

Beating the Odds: How State Education Agencies Can Better Support School Turnarounds

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Fifty states (plus D.C. and Puerto Rico) have been awarded U.S. Department of Education School Improvement Grants (SIGs) and are charged with making “dramatic changes” to their poorest performing schools. These grants represent the latest shift towards deepening the role of the state education agency (SEA) in school turnaround work. A soon-to-be-released study by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) on the implementation of SIGs provides an inside look into how this shifting role is felt at the school and district level. The study focuses on district capacity to support school turnaround efforts. Teachers and principals in SIG schools, district officials and SEA administrators were interviewed during fieldwork and their contrasting depictions of the ground level involvement of the SEAs sheds light on how states’ efforts to expand and improve their support for turnaround work can be maximized.

In the state we studied,¹ the turnaround work had many hallmarks of past efforts—extremely hard working, very well-meaning teachers, principals and district officials making marginal changes well within their comfort zones that in most cases, are unlikely to lead to the results envisioned by the Department of Education. Yet in field interviews, state officials described significant organizational shifts within the SEA, including the creation of a state turnaround office and deep investment in supporting schools and districts in their day-to-day work, all consistent with the federal guidelines for success.

Districts made use of these new state supports, yet continued to view the state’s role as largely monitoring grant compliance. This was probably because the state has played this role for some time, but it might also be a factor of the state-level changes not having the intended impact or reach. Principals and district administrators we interviewed wanted and needed different, more strategic, supports. Specifically, they want strong incentives for innovations that can be tied to improvements in student outcome. As was true for states in *Race to the Top*, these incentives can provide critical political cover when districts want to take bold steps but local conditions prevent it. Districts also want more technical support tailored to their individual needs, including hands-on help in recruiting and training promising school leaders.

SEAs move from monitoring interventions to facilitating them

The expression “school turnaround” has been around for more than four decades. To date, most turnarounds have been orchestrated at the local level and the vast majority have failed. Forty years of data have clarified one thing - successfully turning around a chronically poor performing school is a Herculean task and there is still no road map, we still have no best practices, but we have not given up trying.² Through

other researchers’ diligence, we have begun zeroing in on some promising practices,³ including shifting the work of the SEAs from their role of oversight and monitoring federal grant compliance to actively facilitating and even driving interventions. This shift was driven by a larger federal role via 2001’s *No Child Left Behind Act*, mandating states hold districts and schools accountable for results, warp speed changes to state legislation to increase chances of winning *Race to the Top*, and most notably, the announcement of the new SIG competitive grant.

A study of SIG districts offers clues to impact of SEA changes

In December 2009, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan turned up the heat on turnaround work by offering \$3.5 billion specifically targeted at the nation’s most troubled schools. Over 15,000 schools nationwide were in the bottom five percent in terms of performance and thus were eligible to receive SIG funds—1,228 schools did. Midway through the first school year of grant implementation, CRPE researchers began fieldwork for a study that would take a closer look at how things were going. We were most interested in understanding current capacity at a district level for supporting turnaround work and SIG provided the perfect conditions—lots of money, high stakes, and federal demands on states and districts to push for changes that were finally beyond the margins. After extensive interviews with teachers, principals, and district overseers of SIG funding (including superintendents) in three districts in one state we found the following:

- Districts viewed their role in SIG as a high-level compliance responsibility rather than an opportunity to dramatically rethink how to support struggling schools.
- Districts were unable to articulate a concise theory of change for chronically poor performing schools.
- Human resource policy changes meant to facilitate the removal of ineffective teachers were incremental and limited by principals who did not possess the time, ability, or support to utilize them.

A large body of research on school turnaround work (and some on turnaround work in the private business sector) concurs with these findings.⁴ As we saw firsthand, school turnaround work tends to happen on the margins and follows some now well-established patterns. With two interesting exceptions, the nine schools we visited fell into two buckets. Three schools employed the “kitchen sink” approach – i.e., introduced every possible turnaround intervention they could find. In one case, a school implemented a STEM curriculum, project-based learning, team teaching, block scheduling and an extended school day. Teachers and students were exhausted and benchmark test scores were stagnant.

