



7 Tenets for Sustainable School Turnaround

How States Can Improve Their Lowest-Performing Schools Under ESSA

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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.¹

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.² 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."³ 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.⁴

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