



School Turnaround in Shanghai

The Empowered-Management Program Approach
to Improving School Performance

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Introduction and summary

Public-school students in the world's largest city, Shanghai, China, are academically outperforming their counterparts across the globe and becoming the talk and envy of education experts worldwide.¹ Using an innovative partnering approach that matches successful schools with low-performing schools, Shanghai has valuable lessons to teach on turning around public-school systems—lessons that transcend several of the unique characteristics of the Chinese educational system, as well as the country's rich pedagogical traditions.

In development for more than a decade, Shanghai's empowered-management program aims to improve student achievement in all of its schools by contracting high-performing schools to turn around the academic outcomes of low-performing schools.² Chinese officials regard the program as highly successful and have extended its reach across school districts and to other parts of China.

For a number of years now, the Shanghai approach to schooling has garnered worldwide attention due to its students' impressive performance on international assessments. Results from one of the most respected of these assessments, the Program for International Student Assessment, or PISA, ranked Shanghai as the world's highest-performing education system in 2009. The student assessment, which is conducted every three years, evaluates the math, reading, and science skills of 15-year-old students from more than 70 countries. According to the most recent results available, from the 2009 administration, the average 15-year-old student in Shanghai performs at a math level that is 33 months ahead of the average 15-year-old student in the United States. The performance gap in science is 23 months, and the performance gap in reading literacy is 17 months.³

Admittedly, some have questioned Shanghai's performance on the evaluation, claiming that the results are false, misleading, or the results of selective sampling of students to take the PISA tests. There is, however, no evidence to support such claims.⁴

Just as impressive is the fact that Shanghai's high academic performance is matched by greater equity. This means that there is little difference in student

performance across economic strata. While a student from a poor family or community in the United States is more likely to fall behind academically than his or her peers, the same isn't true of poor students in Shanghai.⁵ In fact, the poorest 10 percent of students in Shanghai perform at a level in math that is on average 28 months ahead of the poorest 10 percent of students in the United States.⁶ What's more, the achievement gap between the lowest- and highest-performing students in Shanghai is smaller than the achievement gap in the United States.⁷

The differences between the performances of students in Shanghai schools and students in U.S. public schools are stark. What, then, can be learned from successful practices in Shanghai? The answers are many and complex. Certainly, not all Shanghai practices could or should be replicated in other countries, and context clearly matters.

In this paper we discuss and closely examine Shanghai's empowered-management program, an important education initiative that has markedly improved low-performing schools in Shanghai. We discuss the program and its implementation in detail in order to help our readers better understand it and to determine those aspects of it that would best suit school systems in the United States. Importantly, this paper argues that cultural differences would not prevent the bulk of this program from being successfully reproduced in the United States, although we fully acknowledge that the program cannot be replicated without some attention to differences across systems.

School-improvement debates in the United States are complex and contested, not least because "school turnaround" has two distinct meanings. As part of President Barack Obama's efforts to implement school reform, "turnaround" is one of four approaches that school districts can take to improve an underperforming school participating in the School Improvement Grant program.⁸ More broadly, school turnaround refers to the process of improving a poorly performing school.

The steps taken in Shanghai to successfully turn around schools will be clearly recognizable to anyone familiar with the school-turnaround process in the United States and other countries. The principles of school improvement remain consistent across the globe.⁹

In Shanghai there are five main factors that are critical to turning around low-performing schools:

- School leadership and strategic planning that raise expectations of students and teachers

- School culture that supports and promotes student learning
- Effective teaching that emphasizes professional collaboration
- Measurement and development of student-learning and effective-learning behaviors
- Strong community relationships that promote student learning

The empowered-management program contracts high-performing schools to work with low-performing schools—usually for a two-year period—in order to turn around their performance. Teachers and school leaders from both schools move between the two schools building capacity and developing effective practices to turn around the low-performing school.

School-district officials in Shanghai match the low- and high-performing schools. Once two schools are matched, the high-performing school is contracted to turn around the performance of the low-performing school. Extensive monitoring and evaluation ensures that the high-performing school is only paid under the terms of the contract if they are deemed to have been successful in turning around the performance of the lesser-performing school. The contract can be terminated and payments can be withheld if they are not successful.

