



# 7 Tenets for Sustainable School Turnaround

How States Can Improve Their Lowest-Performing Schools Under ESSA

By Scott Sargrad, Samantha Batel, Karen Hawley Miles, and Karen Baroody September 2016

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Part of a Series on Implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act

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# Introduction and summary

Across the country and often with support from the federal government, district and state leaders are engaging in the critical work of turning around chronically underperforming schools. These leaders are using a variety of approaches to tackle this challenge. While some are creating separate school districts for the lowest-achieving schools, others are using charter management organizations and providing parents with greater choice, and still others are appointing state receivers to take over struggling districts.

While many places have made significant progress in improving outcomes for students in schools targeted for turnaround, there are significant opportunities to better leverage the key learnings from these various initiatives to improve overall system policy and practice. In general, most turnaround efforts have focused on improving individual schools, with less attention paid to changing the school-system level conditions that contributed to the chronic underperformance in the first place. Indeed, previous turnaround efforts have often led to unintended consequences, from unequal distribution of resources and unfavorable community impact to lack of cooperation and unhealthy competition.<sup>1</sup>

Getting this turnaround work right is important now more than ever, particularly as the Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, gives states greater autonomy to support their lowest-performing schools. States will also have the opportunity to direct more Title I dollars to turnaround initiatives under the new law than in previous years.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, a strategic understanding of best practices will bolster leaders' roles in these efforts.

To this end, in January 2016, the Center for American Progress and Education Resource Strategies, or ERS—a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving urban schools—brought together federal, state, and local leaders with expertise in school turnaround to develop a set of design tenets for state policymakers. Through this collaboration, CAP and ERS aim to use evidence from the field to affect local, state, and federal law and policy.

Included in the conversation were current and former state superintendents, district and regional superintendents, and state and federal officials. As a result of that discussion, this report outlines seven tenets for state leaders to consider:

1. Grant districts, and ultimately the state, the authority to intervene in failing schools.
2. Provide significant resources to support planning and restructuring and leverage competitive grants.
3. Treat the district as the unit of change and hold them accountable for school improvement.
4. Create transparent tiers of intervention and support combined with ongoing capacity building and sharing best practices.
5. Promote stakeholder engagement.
6. Create pipeline programs for developing and supporting effective turnaround school leaders.
7. Embed evaluation and evidence-based building activities in school implementation.

This report also recommends the appropriate roles for the federal government, states, districts, and schools to play in supporting successful turnaround efforts.

It is important to note that while this report is focused on state-level policies and system-level reforms, much of the most crucial work of school turnaround happens at the local level. For a more detailed discussion of effective school-level interventions and supports, please see CAP's report "Strategies to Improve Low-Performing Schools Under the Every Student Succeeds Act."<sup>3</sup> Additional turnaround resources include "Back from the Brink: Lawrence, MA," an ERS case study of Lawrence Public Schools, and "Turning Around the Nation's Lowest Performing Schools," a CAP and ERS publication that recommends five steps for districts to improve their chances of success.<sup>4</sup>

# Brief history of school turnaround

The idea of school turnaround originated in the Improving America's Schools Act, or IASA—the 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or ESEA.<sup>5</sup> IASA required states and districts to identify schools for improvement and review the schools' plans, provide professional development to staff, and offer technical assistance or other supports. If schools did not improve, the law authorized districts to take corrective actions such as withholding funds, changing the curriculum, decreasing a school's decision-making authority, or paying transportation costs for students to transfer to better schools. Furthermore, if districts failed to carry out these responsibilities, the law authorized states to intervene.<sup>6</sup>

The No Child Left Behind Act, or NCLB—the 2002 reauthorization of ESEA—built on IASA's school improvement foundation. In addition to corrective actions, NCLB authorized districts to restructure schools that persistently failed to improve. Districts could reopen the school as a public charter school; replace all or most of the school staff; contract with a private management company to operate the school; turn the operation of the school over to the state; or implement any other major restructuring that made fundamental reforms. School Improvement Grants, or SIG—a percentage of Title I dollars that states set aside—funded districts to do this work.<sup>7</sup>

In 2007, the U.S. Congress allotted \$125 million for SIG in the program's first line-item appropriation, and the U.S. Department of Education issued guidance giving states flexibility in determining intervention strategies.<sup>8</sup> Two years later, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, or ARRA, appropriated \$3 billion for SIG.<sup>9</sup> The ARRA also authorized Race to the Top, or RTT—a competitive grant program to spur K-12 education improvements and turn around the nation's lowest-achieving schools. As of 2014, winning states had combined approximately \$280 million of RTT funding with \$1.5 billion of annually appropriated SIG money on school turnaround efforts over the four RTT grant years.<sup>10</sup>

