



THE LAY OF THE LAND

State Practices and Needs for Supporting School Turnaround

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About Education Northwest

Founded as a nonprofit corporation in 1966, Education Northwest builds capacity in schools, families, and communities through applied research and development. Education Northwest has submitted this report as part of the ongoing formative evaluation of the Center on School Turnaround.

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The nation is experiencing a seismic change in assistance for low-achieving schools. In the past, many education policies focused on incremental school-improvement efforts for lots of schools. Now, leaders are shifting to a concentrated, intensive school turnaround for targeted schools. Several federal policies reflect this change, as seen in new federal guidance on school turnaround efforts to states receiving waivers to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), and in federal guidance for Race to the Top grantees. To help states make the shift successfully, the federal government created the new Center on School Turnaround (CST), as part of the national network of comprehensive centers.

The goal of the CST is to provide technical assistance on research-based practices and emerging promising practices that will increase the capacity of states to support their districts in turning around the lowest-performing schools. When the CST opened its doors in October 2012, it began its work by asking the question: In what areas of school turnaround do states need assistance?

To help CST answer this question, Education Northwest, the CST's external evaluator, administered an online survey to state education agencies (SEAs) in January and February 2013 as part of ongoing formative evaluation of the CST. The survey questions asked about state practices for school turnaround, as well as about state needs for assistance. Survey respondents included SEA staff members with responsibilities for school turnaround efforts. Ultimately, the survey included at least one respondent from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, American Samoa Department of Education, the Bureau of Indian Education, and the U.S. Virgin Islands; 100 percent of states are represented in the results of this report.¹

In this report, we provide initial frequencies for survey items related to three issues:

- 1) Levels of implementation of various aspects of school turnaround principles
- 2) Types of state support currently provided
- 3) Areas of state need for assistance with turnaround efforts

Unless otherwise noted, in cases where there was more than one respondent from a state, we calculated the mean and rounded up at 0.5 and above. In December 2013, we will provide a full CST evaluation report with more complete analysis of this survey data, as well as additional data about the CST.

¹ CST provided a list of participants. During the process, 10 contacts were removed from the list, while 11 were added, making a total of 176 possible participants. Of these 176, 85 responded, yielding a response rate of 48 percent.

How Fully are States Implementing Turnaround Principles?

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) has defined several school “turnaround principles.” ESEA waivers require districts, in states with waivers, to implement these principles in low-performing schools, and states assist districts with these efforts. School districts receiving federal School Improvement Grants also address these principles. To report the differing levels of implementation, we grouped the turnaround principles into the topics: principal leadership, teacher effectiveness, and other turnaround efforts.

We asked SEA representatives to rate their stage of implementation of each turnaround principle, based on a scale developed from the work of the National Implementation Research Network, one of the partner organizations in the CST. Based on a meta-analysis of nearly 800 articles about effective implementation, the implementation stages describe the essential activities in each stage. In the *exploration stage*, participants assess options and consider readiness for implementation. In the *installation stage*, leaders plan and prepare for implementation. Next, in *initial implementation*, practitioners try out the changes and begin implementing. Finally, in *full implementation*, the changes are completely in place and implementation is routine. In addition, while not strictly viewed as a “stage,” literature indicates the need to attend to sustainability. We did not ask about sustainability on this survey because we believed it was too early for any state to be sustaining these new principles. It is also important to note that the survey is a self-reported measure, and is therefore likely to be biased toward a more positive response.

Principal Leadership: <50% Full Implementation

Responding to the survey, SEA representatives reported which stage of implementation they believed their state had reached in efforts to assist or monitor their districts’ school turnaround efforts related to the principal leadership strategies, as defined in the ESEA flexibility waiver (table 1).

Table 1. Fewer than half of SEAs believe they have fully implemented their assistance or monitoring of districts’ efforts to improve principal leadership.

	Exploration	Installation	Initial Implementation	Full Implementation
Providing the principal with operational flexibility (e.g., in the areas of scheduling, staff, curriculum, and budget)	17%	20%	22%	41%
Replacing the principal, if such a change is necessary, to ensure strong and effective leadership (or demonstrating to the SEA that the current principal has a track record in improving achievement and has the ability to lead the turnaround effort)	17%	17%	28%	38%
Reviewing the performance of the current principals	7%	33%	28%	32%

Note: This table was ordered by highest frequency of responses for full implementation.

Teacher Effectiveness: ≤ 33% Full Implementation

In response to the survey, SEA representatives reported which stage of implementation they believed their state had reached in efforts to assist or monitor the teacher effectiveness strategies described in ED's turnaround principles (table 2).

Table 2. A third or fewer SEAs believe they have fully implemented their assistance and monitoring of districts' efforts to improve teacher effectiveness.

