruptive approach for the community. It’s also the approach that the district leadership required. Programmatically, this method required Mastery to prepare leaders a year in advance and to start recruitment and teacher training before the CMO even stepped foot in the building. The CMO must have enough financial reserves to cover those additional costs, as negotiations with the district may be ongoing.

Second, the finances for a TPS restart are different. While new start charter schools require significant facility costs in terms of acquiring buildings, with a turnaround

“[CMOs get] a district facility already built, but [they’re] spending more money on [student] remediation, establishing the culture, and doing community outreach. Some of the costs are higher initially, but [they] also save in other areas. For example, the TPS restarts enroll at full capacity right away versus expanding one grade at a time, so [the CMO] isn’t paying for a partially empty building,” said Gordon. Mastery uses standard state and district per-pupil allocations and special education funds to cover the basic academic and programmatic costs, but additional funds are needed for capital costs such as equipment, books, supplies, facility updates, and maintenance. Those costs range from a half a million to 2 million dollars per school, depending on its size and the condition of its building. The facility renovations are not complete overhauls of the structure, but they do include painting, replacing windows, and fixing broken items (e.g., water fountains, doors, toilets)—all basic features that are needed to create a welcoming place for students.⁵¹ SIG funds do not cover these costs, and Mastery raises additional funds to cover facility renovations and improvements. Gordon stated, “We want the schools to break even in the first or second year on an operating basis. Additional money for psychologists and counselors is needed for the first year but usually goes away after the school is up and running.”

Impact of Mastery’s Turnarounds

Mastery’s schools, including the new starts and TPS restarts, have demonstrated dramatic academic improvements and improved culture and climate in the schools. Mastery reported that 96 percent of the class of 2014 earned college or postsecondary acceptance.⁵² Additional impact data are presented on the following page in tables 3 and 4.

Student behavior at Mastery schools changed dramatically post-turnaround. After the partnership, schools saw an average of 80 percent reduction in school violence.⁵⁵

Table 3: PSSA⁵³ Growth in Nominal Percentage Increases from Year 1 of Mastery Turnaround to 2014 (i.e., nine years of data for Thomas and one year of data for Pastorius)⁵⁴

School and Launch Year	Math Growth	Reading Growth
Thomas Middle (FY06)	+38%	+51%
Shoemaker Middle (FY07)	+46%	+34%
Pickett Middle (FY08)	+63%	+37%
Mann Elementary (FY11)	+27%	+12%
Smedley Elementary (FY11)	+20%	+20%
Harrity Elementary (FY11)	+18%	+20%
Clymer Elementary (FY12)	+20%	+9%
Gratz High School (FY12)	+11%	+9%
Cleveland Elementary (FY13)	+28%	+17%
Pastorius Elementary (FY14)	+28%	+14%

*11th grade PSSA administered in FY12, then discontinued by state.

Table 4: Change in Percentage of Students Withdrawing for Any Reason, September through June, Post-Mastery Turnaround (i.e., nine years of data for Thomas and one year of data for Pastorius)

School and Launch Year	Change in Student Withdrawals
Thomas Middle (FY06)	-71%
Shoemaker Middle (FY07)	-89%
Pickett Middle (FY08)	-62%
Mann Elementary (FY11)	-60%
Smedley Elementary (FY11)	-45%
Harrity Elementary (FY11)	-43%
Clymer Elementary (FY12)	-68%
Gratz High School (FY12)	-72%
Cleveland Elementary (FY13)	-69%
Pastorius Elementary (FY14)	-73%



Discussion of Key Findings

Dramatically turning around the performance of failing schools is a critical goal and persistent challenge for federal, state, and local policymakers and practitioners. The last four decades of school reform efforts have demonstrated the significant barriers to substantial and sustainable reform. While not the panacea of school turnaround, when coupled with key actions documented to drive school turnaround (e.g., hiring strong leaders, reallocating resources, and leveraging data to drive decisions), the autonomies extended by state charter school laws have the potential to catalyze turnaround efforts. The following are the charter school autonomies that were most beneficial in the case studies included here:

- **Staffing:** Freedom in hiring, placement, incentives, professional development, and removal of staff;
- **Use of Time:** Freedom to determine the length of the school day or year and how to allocate student and staff time;
- **Programming:** Freedom to determine the academic program and wraparound services;
- **Finances:** Freedom to allocate district, state, and federal dollars to priority areas that benefit students; and
- **Access to Facilities:** Freedom to own, maintain, and renovate a building, or have the building renovated and maintained by the district according to the operator's standards.

To date, relatively few states or districts have chosen to pursue charter school autonomies as a strategy for turnaround. Our examination of three TPS restarts documented various approaches to leveraging charter school autonomy and revealed emerging strategies and challenges. In addition to the many opportunities of the restart model, the associated challenges provide insight into why the strategy has been underutilized. These common approaches are instructive for federal, state, and local policymakers and practitioners who are interested in further exploring chartering to drive turnaround and to refine their strategies to improve failing schools.