With an influx of funds to the SIG program, the Department of Education issued new regulations in 2009 that significantly increased the SIG program’s targeting of the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools in each state and required more aggressive action to improve these schools.<sup>11</sup> Prior to these new regulations, districts and schools nearly always chose the program’s “other major restructuring” option; for example, some states chose this option up to 96 percent of the time.<sup>12</sup> And the most common intervention under the “other major restructuring” option was simply to change curricula or instructional programs.<sup>13</sup> As a result, the Department of Education eliminated this option and required districts to choose between one of four models to improve the lowest-performing schools: turnaround, restart, closure, or transformation. The Department of Education also increased the range of school awards in addition to the number of schools eligible to receive SIG funds.<sup>14</sup>

In 2011, when it became clear that congressional action to reauthorize ESEA was unlikely, the Department of Education offered states the opportunity to seek waivers from NCLB’s outdated accountability provisions in exchange for state-developed improvement plans. As part of these plans, states identified their lowest-performing 5 percent of schools and those with graduation rates of less than 60 percent, and districts with these schools implemented interventions aligned with seven key “turnaround principles.”<sup>15</sup> These principles focused on strong leadership, effective teaching, more learning time, better instructional programs, use of data, supportive school climate, and family and community engagement.<sup>16</sup>

In March 2015, the Department of Education issued regulations with two new SIG models: an evidence-based, whole-school reform model and a state-determined intervention model focused on improving educational outcomes in pre-school and early grades.<sup>17</sup> Later that year, the Every Student Succeeds Act—the most recent reauthorization of ESEA—eliminated the SIG program. But ESSA continues to require states to set aside a portion of Title I funds for schools that they have identified for comprehensive support and improvement or targeted support and improvement.<sup>18</sup>

Accordingly, states and districts now have greater autonomy in designing and implementing turnaround interventions. This report focuses on strategies for comprehensive support and improvement, which districts will develop for the lowest-performing 5 percent of Title I schools, high schools with graduation rates below 67 percent, and schools with chronically low-performing subgroups of students.<sup>19</sup> As states tackle this challenge, CAP and ERS recommend the seven tenets of school turnaround outlined and discussed below.

## Methodology

In January 2016, the authors of this report—who represent CAP and ERS—hosted a roundtable discussion with district, state, and federal leaders and supplemented the conversation with a review of research and best practices on school turnaround. Included in the dialogue were Mitchell Chester, commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education; Jeff Riley, superintendent of Lawrence Public Schools; Kevin Huffman, former Tennessee commissioner of education; Sharon Griffin, regional superintendent of Innovation Zone Schools in Memphis, Tennessee; Peter Sherman, executive director of school and district performance at the Colorado Department of Education; Amy Keltner, director of academic projects at Denver Public Schools; Gary Robichaux, former chief executive officer of ReNEW Schools in New Orleans, Louisiana; and Ann Whalen, senior advisor to the secretary, delegated the duties of assistant secretary in the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education at the U.S. Department of Education.

# Tenets of school turnaround

The seven tenets of school turnaround embrace the need for dramatic redesign to improve students' opportunities for success by turning around the lowest-performing schools. They should serve as guidelines for policymakers as they design their turnaround systems and supports. To this end, state policymakers should grant districts, and ultimately the state, the authority to intervene in failing schools; provide significant resources to support planning and restructuring and leverage competitive grants; treat the district as the unit of change and hold them accountable for school improvement; create transparent tiers of intervention and support combined with ongoing capacity building and sharing of best practices; promote stakeholder engagement; create pipeline programs for developing and supporting effective turnaround school leaders; and embed evaluation and evidence-based building activities in school implementation.

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Tenet 1: Embrace the need for dramatic redesign by granting authority for districts—and ultimately the state—to intervene directly in failing schools

States, as a part of their intervention and support framework, should ensure that both districts and ultimately the state itself have the authority and flexibility needed to make major changes in the lowest-performing schools, including the authority to hire and fire staff and school leaders; make spending and other resource allocation decisions; change the school day, week, or year; and implement new instructional programs.