A lack of detailed school- and student-performance data can make it difficult for outside observers to quantify the success of the program. As a consequence, this paper does not attempt to quantify the effectiveness of the program, as data needed to do so were not available and because there is not yet conclusive quantitative evidence of the impact of the program on student progress. There are no studies, for example, that measure the impact of the program using school-level, value-added data, which measures the contribution that schools make to student progress. (For an explanation of how additional information was gathered for this report, please see the Methodology.)

This report is therefore more descriptive, highlighting the apparent strengths of the program that align with international evidence on effective schooling. In Shanghai the evaluation of the program itself is more qualitative, analyzing in schools the behaviors that international research has shown to be important to effective learning and teaching and the assessment of parents' reactions. Further empirical research is required to assess the effectiveness of the program, but it is clear that key decision makers at every level of Shanghai school education consider the empowered-management program to be key to improving performance and equity.

Contextual differences in school education between the United States and Shanghai

A number of contextual differences should be considered in discussing how an education program in Shanghai can inform programs in Western countries such as the United States. Cultural differences clearly play a role in school education, but they are too often overemphasized in explaining differences in performance or as a reason why meaningful reform cannot occur.¹⁰ The evidence rarely supports such arguments.

We should always consider how cultural differences affect policies and programs and how they should be adapted to suit local contexts, but it is easy to exaggerate differences that do not directly relate to the key issues. Still, a number of contextual differences do need to be considered. There are important differences, for example, in the way that schools are financed in Shanghai versus in the United States. Most schools in the United States are funded by state and local revenue. Only about 10 percent of education in the United States is federally funded.¹¹

At the school-district level, much of the funding in the United States comes from local property taxes. Schools in areas with higher property values have larger budgets, which generally means that schools with an enrollment of students with higher socioeconomic statuses also have more and better resources.¹² A recent analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data found that funding ranges from a low of slightly more than \$8,000 per student in Barbourville, Kentucky, to a high of almost \$27,000 in Scarsdale, New York.¹³ This school-funding variance puts the United States in the minority of countries studied in the Program for International Student Assessment—one of only three, in fact—where schools in richer areas have greater resources than schools in poorer areas.¹⁴

In contrast, funding for the public-education system in China has traditionally been highly centralized. In recent years, however, Beijing has granted greater autonomy to provinces. And while Shanghai is a municipality, it has been granted specific status as an innovative school-education area, meaning that it has been granted even more autonomy than other provinces in China. This has allowed Shanghai to pursue specific policies such as increased autonomy to local school districts and the empowered-management program.¹⁵

Shanghai has benefited from this increased autonomy. This is illustrated by the fact that more innovation and subnational decision

making has been encouraged in Shanghai than in most of China's other provinces. This has helped Shanghai become a pioneer in education reform, which has improved key aspects of its schools and instructional practices in ways that improve outcomes in the areas of curriculum, teaching, and leadership.¹⁶

Other changes in Shanghai are also important in understanding the empowered-management program. "Key schools"—elite schools exclusively for high-performing students that once received a disproportionate share of resources—are being abolished.¹⁷ Additionally, schools in Shanghai have the autonomy to work in clusters or form partnerships, which enable them to share resources.¹⁸ Schools with a greater proportion of disadvantaged students, such as those with a high concentration of migrant students or students with lower socioeconomic profiles, need more resources in order to provide an equitable standard of education.¹⁹

It is also important to understand some fundamental elements of public-school education in Shanghai. Compared to most other school systems around the world, Shanghai makes large investments in the following four aspects of teachers' work that are considered fundamental for effective schooling:

- Professional collaboration
- Professional learning
- Induction and mentoring
- Research and lesson groups²⁰

These four areas are key to understanding the empowered-management program, as they are often central to turning around low-performing schools. These areas have had an increased impact on classroom learning and teaching due to effective implementation programs that focus on continually improving learning and teaching in classrooms. Effective implementation of each of these aspects has been shown to be critical to improving schools in numerous education systems around the world.²¹

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