Turning around Failing Schools Is More Complex than Starting New Ones

Turning around a low-performing school by converting it to charter governance and enlisting new management is more difficult than launching a typical new start charter school. Whereas starting a new school from scratch poses notable challenges (e.g., securing a facility, developing a program from scratch, and creating operational systems), turning around an organization that has failed presents far more dynamic challenges (e.g., updating and maintaining old facilities, introducing new programs, training any rehires, and hiring high-quality personnel). Figuring out how to balance the community needs and the politics of historical dysfunction while also meeting the educational, social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students—all in a short timeframe—requires a strong organization and strong leadership. Neerav Kingsland, former CEO of New Schools for New Orleans, commented, “Turnaround is much harder work. It requires caution and careful decision-making. If 100 CMOs can do [new] start charters, maybe five can do turnaround well.”

Overlapping Accountability Systems

Charter school operators doing a TPS restart face additional accountability and reporting requirements than what may be required by their state charter school laws and other federal program requirements. State accountability systems, as well as grant regulations, may stipulate that turnaround providers must develop detailed plans reflecting prescribed turnaround models and meet reporting and accountability requirements in addition to requirements stipulated by state charter school laws. The CMO leaders highlighted in our cases noted that the overlap of state and federal accountability and funding requirements added a layer of complexity to their work.

Transitional Costs

Converting a failing school—be it a traditional public school or a charter school—to public charter school status under new leadership and with new governance has tangible transitional costs. For instance, the blurry lines associated with actually handing over a building, acquiring student and special education records, arranging bus routes and transportation, handing over the keys to the building, enrolling students, and getting up and running all require a great deal of staff time. In addition,

facilities can remain a contentious issue; all interviewees mentioned that disagreements about who is responsible for major capital repairs could bog down the transition process. Districts provide the buildings to the CMOs to manage, but they are often delivered in poor condition and are usually still owned by the district.

The first few years also typically require additional funds for investments in extra technology equipment and infrastructure, academic supplies, mental health supports, and facility improvements. The leaders of the three organizations reported that although they strive to manage the academic and programmatic costs on the standard per-pupil allocation, but the transitional costs can make budgeting quite challenging.

Specific costs range based on the school size and the condition of the building, but the CMO leaders estimated that additional transitional costs might range from half a million to 2 million dollars. Two of the CMOs were awarded federal CSP funds for some of their work. LEAD received a CSP grant for five schools, focusing on TPS restarts, which will total approximately 4 million dollars over the course of several years.⁵⁶ Schools targeted for turnaround can also access federal SIG funds to cover some of these costs, but SIG grants are relatively restrictive and bureaucratic in terms of monitoring and reporting. Consequently, CMOs have raised additional philanthropic dollars to cover the planning year, renovation, and start-up costs for each turnaround school.

These transition costs—both in the form of staff time and actual dollars—can serve as a deterrent to operators interested in entering the turnaround sector.

“We have access to SIG funds but can’t use the money in the ways that we want and that will best serve kids. We have access to a building, but it doesn’t meet kids’ needs, it costs more than it should in annual upkeep because of years of deferred maintenance, and we don’t own it—so can’t take out a mortgage on it. These factors really hold us back from the work that needs to be done.”

—Chris Reynolds, CEO, LEAD Public Schools

“Grandfathered” Enrollment versus Parental Choice

As public schools of choice, charter schools must offer open enrollment, but the actual step of a parent exercising choice is, by definition, different from simply enrolling his or her child in their neighborhood school. This may lead to different levels of parental “buy-in” to the charter school’s educational mission. Further, CMO leaders observed that their restarts—compared with the schools they are replacing—often have student populations with higher percentages of students with social emotional needs and lower levels of academic attainment. The leaders of the three organizations hypothesize that this difference is due to some parents, after learning about how poorly the district-run school was, opting to move their children to other schools.

In addition, the CMO leaders noted that, based on their experience, both the number and diversity of students with disabilities enrolled in the neighborhood schools differed from what they typically saw in their new start charter schools. While recognizing their responsibility to enroll all students, the CMO leaders noted it was an adjustment that required them to rethink some of their programming to ensure they provided a full continuum of instructional options for students with a diverse array of disabilities. Green Dot’s Petruzzi reflected, “as a whole, many CMOs need to admit that they don’t often serve students with significant special education needs well, and turnarounds are a forcing function to learn how to do this better. It’s complicated and expensive, and we all know that the funding is inadequate to cover the needs of some students [that require intensive services and supports]. Special education isn’t funded very well across the nation.”