States should initially provide increased flexibility for districts around state rules and regulations, as well as around local collective bargaining agreements, in order to allow districts to take more direct action to replace staff, reallocate resources, or make significant changes to instructional time. If districts are not able to successfully turn their schools around, states should have the authority to take their own direct action at both the district and school level, including through school takeover or district receivership. The key factor is the ability of the lead

turnaround agent—be it the state, the district, or an outside operator—to take unilateral action. This freedom—which may include rethinking staff composition and roles—is the condition that enables a series of changes to affect comprehensive redesign of the school.<sup>20</sup>

In 2003, for example, Louisiana passed legislation that gave the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, or BESE, the authority to take over chronically low-performing schools in the state through the Recovery School District, or RSD.<sup>21</sup> The BESE planned for the RSD to oversee failing schools for an initial period of five years and after sufficient school improvement, return them to their local school board. But after Hurricane Katrina devastated the city in 2005, the RSD effectively overhauled New Orleans’ public school system. State legislation passed in the wake of the storm allowed the BESE to place more than 80 percent of New Orleans’ schools under RSD control.<sup>22</sup> Today, the RSD controls nearly 60 percent of New Orleans’ schools.<sup>23</sup>

Until 2014, RSD schools either were run by the RSD directly or were charter schools; after 2014, all RSD schools became charters.<sup>24</sup> In 2010, for example, RSD contracted with the charter management organization ReNEW Schools to operate six distinct schools in New Orleans.<sup>25</sup> ReNEW Schools employ a whole-school turnaround model to transform underperforming schools throughout the community, in part by focusing on the arts, science, and technology.<sup>26</sup>

This approach has earned ReNEW recognition. In 2012, the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, or PCAH, selected ReNEW Cultural Arts Academy as one of eight participating schools in its new nationwide Turnaround Arts initiative.<sup>27</sup> According to a 2015 PCAH evaluation report, ReNEW Cultural Arts Academy students in grades three through five—whose leaders adopted the most intensive interventions compared with other grades—experienced significant academic growth in addition to high levels of satisfaction and engagement after one year of investment.<sup>28</sup>

Overall, the RSD has made significant progress in student achievement, with its charter schools outperforming the previously direct-run schools.<sup>29</sup> RSD schools have also experienced greater gains than New Orleans’ schools overall.

For example, between the 2008-09 and 2013-14 school years, the RSD increased by 20 percentage points the share of students in grades three through eight who scored “basic” or “above basic” in English language arts, mathematics, science, and social

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studies.<sup>30</sup> The district, by comparison, improved student performance 15 percentage points during those same six years. The RSD also improved the rate of high school students scoring “good” or “excellent” on end-of-course tests by 34 percentage points, compared with a 26 percentage point improvement in New Orleans as a whole, during that time span. In addition, the RSD raised high-school graduation rates in New Orleans from 50 percent to 61 percent.<sup>31</sup> In May 2016, the state legislature voted to return RSD schools to the local school board by 2018.<sup>32</sup>

As a part of the turnaround process, districts and states can also use their authority and flexibility to give schools more support and autonomy. For example, states can require districts to give staffing priority to turnaround schools through earlier hiring authority or to give schools the flexibility to make changes to their staffing, reorganize and extend time, and engage outside providers. This autonomy can also create opportunities for innovation at the school level and lead to important lessons for the district and state about the level of flexibility appropriate for all schools.

The innovation zone, or iZone, run by Shelby County Schools in Memphis, Tennessee, relies on several of these strategies to improve its lowest-performing schools. Facilitated by extra resources, the district extended the school day, gave principals autonomy to select staff, employed content coaches to support teachers, and created partnerships with local universities. In addition, district teams work in schools on a daily basis to support turnaround efforts.<sup>33</sup> According to Kevin Huffman, former Tennessee commissioner of education, Shelby County is the top-performing iZone district in the state.<sup>34</sup> Huffman credits the iZone’s success, in part, to the state’s ability to take over districts.

Meanwhile, in the Lawrence, Massachusetts, school district—which the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education took over in 2010—the state employed similar strategies to improve its struggling schools through increased flexibility coupled with additional resources. By extending the school day, adjusting building leadership and staffing, and reorganizing schedules to enable teacher teaming, among other reforms, Lawrence schools witnessed improvement in student results.<sup>35</sup>

In particular, by 2014, the district saw significant gains in mathematics and moderate gains in English language arts proficiency—from 28 percent to 41 percent proficient and from 41 percent to 44 percent proficient, respectively.<sup>36</sup> Students improved 17 points in mathematics and 9 points in English language

arts as measured by student growth percentiles, or the amount of growth a student makes relative to his or her peers. Additionally, the district's graduation rate rose from 52 percent to 67 percent while the dropout rate nearly halved from 8.6 percent to 4.6 percent.<sup>37</sup>

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Tenet 2: Provide significant multiyear resources to support planning and restructuring and leverage competitive grant programs with rigorous review processes

Dramatic improvement in the lowest-performing schools requires a significant investment of transition funding because it is difficult for schools to quickly move resources to new functions given restrictions in contracts and various state regulations. Transition funds can help pay for activities such as planning for the turnaround process; restructuring the school's operations, including staffing and schedules; and building the capacity of educators. Once this transition funding ends, high-needs schools may require additional ongoing resources to serve their student populations.

