Revisiting The Turnaround Challenge: Lessons From the Field to Advance Pandemic Recovery in Low-Performing Schools

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It has long been the case that the nation's lowest performing schools serve our highest needs students — students who are systemically marginalized by virtue of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language, and/or ability.[1-3] But the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the need to provide dramatically different supports to these schools. Between 2019 and 2022, too many students lost ground academically, and researchers estimate that it will take the average student three to five years to catch up to where they would have been pre-pandemic.[4]

Students, particularly those who are systemically marginalized, do not have three to five years to wait. For these children, restoring academic achievement to pre-pandemic levels will do nothing to address long-standing educational inequities. At this critical moment, improving low-performing schools cannot recede into the background.

Purpose

This report revisits the concept of school turnaround in order to identify critical lessons learned for school and district leaders and state education agency (SEA) staff working to accelerate pandemic recovery in low-performing schools and begin the difficult task of reinventing public education to better serve systemically marginalized students.

Methodology

This report uses quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the implementation and outcomes of three turnaround zones established and implemented by urban public school districts in partnership with Mass Insight, the project organizer of *The Turnaround Challenge*,[5] between 2012-2019.

The Turnaround Challenge

Released in 2007, *The Turnaround Challenge* was an influential and controversial report shaping state and national education policy during the early 2000s.[5,6] Arguing that the United States' best opportunity to dramatically improve student achievement lies in "turning around" low-performing schools, the report proposed a turnaround model rooted in the assumption that states and districts could engineer more effective turnaround at scale by creating "an appealing 'space' or zone for failing schools."[5(p4)]

To be effective, the report argues, zones must change conditions, cluster schools for support, and build capacity. According to *The Turnaround Challenge*, changing conditions is best accomplished by empowering school leaders with, "flexible authority over critical resources — people, time, money, and program — and professional incentives that actively encourage people to do their best work."[5(p44)] Clustering entails grouping schools by need, type, or region for "intensive network support."[5(p52)] In *The Turnaround Challenge*, clustering is hypothesized to improve networking and resource allocation. It also requires a transparent and deliberate balance of decision-making authority between participating schools and the "lead turnaround partner" — an external organization or newly established district

office that assumes control over all aspects of zone management.[5(p50)] Building capacity is one of the central functions of the lead turnaround partner, which involves "enhancing schools' ability to recruit, train, assign, and support people with the right skills for the right jobs,"[5(p48)] providing sufficient funding and resources, as well as coordinating the work of external organizations in zone schools.

Noting that, "failing schools serve mostly poor children,"[5(p17)] a section of *The Turnaround Challenge* describes strategies "High Performing, High Poverty Schools" use to "bring highly challenged student populations to high achievement."[5(p9)] But there is nothing explicitly focused on diversity, equity, or inclusion in the report's turnaround model. While reflective of the national discourse at the time, this is a shortcoming that must be addressed by school and district leaders and SEA staff working to transform low-performing schools and address the current educational crisis.

Key Findings

Of the three zones studied in this report, two (Districts 1 and 2) experienced statistically significant improvement in test scores and/or graduation rates during the intervention period. Increases to the graduation rate in District 3's zone were also nearly significant during implementation years two and three. While descriptive results suggest that zone schools narrowed the test score gap with non-zone schools in District 1, trends in zone schools were only significantly different from those in non-zone schools during the first year of zone implementation in District 2.

Qualitative findings suggest that Districts 1 and 3 implemented their zones in a manner that was generally faithful to *The Turnaround Challenge* model. They gave zone schools new decision-making

authority to change conditions and established internal lead turnaround partners reporting directly to the Superintendent in order to build capacity and provide intensive network support to a cluster of schools. Although not explicitly a component of *The Turnaround Challenge* model, the Zone Office's ability to provide streamlined central office support/buffer zone schools in these districts helped improve resource allocation within the zone.

In contrast to Districts 1 and 3, zone implementation in District 2 differed significantly from *The Turnaround Challenge* model. The district did not alter decision-making authority in its zones and embedded the lead turnaround partner within the district's central hierarchy. Additionally, District 2 built capacity primarily by flooding the zones with resources.

While Districts 1 and 3 implemented their zones in ways that were more consistent with *The Turnaround Challenge* model than District 2, key differences between Districts 1 and 3 emerged in qualitative analyses. District 1's prior experience collaborating with its teachers' union to change conditions in a smaller subset of schools enabled District 1's zone to use its decision-making authority more easily than the zone in District 3. District 1's zone also appeared to benefit from a more collaborative district and zone climate than the zone in District 3. In District 3, bureaucratic and, to a lesser extent, union resistance hampered zone school leaders' ability to use new decision-making authority they received from the state. Finally, while both zones implemented planned teacher and principal turnover, in which teachers and principals were invited/encouraged to transfer out of zone schools if they did not want to participate in zone implementation, they each used different strategies to improve the effectiveness of the teachers and principals remaining at or moving into zone schools. Whereas District 1 used

a competency-based hiring process to improve the overall effectiveness of the teacher and principal workforce in zone schools before implementation began, District 3 relied on a mix of one-year contracts and performance-based dismissal policies. However, District 3 zone schools experienced challenges in implementing these approaches. During qualitative analyses, several other key implementation differences emerged. District 1 stood out for its ability to establish a clear focus and align capacity building efforts to that focus, while District 3 stood out for implementing a spiderweb network model that appeared to be associated with improved resource allocation and networking in zone schools.

Lessons Learned

Triangulating quantitative and qualitative findings offers the following lessons for school and district leaders and SEA staff working to transform low-performing schools and address the current educational crisis:

- The extent to which a district has established the conditions (time, people, money, and program) for school transformation seems to matter more than the strategies by which conditions change occurs. While *The Turnaround Challenge* argued that school leaders need new decision-making authority to change conditions, the results of this study suggest that new decision-making authority is not always necessary or sufficient to alter conditions in low-performing schools.
- Context matters. School and district leaders and SEA staff working to transform low-performing schools and address the current educational crisis would do well to focus on strategies for improving conditions in low-performing schools that have the greatest likelihood of success in their local context.
- In addition to time, people, money, and program; school and district leaders and SEA staff should

add district and zone climate to the list of critical conditions to be leveraged or improved. Adapting Cohen's definition of school climate, district and zone climate may be thought of as the "quality and character"[7(p180)] of district or zone life as expressed through interpersonal interactions.[8-10]

- The benefits of clustering — networking and resource allocation — appear related to the use of a spiderweb network model[11] and the establishment of a zone office with the structure and authority to offer streamlined central office support/buffer zone schools.
- While a large infusion of resources may significantly improve student outcomes in the short-term, school and district leaders and SEA staff working to transform low-performing schools and address the current educational crisis must combine additional resources with other capacity-building strategies if they are to affect long-term student outcomes in low-performing schools.
- School and district leaders and SEA staff would do well to use competency-based hiring processes, particularly when aiming to build capacity through planned teacher or principal turnover. They should also establish a clear focus and align their capacity building efforts to that focus.

While critics have rightly pointed out the faulty assumptions and limited success of the early 2000s school turnaround movement, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the need to dramatically reinvent public education in the United States. By applying the lessons learned from this study of school turnaround to the current educational crisis, school and district leaders and SEA staff can accelerate pandemic recovery in low-performing schools and begin the difficult task of reinventing public education to better serve systemically marginalized students.

Endnotes

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