Moving forward, the lessons learned and the opportunity to develop innovative special education programs in turnaround situations could be an important contribution led by CMOs, and it could benefit both public charter schools and traditional public schools. Additionally, recent research indicates that the absence of parental choice in TPS restarts may not be a disadvantage. A recent National Bureau for Economic Research study of middle students achievement in New Orleans and Boston found that their high disadvantaged student populations that are “grandfathered” into a school as part of a TPS restart or takeover make significant gains.⁵⁷ The study also found the improvement comparable to those of students that attended a charter through a lottery process.

Human Capital

Turnaround frequently entails significant changes in staffing, which can have a residual impact on the community in that CMOs may immediately alienate community members who could be instrumental to gaining buy-in with the broader community. The cases revealed that the CMOs wrestled with the tension to retain some key staff members, in order to build community ties and ensure institutional memory, while striving to retain or hire the most qualified staff possible to lead the arduous turnaround work. Efforts to balance the needs of veteran and new staff members were complicated in turnarounds; they involved phasing in new grades and associated staff, and phasing out existing personnel.

Building effective teacher and leader pipelines requires developing regional hubs of four to 10 schools to build a collaborative environment, and bringing in efficiencies that will function across the system. All three CMOs discussed the challenge of hiring high-quality staff, even in some small cities. The desire to build regional hubs and recruit high-quality staff may present a challenge for rural communities. National CMOs may be apprehensive about launching a partnership without a regional central office and city infrastructures to draw new staff. Green Dot, which is currently launching two regional hubs in midsize cities, is concerned about the ability to attract high-quality staff and plans to partner with programs like Teach for America to help with the initial staff recruitment. The leaders from all three CMOs also commented that teacher and staff professional development must be extremely strong in order to build a staff with the skills and content expertise required for their schools.

Facilities

Facilities were identified as a notable challenge by all three CMOs. While TPS restarts typically include the use of a building, which can be a huge asset to charter school operators as buildings are a large expense for new start charter schools, the quality of the buildings and confusion over who is responsible for their upkeep can be a major challenge. Chris Reynolds of LEAD schools explained that,

Tennessee state law requires the district to provide the building to the CMO, but the statute doesn't include any guidance around what to do about deferred maintenance, and these are some of the crummiest buildings in the city. [One of our turnarounds] needed \$14 million to go towards deferred maintenance. Initially, the district took that school

out of the capital budget because it was a charter school and felt they were no longer responsible for it. I had to go to the school board to fight for the school to get back on the list. Eventually, [the school] was put back on the list for capital improvements but wasn't provided a timeline for improvements, essentially continuing to defer maintenance and district responsibility.

Sustainability

Turning around the failing school is only the first step; the true goal is to sustain the turnaround and ensure continued improvements in performance. Our cases revealed that district and CMO capacity as well as unrealistic timelines may undermine efforts to sustain the turnarounds.

Districts/CMO Capacity

Highly effective and efficient central offices are crucial to high-performing turnaround schools, and the CMO operators proposed that a larger portion of SIG funds be available to support central office structures of charter school operators. At this time, SIG funds only permit a small set-aside for district or charter school operator central office operations to support the SIG schools. In line with concerns about the high costs of transitioning to charter school status, the CMO leaders stressed that resources are needed to build centralized systems to support and sustain the turnaround efforts.

Timeline for Results and Institutionalizing New Programs

Current state turnaround timelines, which are often determined by regulations associated with receipt of federal funds, create major time crunches for the operators turning around low-performing traditional public schools or public charter schools. Several interviewees noted that the operators often receive approval for a TPS restart in the middle of winter or early spring, which leaves a very short timeline to recruit and hire staff, train staff, analyze budgets, complete community outreach, enroll students, complete residency verifications, acquire special education plans, acquire district records, and improve the facilities. All of this work must be completed for a late-August beginning of the school year. While the operators would like to perform a deep diagnostic assessment of the existing school, there is barely enough time to address the urgent operational matters within a four-to-six-month timeline before launch.

Opportunities Outweigh Challenges

While turning around failing schools is difficult and complex work, all three CMO leaders highlighted how rewarding it is and how much turnarounds have positively influenced the efficiency of the central office and the services provided in all of the operators' schools. Marco Petruzzi of Green Dot stated, "I'd love to see the larger CMOs do this work—those that have the infrastructure and talent to think through these issues. It would push them to learn some of the same things we've learned. And, there's just a huge need. We need more [providers] to get into the field." Petruzzi reflected that turnarounds can be controversial and warns other operators "when you take over schools, you need to be ready for intensity at a level you will almost certainly not have encountered before. But, we shouldn't shy away from the challenge just because it makes us uncomfortable. We know that what we're doing works and is working for students. You just need to be prepared to stay the course in the face of resistance and push back." Operators must have the political willpower to take on this type of work, but the field as a whole must also develop capacity by encouraging more operators to get into the turnaround space.