As part of the turnaround effort, districts should also conduct a resource assessment to identify whether a low-performing school is being funded equitably before the addition of new dollars. In addition, a resource assessment will help district leaders understand the use of current resources and highlight opportunities for improvement. The Every Student Succeeds Act, for example, requires districts to identify resource inequities—which may include a review of district and school-level budgeting—when developing a comprehensive support and improvement plan for low-performing schools.<sup>38</sup> Schools with low-performing subgroups must also identify and address resource inequities through their targeted support and improvement plans.<sup>39</sup> Based on these assessments, most turnaround schools will need to restructure existing dollars or find new dollars to ensure that students have ongoing access to improvement strategies and resources, such as expanded learning time and wraparound services.

While the vast majority of federal, state, and local education funding is distributed via formulas, competitive grant programs can also have significant impact that is disproportionate to the actual amount of funding entities receive. These programs not only provide extra resources, but a rigorous competitive application process can also help build capacity and improve strategic planning even in districts or schools that do not initially win grants. All districts with the lowest-performing

schools need resources and support to turn these schools around, but a rigorous process at the state level can ensure that funds are allocated first to the places that are most likely to use them well, giving other districts time to develop and demonstrate similarly strong plans, evidence, and commitment.

At the federal level, for example, the competitively funded Race to the Top, or RTT, program directed resources to states, districts, and schools best equipped to transform their systems.<sup>40</sup> After four years of spending, RTT increased state capacity of grantee states and funded states to take bold new approaches to turn around their low-performing schools. Furthermore, the competition helped nonwinning states improve their turnaround strategies, as states modified laws and policies—including their authority to intervene in chronically underperforming schools—to increase their chances of winning an award.<sup>41</sup>

Under ESSA, states must reserve either 7 percent of Title I funding or the amount the state received for school improvement in 2016, whichever is greater, to support districts implementing locally determined, evidence-based turnaround strategies.<sup>42</sup> By choosing to competitively distribute all or a portion of these funds, states can first target resources to districts best equipped to succeed in turnaround work while giving other districts the opportunity to develop successful school turnaround plans and receive later rounds of funding. Grant competitions, accordingly, can serve as a tool to build internal capacity and ensure that all districts receive the resources they need when they are optimally positioned to use them.

Some states have already found success with competitively distributing funds to districts and schools. The Tennessee Department of Education, for example, ran a grant competition for districts to create its iZones, noted earlier, whose schools are in the state's bottom 5 percent.<sup>43</sup> Similar to the Shelby County Schools' iZone in Memphis, iZone schools elsewhere in Tennessee remain in their local districts and are allowed flexibility over staffing and programming in order to experiment with different turnaround approaches.<sup>44</sup> A 2015 study found that iZone schools have had moderate to large positive effects on student achievement in reading, mathematics, and science, outpacing state-run turnaround efforts.<sup>45</sup> Memphis iZone schools in particular had large effects in mathematics and science.<sup>46</sup>

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### Tenet 3: Develop a systems-based approach that treats the district—not just the school—as the unit of change and includes feedback loops for both states and districts

When considering how best to approach turning around a chronically underperforming school, it is natural to view the school itself as the unit of change. There is a specific school that needs dramatic improvement, and there are specific actions to take at the school level to do so: replacing the principal, changing the curriculum, increasing instructional time, and building human capital, to name a few.

However, with the exception of charter schools that are their own districts, schools are not independent entities; they are situated within districts that have policies, procedures, and rules that greatly influence the ability of the school to accomplish its goals. Furthermore, actions taken in an effort to change the turnaround school, such as changing staffing or school hours, without changing the systems around them can have unintended consequences for the rest of the district.

Additionally, while a middle school or high school may be particularly low performing, students often arrive at these schools from feeder schools that are not much higher performing and also need significant improvement. Without considering and addressing these issues at the district level, the likelihood of successful school turnaround is significantly lowered.

Accordingly, as the unit of change, the district should develop a plan for sustainability that changes the system conditions that contributed to school failure and addresses the environment from which students arrived while maintaining the critical components of turnaround for continued success. Drafting this plan within the first year of funding will allow for the district to address changes, identify updates, and outline school turnaround exit criteria.

For example, if the district determines that extended learning time or a change in school staff and leadership are the key strategies to turnaround a struggling school, the plan should define how the district intends to pay for a longer school day, week, or year or ensure better distribution of effective teachers and professional development for novice principals. The plan must also address how the district and school intend to reorganize funds to sustain these practices. This type of planning puts the district at the center of the turnaround process and recognizes that the school is not the sole agent of change.