	Exploration	Installation	Initial Implementation	Full Implementation
Providing job-embedded, ongoing professional development, informed by the teacher evaluation and support systems and tied to teacher and student needs	4%	30%	33%	33%
Reviewing the quality of all staff	11%	30%	37%	22%
Retaining only those staff members who are determined to be effective and have the ability to be successful in the turnaround effort	19%	34%	28%	19%
Preventing ineffective teachers from transferring to other schools	36%	30%	25%	9%

Note: This table was ordered by highest frequency of responses for full implementation.

Of all the turnaround principles, the results of the survey show that states have made the least progress implementing those related to staffing schools with effective teachers. These least implemented principles include reviewing the quality of staff members, retaining only those who are effective, and preventing ineffective teachers from transferring to other schools. Respondents from fewer than one-fourth of the states reported fully implementing these principles, and respondents from about a third of the states reported they were still in the installation stage, (i.e., planning and preparing). In contrast, respondents from a third of the states indicated that professional development for teachers was fully implemented.

We also compared the responses of those from states that had received an ESEA waiver to responses of those whose states had not. Those receiving the waiver reported being further along in implementation of the last three principles in table 2. Those from states that had not received a waiver were typically not implementing these principles yet.

Other School Turnaround Efforts: < 50% Full Implementation (for all strategies except instructional data use)

We also asked SEA representatives which stage of implementation they believed their state had reached in providing assistance or monitoring to their districts in additional turnaround efforts.

Table 3. With the exception of instructional data use, fewer than half of SEAs believe they have fully implemented their assistance or monitoring of districts' other school turnaround efforts.

	Exploration	Installation	Initial Implementation	Full Implementation
Using data to inform instruction for continuous improvement	0%	11%	28%	60%
Providing time for collaboration on the use of data	6%	9%	36%	49%
Establishing a school environment that improves school safety and discipline	2%	15%	37%	46%
Strengthening the school's instructional program based on student needs	6%	11%	37%	46%
Ensuring that the instructional program is research-based, rigorous, and aligned with state academic standards	4%	17%	35%	44%
Redesigning the school day, week, or year to include additional time for student learning	9%	11%	43%	37%
Redesigning the school day, week, or year to include additional time for teacher collaboration	11%	13%	39%	37%
Providing ongoing mechanisms for family and community engagement	9%	19%	35%	37%
Addressing nonacademic factors that impact student achievement, such as students' social, emotional, and health needs	2%	26%	37%	35%

Note: This table was ordered by highest frequency of responses for full implementation. Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Respondents from the largest percentage of states reported they were fully implementing the turnaround principle “using data to inform instruction for continuous improvement.” However, we did not ask about the type or quality of data use. Respondents may have lumped all data use together when they responded. We suspect that “60 percent” may over-report the number of states that use data well. We hope to probe this question in future surveys.

Respondents from fewer states reported that “addressing nonacademic factors” was among the principles their state had implemented fully. This result might be expected because this element is relatively new for states. Previous efforts to improve low-performing schools have rarely focused on nonacademic factors.

On the survey, SEA representatives also responded to an open-ended question about what changes (if any) they would like to see in federal guidance and rules on school turnaround. About a fourth of survey participants responded to this open-ended item. Several SEA respondents want more clarity, flexibility, or a change in expectations and requirements in five areas:

- Flexibility in use of funds
- Flexibility in, and clarity about, additional learning time
- Clarity about alignment of federal requirements
- Clarity and solutions for staffing issues (i.e., recruiting, retaining, and rewarding staff members)
- Increased access to research-based turnaround strategies

Some respondents indicated they would like to see several of these changes. For example, regarding alignment, research-based strategies, and use of funds, one state respondent wrote:

[We need] more alignment and coordination between the federal School Improvement Grant program (SIG) and the Priority schools, more understanding of what it takes to “turn around” a school, particularly a large, urban high school. This could include more flexibility in length of funding.

Respondents who wrote about additional learning time expressed interest in both flexibility for this principle and more research about what works and how to implement well. However, several knew that additional learning time should not just be more hours of “business-as-usual” instruction. One wrote:

Please allow flexibility with extended time/flexible learning programs. The focus should be on increasing instructional time for all students in an effective, efficient, and sustainable way - not just on adding additional hours or days.

As revealed elsewhere in this survey, school turnaround principles that relate to staffing appeared to be particularly difficult to implement. For this principle, many SEA respondents indicated they would like to see changes in federal approaches, particularly in rural and hard-to-staff schools.

The requirement to replace 50 percent of staff and principal is very difficult in rural areas. Doesn't really make much sense.

How Do States Currently Support School Turnaround?

Responding to the survey, SEA representatives reported whether they were providing any of the supports for school turnaround on a list we provided them (table 4). This list was derived from previous studies of state supports for school improvement under ESEA.