In addition, several interviewees suggested providing additional funds to open new start charter schools in areas where low-performing schools have shut down. Neerav Kingsland commented, "The government needs to move away from only looking at the turnaround of existing schools, [and] instead shift to a focus on supporting entrepreneurs, and let great schools open."⁵⁸ The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools has also called for permitting the federal SIG funds to be used for the replication and expansion of high-quality schools. While still providing students with the educations they deserve, this approach would give students access to new, stronger schools; allow high-quality public charter school operators to begin new starts; expand successful schools; and avoid some of the pitfalls of turnarounds. Funds to open new charter schools or to expand existing ones could be awarded by states out of their Title I funds for school improvement, rather than allocating funds to LEAs.⁵⁹

Conclusion

Autonomy extended by state charter school laws can catalyze focused school turnaround efforts. Yet, to date, states and districts have, arguably, not fully leveraged turnaround strategies that involved granting schools charter school status as part of the turnaround process.

Adoption of chartering and leveraging charter school autonomies as turnaround tools have been limited by both policy and practice. In states that use their public charter school laws to grant turnaround schools greater autonomy, the manner in which the process is operationalized varies considerably. Table 5 features some of the pros and cons of the various models highlighted in this paper.

High-quality public charter school operators, and the freedom they have to implement effective educational programs, could fundamentally change the current thinking about school building-focused turnaround and improvement strategies.

Regardless of the original governance structure of a school (i.e., existing public charter school or traditional public schools), new management is frequently critical to effectively turn around a school and provide currently enrolled students the educational opportunities they deserve. Federal and state policymakers should examine whether their school turnaround investments are leading to such fundamental changes in the schools that need the most significant interventions.

Moving forward, initiatives to improve the success rate of turnaround efforts need additional data and research to determine which strategies have the greatest promise. For instance, schools currently beginning restart efforts with the support of SIG funds must be further studied to determine whether there are differences between the various approaches; whether whole-school or phase-in models have different levels of success; and whether CMOs, EMOs, or other ESPs generate the strongest results. In addition, more studies about closure and replacement strategies, in lieu of a TPS restart, are necessary. Additional research on non-SIG TPS restarts is also needed.

High-quality public charter school operators, and the freedom they have to implement effective educational programs, could fundamentally change the current thinking about school building-focused turnaround and improvement strategies. Federal and state turnaround policies need to focus more on expanding access to a high-quality education within a community through restarts of traditional public schools and the creation of new start charter schools; such policies should also explore other ways that charter autonomies could expand opportunities for students attending low-achieving schools. Much work remains, however, to ensure that such efforts fully optimize key autonomies that can catalyze change.

Table 5: Pros and Cons of Turnaround Models that Leverage Charter School Autonomies

Turnaround Roles	Pros	Cons
TPS Restart	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autonomy extended by state public charter school law • Existing building provided • Challenges strong providers to become more responsive • Autonomy to dictate transition process (e.g., full takeover at once or phase-in/out) • Access to federal grant funds (e.g., Title I) • Existing student body enrolled 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Varied levels of autonomy • Building may require significant capital investment to renovate • Percentage of students with significant academic needs may be greater than that of the closing school • Community distrust triggered by staff changes • Community distrust of nontraditional public school • Federal grant funds introduce regulations
Closure/ Replacement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to start a school from scratch • Autonomy defined by state public charter school law • Access to federal grant funds (e.g., Title I) • Autonomy to dictate transition process (e.g., full takeover at once or phase-in/out) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May need to acquire a building • Need to recruit students from closed and surrounding schools • Limited federal grant funds • Community distrust of nontraditional public school
Charter Restart	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autonomy defined by state public charter school law • Existing student body enrolled • Access to existing building • Access to federal grant funds (e.g., Title I and Charter School Program) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building may require significant capital costs to renovate, or it may carry debt • Challenge to take over whole school versus ability to use a phase-in process • Frustration from families or students if desirable aspects of school program change • Community distrust if staff are removed

Endnotes

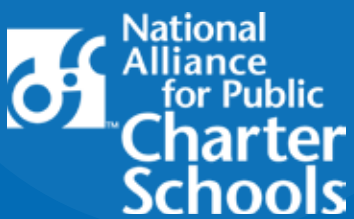
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- 12 LEAD is launching a new TPS restart school in summer 2015, which will bring the total number of schools to six and the number of TPS restarts to three.
- 13 LEAD does not calculate student retention, but on a net basis LEAD typically backfills enough so that the end-of-year enrollment is usually 95 percent–96 percent of beginning-of-year enrollment, networkwide.
- 14 LEAD's TPS restart schools have not yet had a graduating class.
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