Prior to 2009, for example, Massachusetts' state board of education reviewed and voted on 70 individual school turnaround plans—a strategy that largely ignored districts.<sup>47</sup> The state has since adopted a tiered approach that categorizes districts into five levels based on Massachusetts' statewide accountability system. Each level determines a district's autonomy: A level 1 district has the most flexibility, whereas a level 5 district is placed under state control.<sup>48</sup> Through this approach, Massachusetts recognizes that state engagement with low-performing districts and district engagement with all schools is needed for continuous, sustainable improvement.<sup>49</sup> It also underscores the principle that the possibility of state take-over is essential for aggressive district action.

For Massachusetts' level 4 and 5 districts—which require the most intensive strategies—the state approaches turnaround through both catalytic intervention and support. Level 4 districts design a district plan for accelerated improvement, and the state provides funding to support a plan manager responsible for managing implementation and a plan monitor to report on district progress.<sup>50</sup> For level 5 districts, the state-appointed receiver develops the turnaround plan in collaboration with the commissioner, receiving stakeholder input from teachers, parents, and community members.<sup>51</sup>

Accordingly, since schools are not solely responsible for their success or failure, districts need to be significantly involved in the turnaround process. However, accountability systems are typically focused at the school level. Though these systems may require districts to take action, they do not necessarily include supports for districts to be successful or consequences for districts that are not successful. Setting high expectations for district responsibilities in an accountability system sends important signals about the role of the district and can lead to greater district involvement across turnaround schools and other struggling schools.

For example, in 2012, Tennessee adopted an accountability system for districts based on academic achievement, achievement gaps, and academic growth.<sup>52</sup> Districts that reach the majority of their annual measurable objectives, or targets, are classified as “exemplary.” Additional designations include “intermediate,” “in need of subgroup improvement,” and “in need of improvement.”<sup>53</sup> Exemplary districts receive greater funding flexibility and are freed from state strategic planning processes and some state reporting requirements.<sup>54</sup> Districts that are in need of improvement, on the other hand, meet with state officials to create an aggressive plan for corrective action.<sup>55</sup>

In addition to state-level district accountability systems, federal law holds districts accountable to states for improving schools identified for comprehensive support and improvement. ESSA gives states the authority to intervene in struggling schools that have not exited turnaround status with district support in, at most, four years.<sup>56</sup> Rigorous state action may include direct school-level interventions, such as those addressing school operations.<sup>57</sup>

Furthermore, creating formal structures that provide feedback loops for both the state and districts also makes it more likely that this work does not happen in a vacuum. Particularly in large states or states with many rural and isolated schools, state officials may be further removed from what is actually happening in schools. Accordingly, they face challenges in understanding the day-to-day successes and struggles and in sharing information across schools and districts. Formal feedback structures such as online planning and implementation support tools, communication protocols, and virtual or in-person communities of practice can mitigate these concerns.

Louisiana, for example, uses Indistar—a web-based system that enables district and school improvement teams to organize and monitor improvement activities. Through Indistar, which launched in 2007 to support Virginia’s school improvement needs, states can document their progress using indicators of evidence-based practices and design their online systems to accommodate different zones of districts or schools.<sup>58</sup>

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#### Tenet 4: Create transparent tiers of intervention and support that combine early intervention with ongoing capacity building and sharing of best practices

A precondition for successful school and district turnaround is the state’s ability to effectively identify the lowest-performing schools and districts, the reasons for their continued low performance, and the level of intervention and support that is required. Nearly all state accountability systems have some way of identifying the bottom 5 percent of schools that need the most intensive interventions, but it is important for states to both differentiate among the schools within the bottom 5 percent based on their specific challenges and needs and, at the same time, identify additional tiers of schools that are still low-performing but may need less intensive interventions.

When determining the types of supports that districts and schools require, states should create tiered systems based on school and district need and include multiple levels of additional funding, supports, and flexibility. States should also articulate clear parameters around who—the state or the district—is responsible for interventions and supports within each tier of schools.

Denver Public Schools, or DPS, for example, classifies schools by four tiers of supports: universal, strategic, intensive, and turnaround.<sup>59</sup> Universal supports are available to all schools, such as support for data-driven instruction and English language learners. Strategic supports include school support with data disaggregation and managerial planning, in addition to a school quality review.<sup>60</sup> Schools receiving intensive supports go through a comprehensive strategic planning process that includes the identification of short-term and long-term school goals, tools for data analysis, and a tracking tool for monitoring progress.<sup>61</sup> Lastly, turnaround-tier schools receive wraparound services and targeted supports for school leadership, teachers, and the community.<sup>62</sup>

To effectively identify and support schools, state education agencies must build internal capacity and create new and more collaborative organizational structures for turnaround work, even if they do not plan to provide the support themselves. Historically, state education agencies were compliance agencies, focused on ensuring that districts and schools follow requirements for state and federal programs, use funds appropriately, and fulfill their legal responsibilities.<sup>63</sup> However, in the turnaround context in particular, state agencies need to approach their work in a significantly different way.