Table 4. Nearly all SEAs report they offer general monitoring and data review, as well as onsite monitoring of school turnaround efforts

	Frequency
General monitoring and data review	98%
Onsite monitoring of school turnaround efforts	96%
Professional development, voluntary activities	85%
Guidance on selecting school intervention models	83%
Information on best practices for low-performing schools	80%
Professional development, mandatory activities	69%
Guidance on finding and selecting external providers	65%
Identification and recruitment of highly effective teachers	46%
Instructional materials (curriculum, textbooks, etc.)	41%
Technology-based instructional materials (hardware, instructional software, etc.)	39%
Lists of approved external providers (e.g., of school turnaround services)	37%
Training for external providers (e.g., nongovernmental agencies that provide school turnaround services)	30%
Other	9%

Note: This table was ordered by highest frequency of responses.

SEA representatives also answered an open-ended question about what challenges (if any) their state faced in providing assistance on school turnaround. Fifty-three individuals responded to this question.

- More than half of respondents reported SEA capacity was a challenge.
- About a third said their budgets posed problems.
- Another third reported differentiating supports to schools proved difficult.

When describing the SEA capacity challenge, respondents wrote most frequently about SEA staff time and coordination within the SEA rather than staff knowledge (which our other survey question focused on). Two typical responses included:

The most effective practice is frequent monitoring and support via onsite presence by SEA staff. However, there is more "business" than there is manpower to meet it. Rural and reservation schools are also challenging.

[Some challenges are:] increasing the internal coherence within the SEA to coordinate the delivery of support services to turnaround schools and districts, securing funding streams to support the turnaround services and internal SEA operations, and developing strategies for sustainability in turnaround schools and districts.

Not surprisingly, in these difficult economic times, about a third of respondents indicated they suffered from budget woes. These budget difficulties made assisting with school turnaround challenging.

With budget cuts in our 1003(a) funds, our onsite technical assistance will be redesigned.

[There are] not enough funds to support the work, and the federal government wants to give more resources to individual schools versus supporting the larger system of low-performing schools with sharing the resources.

Finally, about a third of respondents reported having difficulty providing services tailored to schools' needs. Some also noted that determining school needs was sometimes challenging.

[The challenge is] working with large districts that feel they can work alone with their schools (which dominate the list of low-performing schools [in the state]).

[There is] a disconnect between perceived performance on indicators and actual practice.

While these survey results show that states are supporting school turnaround efforts in many ways, the results also indicate areas in which states might need assistance. The next section of this report describes these areas of need in more detail.

What Assistance Do States Need for School Turnaround?

The CST organized its work plan and designed assistance for SEAs around a set of 12 focus areas derived primarily from the needs of schools and districts. Responding to this survey question, SEA representatives indicated the degree to which they believed their state needed assistance in each of the 12 focus areas (table 5). Respondents confirmed that SEAs do need assistance in the CST focus areas.

Table 5. The majority of SEAs (at least 79%) “agree” or “strongly agree” they need assistance in all but one of the CST focus areas.

My state needs assistance in...	“Agree” or “Strongly Agree”
Building district capacity to assist with school turnaround (e.g., improving district staff knowledge of existing school-turnaround research)	98%
Developing SEA staff capacity to assist with school turnaround (e.g., improving SEA staff knowledge of existing school turnaround research)	94%
Improving capacity of local school boards to support turnarounds	94%
Promoting the use of expanded learning time (e.g., extending the school day, increasing the number of school days per year, or expanding instruction in core content areas)	93%
Monitoring and evaluating school turnaround efforts	91%
Ensuring the development of local turnaround leaders (e.g., principals and other administrators)	89%
Engaging families and communities	87%
Ensuring a pool of high-quality turnaround partners (e.g., agencies other than the state that can provide assistance with school turnaround)	85%
Building political will for change	83%
Supporting schools and districts in establishing a positive school climate	82%
Ensuring the timely availability of useful data from SEA-level data systems	79%
Promoting cooperative labor-management relations (e.g., help guiding and negotiating union contracts)	54%

Note: This table was ordered by highest frequency of responses for “agree” or “strongly agree.”

In almost all states, participants agreed that the state needed assistance building internal capacity as well as the capacity of districts and school boards. Districts and states may need added capacity in a number of areas—from more funding to better technology—but this survey question particularly defined capacity around “knowledge of existing school-turnaround research,” since adding to this capacity was within the purview of the CST.

Respondents from fewer states—just over half—agreed that they needed assistance promoting cooperative labor-management agreements. However, recent research shows that unions vary in strength across the nation. It may be that states with stronger unions will need more assistance.

What's Next for CST's Tracking of State Practices and Needs for School Turnaround?

Based on survey responses, this report describes state leaders' perceptions of their current school turnaround efforts. More changes may be on the horizon as states intensify their efforts to help their low-performing schools. CST and Education Northwest are deeply committed to using data to inform policy and practice. As part of that commitment, we plan to repeat many elements of this survey annually. We anticipate that this will help CST provide high quality, relevant, and useful technical assistance to states on school turnaround. In addition, CST plans to present these survey results to other school turnaround leaders, in order to assist in the national school turnaround effort.