As a result, many states have created state turnaround teams or offices that have broader responsibilities, including support, technical assistance, and performance management. These designated turnaround personnel can ensure access to direct assistance through coaches and experts; examine performance data to help schools and districts make adjustments; and manage competitive grant programs that encourage innovation. Turnaround teams can also capture institutional knowledge in order to maintain lessons learned from across the state. While a formal turnaround office might not be the best approach in every state, states must ensure that key staff or teams of staff have clear responsibility for turnaround work.

Massachusetts, for example, used Race to the Top funds to build state capacity by hiring 30 to 40 additional staff. The majority of new personnel were deployed on programmatic work, including school turnaround supports. One staffer, for

State education agencies must build internal capacity and create new and more collaborative organizational structures for turnaround work.

example, was hired specifically to run a wraparound zone program. As the grant came to a close, the state repositioned the staffer to continue working on turnaround efforts, including social-emotional supports in turnaround schools.<sup>64</sup>

Building specific, dedicated capacity for school turnaround is also important at the district level. DPS, for example, has designated school turnaround staff that provide support in areas of federal and state turnaround policy, grant management, and budget management and communications. In years past, staff have been responsible for assisting two regional turnaround support networks of schools as they implement turnaround strategies.<sup>65</sup> The district's support network has since evolved. DPS supports two secondary school networks, one of which contains schools in the northeast region of Denver and the other a geographic mix of schools. At the elementary level, DPS has implemented an embedded model to support turnaround schools in small subnetworks—with a ratio of one instructional superintendent for every four to five schools—inside a bigger network of approximately 15 schools.<sup>66</sup>

In addition to delineating a state turnaround portfolio that can ensure access to high-quality assistance for schools and districts, states can create networks of schools so that school leaders and teachers are able to connect with their colleagues. These networks are not only critical for sharing best practices but also for providing a forum for those directly involved in the work of school turnaround to connect with their colleagues and provide support during challenging times. Being a principal or a teacher in a turnaround school can be an isolating experience, particularly if the school is under different rules and regulations than other schools in the district or if the school is already geographically isolated.

For example, Colorado launched an application-based turnaround network to foster collaboration among local schools and support turnaround leaders. Network-school principals have access to intensive professional development, visit high-growth schools, and learn about performance management and the use of data to drive instruction.<sup>67</sup> The network welcomed nine schools in the summer of 2014, 11 schools in the summer of 2015, and 12 schools in the summer of 2016.<sup>68</sup>

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## Tenet 5: Develop and implement structures and processes for states and districts to engage with families, communities, teachers and their representatives, and other stakeholders throughout the turnaround process

The most successful school turnaround efforts are those where the state and district have made stakeholder engagement a core part of their strategy. Conversely, some of the most vigorously opposed turnarounds are those where the state or district has not engaged with the community at a deep level or engages only when key decisions have already been made. States can put in place clear structures and processes to ensure engagement is ongoing and meaningful. It is particularly important that engagement begins at the very early stages of the turnaround process, including in the development of policies and strategies at the state level as well in the initial turnaround planning stage at the local level.

Then there is the example of Lawrence Public Schools. Although Massachusetts legislation gave Jeff Riley—who was appointed receiver of the Lawrence district in 2012—the authority to unilaterally alter the teachers’ contract, he and his team made a deliberate decision to work with the union to develop a mutually acceptable agreement. While this decision added almost a year to the process, ultimately the union approved a groundbreaking contract that included a new career ladder with more leadership opportunities for teachers and more school-based authority over working conditions.<sup>69</sup> In addition, Lawrence Public Schools launched an improved family and community relations department to strengthen its leadership team.<sup>70</sup> Not only did these reforms improve academic achievement, as noted earlier, but they also increased teacher satisfaction.<sup>71</sup>

While the engagement critical to successful school turnaround will take different forms based on whether the state, district, or an outside operator is the lead turnaround agent, the main responsibility for engagement should rest with the lead turnaround agent. For example, in a school turnaround environment where the state is much more heavily engaged in the local work, frequent two-way communication that involves all parties—state officials, district officials, and community stakeholders—can help build trust and ensure that information is shared across all levels.

Furthermore, it is critical that parents are involved in every stage of the turnaround process, especially even before the takeover work begins. Parents should know when their child’s school is in the bottom 5 percent of the state in terms of

performance; understand what this means in terms of their child's education; and be able to visit high-performing schools to have a point of comparison. Only then will parents be able to effectively advocate for their children, agitate at the district level to inform turnaround strategies, and hold schools and districts accountable.

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## Tenet 6: Create pipeline programs for developing and supporting effective turnaround school leaders

One of the biggest challenges associated with school turnaround is ensuring that there is a sufficient supply of principals who have the knowledge and skills to effectively lead the turnaround effort. As a result, states and districts need to develop their talent pipeline through both state- and district-level programs that identify promising school leaders and provide them with high-quality training and professional development that includes mentoring and shadowing; places them in schools where they are most needed; and provides continuous on-the-job support. These programs can be run by the state, the district, higher education institutions, or outside organizations, but in all cases, they should include ongoing program evaluation activities to continuously improve and meet the changing needs of the state's turnaround schools.

Colorado, for example, offers a variety of School Turnaround Leaders Development programs through partner providers to train teachers, principals, and district staff on team building, organizational management, and high-impact leadership.<sup>72</sup> The competitive grant, established in 2014 through state legislation, funded the participation of 87 aspiring leaders, school leaders, and district leaders in June 2015. Participants were selected from districts and schools with priority improvement or turnaround plans in an effort to create talent development pipelines in the state's lowest-performing schools.<sup>73</sup> In June 2016, the grant program welcomed a new cohort of approximately 50 leaders.<sup>74</sup> Some highlights to date include improved student achievement in high-impact schools and improved student and staff culture.<sup>75</sup>

School leaders have also received support from the federal government. Through the Turnaround School Leaders Program, for example, the U.S. Department of Education has offered competitive grants to states and districts to fund projects that train, place, support, and retain leaders in turnaround schools.<sup>76</sup> The Department of Education awarded 12 grantees in September 2014 and eight additional grantees in August 2015.<sup>77</sup>

In addition, ESSA authorizes funds for states to establish or expand teacher, principal, and other school leader preparation academies to prepare leaders to serve in high-need schools. States will partner with public or nonprofit organizations—such as institutions of higher education—to implement these programs, and participants receive certificates of completion only after they have demonstrated success in improving student performance.<sup>78</sup>

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## Tenet 7: Embed evaluation and evidence-building activities in school-level implementation through partnerships with higher education and research organizations

One of the most important ways to understand what is working and share lessons learned is to rigorously evaluate specific activities and determine their impact on student outcomes. At the same time, rigorous evaluations are not very common in education, particularly in the unique context of school turnaround. In order to make sure that evaluation results are valid, states need to ensure that evaluation and evidence-building activities are embedded in implementation from the very beginning.

ESSA lays the foundation for this work, requiring states to use evidence-based strategies to improve student achievement and instruction in low-performing schools.<sup>79</sup> States should build on this foundation by providing specific funding for evaluations and create partnerships with external entities that have experience in evaluation, including institutions of higher education and research organizations.

In Tennessee, for example, the State Collaborative on Reforming Education, or SCORE, works collaboratively to improve K-12 education throughout the state.<sup>80</sup> SCORE identifies evidence-based practices from other states to drive local solutions and monitors the progress of successes and challenges in schools and classrooms. In addition, the organization gathers information from teachers, principals, district leaders, state-level leaders in education, and national education partners to inform its annual report on the state of education in Tennessee.<sup>81</sup>

Colorado, on the other hand, has embedded internal evaluation into its Turnaround Learning Academy. Launched in 2015, the pilot program seeks to build capacity among district leaders and provide them with research-based professional development. District teams are responsible for ongoing evalua-

tion throughout the school year to improve district and school-level outcomes through district-level redesign. Teams also collaborate with the Colorado Department of Education's District and School Performance Unit for progress monitoring. The department built into the pilot a plan to conduct a follow-up review of districts at the end of the school year using best practices research synthesized from external organizations.<sup>82</sup>

# Conclusion and recommendations

By using the seven turnaround design tenets to guide their practice, states, districts, and schools can better serve students in need of the most support. While these policy tenets focus on states, other levels of government also play critical roles in helping to improve the lowest-performing schools.

The following recommendations delineate the federal-, state-, district-, and school-level opportunities to implement the above seven tenets and support successful school turnarounds. Like the school turnaround tenets, these recommendations are informed by the experience of leaders in the field.

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## Federal role

Since the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965, the federal government's main role in school turnaround has been to provide a dedicated turnaround funding stream through School Improvement Grants. Resources, however, were often spread thin at the lowest-performing schools. An influx of SIG funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, in addition to grant money from Race to the Top, enabled the U.S. Department of Education to rethink how to target resources, tighten approaches to rigorous interventions, and play a greater role in helping improve the nation's failing schools.<sup>83</sup>

The Every Student Succeeds Act eliminates the requirements for states and districts to choose from redesign models and distribute funds competitively. Instead, under the new law, states must reserve either 7 percent of Title I funding or the amount the state received for school improvement in 2016, whichever is greater, to serve schools most in need through locally determined, evidence-based strategies.<sup>84</sup> This set-aside is greater than the No Child Left Behind state reservations, which increased from 2 percent in 2002 to 4 percent in 2004.<sup>85</sup>

Although turnaround efforts will largely be at the state and local levels going forward, the federal government still has an important role to play. In particular, the Department of Education can play a convening role, creating networks of states to help state agencies learn best practices and share strategies.<sup>86</sup> The Department of Education can continue to support these initiatives through its What Works Clearinghouse, a research resource on education practices and policies, in addition to its Office of State Support, which helps states align and coordinate policy and financial resources for state-administered grant programs. The Department of Education can also continue to raise the profile of this work through partnerships with the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities’ Turnaround Arts initiative, for example.<sup>87</sup>

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## States’ role

The state has a myriad of roles to play in school turnaround, from smartly targeting federal funding for districts in need to providing cover for districts making politically difficult decisions. In order to effectively accomplish these goals, states must develop the capacity to both implement turnaround practices and draw lessons to inform present and future district practice. By setting clear expectations for turnaround operators and communicating key issues to stakeholders, states determine the nonnegotiables—or must-haves—for school improvement and support districts by building the capacity of external partners.<sup>88</sup>

States also have an important role to play in attracting and maintaining talented people to effectively implement school turnarounds. States must take on staff that can successfully guide districts and schools through turnaround operations. They can also affect teacher and leadership development pipelines by setting licensure requirements and determining salary schedule reform. By prioritizing the people involved in school turnaround and supporting districts in teacher and leader selection, mentoring, and placement, states can play a direct role in shaping the outcomes of school improvement.<sup>89</sup>

Furthermore, the state has the role of sharing and scaling best practices as they emerge, which requires changes to policy in most states. Most turnaround models, for example, rely on organizing talent, time, technology, and money in ways that policies that are fashioned for industrial-age school designs make difficult. The most important areas for change include regulations related to time, certification, tenure, and staffing.

Accordingly, schools serving students who may be significantly behind their grade level need to organize time, staff, and technology differently in order to help them catch up and accelerate learning. This means that rules requiring specific amounts of “seat time” to gain credit or rules around how much time schools must devote each day to certain subjects need to change. It also means that states that allocate or require specific staffing positions will need to enable significantly more flexibility. Recertification requirements that mandate that teachers take courses to maintain their certification take valuable time away from teacher learning and capacity building that must happen in teams at the school site and could be replaced with demonstration of participation in such on-site activities.<sup>90</sup>

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## Districts' role

Districts play a critical role in supporting school-level turnaround. As turnaround efforts begin, districts can ensure that the right school leadership is in place and help schools find the right mix of teachers from within and outside the district. With state support, they can secure transition funding, provide relief to schools around collective bargaining rules and district policies, and help find external providers or school operators with expertise that the district or individual schools may lack. And districts must engage with key stakeholders and leverage community resources to not only put the right strategies in place but also to garner the support of those affected.<sup>91</sup>

But perhaps more importantly, district transformation is critical for scalable and sustainable improvement. If districts do not change the underlying conditions that allowed these schools to fail in the first place, then once even the most successful schools come out of turnaround, they will be faced with the same challenges they faced previously and risk losing the progress they have made. As a result, districts must adopt a multiyear approach that involves sustainability planning, transition spending, and support for post-turnaround work.

Accordingly, districts can help support schools in several important ways. They must ensure that before and after turnaround dollars are distributed to schools, those with the highest-need populations receive the most money. After transition funding runs out, schools must continue to receive adequate resources to serve their highest-need populations. Districts can also help schools by building a strong pipeline of teachers and school leaders and by providing career opportunities and incentives to attract them to hard-to-staff schools and subjects. Districts'

central offices should provide school leadership teams with the flexibility they need to continue to adapt school staffing, schedules, and designs to meet student and teacher needs, as well as support schools around their biggest areas of need—including instructional leadership, curriculum and assessment options, and operational expertise. Districts can also share best practices and success stories among turnaround schools and other struggling schools in the district.<sup>92</sup>

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## Schools' role

Turnaround happens most directly at the school level. To succeed, schools must have in place a strong turnaround design model that fits the needs of their students and community and is both coherent and properly sequenced. Collaboration and communication with external partners—who are also engaged at the state and district levels—is key. Furthermore, schools must have strong leaders to not only facilitate these relationships but also to ensure that internal structures and protocols are designed to help teachers and students succeed.<sup>93</sup>

In particular, empowerment when it comes to budgets, hiring, and firing may give schools the opportunity to take better command of their turnaround operations, attract and support excellent teachers, and provide wraparound services. Control over academics, such as curricula and schedules, also gives school leaders the autonomy and flexibility to meet the needs of their students and communities.<sup>94</sup>

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