In four other schools, administrators were also working extremely hard—but “around” the problems instead of directly “at” them. Organic gardens were planted and art curriculum was honed, but no one from the school or district could articulate how these interventions connected to academic improvement. The two schools bucking the trend were no different from the exceptions we have all heard about for years—even before Morgan Freeman brought us Joe Clark—their principals had the right stuff: a proven track record of turning around chronically failing schools and the ability to make quick work of the disarray and low expectations they inherited, undeterred by complaints that they were upsetting the building’s status quo.

After we completed district and school interviews, we turned our attention to the state, prepared to hear how widely its education agency had missed the mark. What we learned, surprisingly, was that the SEA had made substantial organizational changes to support the SIG program. This state was ahead of most in its creation of a statewide turnaround office, a recommended baseline step.⁵ This new Turnaround Office provided technical assistance to districts on choosing models and effectively negotiating with the unions. The state provided professional development to principals, including an intensive training on “turnaround leadership.” The state also contracted with well-respected retired principals to visit districts and provide on-the-ground technical assistance.

Had we interviewed state officials before heading into the districts and schools, we might have been surprised at the lack of bold turnaround work we found, given the changes and new expectations at the SEA level. With the local interviews fresh in our minds, however, we knew that all the supports state administrators had described were appreciated and had helped clear certain obstacles, but did not go far enough. Just as principals needed someone at the district level to provide them with strong support, political cover, quick answers and increased flexibility to address their unique set of challenges, district administrators needed the same from the state. The interviews with districts administrators demonstrate that this state still has far to go in giving districts what they need.

A question posed by a district to the SEA on use of SIG funds went unanswered for so long that the school ended up using the money for something else. A district under heavy union pressure to choose the least disruptive turnaround model had nowhere to turn for political cover and acquiesced. Uncertainty and reluctance to implement a new teacher evaluation system incorporating student growth scores was partly to blame when teachers recognized as poor fits for the SIG schools were not moved.

Four ways for SEAs to go deeper and fill in gaps for turnaround schools

Field interviews showed that teachers and principals in SIG schools are working very hard and want the absolute best for the students they serve. They see the grant as an opportunity to do things differently. In most cases, all their efforts and good intentions still fell short of what was needed to move their school from struggling to succeeding. To improve on the support states provide to struggling districts and schools, SEAs should consider the following ideas:⁶

- **Push to be bold:** The state must communicate the urgency of dramatic turnaround to districts by creating incentives to change that are beyond marginal—but that have a direct link to the school’s academic struggles. A rural middle school considering implementing

a STEM curriculum may be innovative, but when students are several grades behind in math and teachers have not had the requisite training, the change is unlikely to bring up scores. States can guide districts in designing turnaround plans that are both workable and likely to be successful, not simply funding “kitchen sink” proposals that layer numerous interventions onto existing models. States might consider taking a page out of the federal Department of Education playbook by inviting districts to compete for the now scarce resources and fully fund plans that have the greatest likelihood of success. They should then follow those districts closely, understand what, if anything, is working and encourage others to follow suit.

- **More technical assistance:** States need to up the ante on technical assistance. The districts we visited appreciated the help they got but wanted more—in the school and at the district. SEAs can guide districts as they form their own “Turnaround Offices” to prioritize turnaround work. They can also help them find effective partners—private companies contracted to ensure turnaround. SEAs can provide districts with a hotline to ensure that questions and concerns are quickly addressed and necessary supports are provided rapidly enough to be effective. Teacher evaluation is clearly a struggle. Districts we visited lacked the tools and expertise to collect, analyze, and use teacher evaluation data or to make instructional changes based on it.
- **More help in finding and training leaders:** Each district we studied struggled to find principals to staff their SIG schools. While the grant mandated that principals in place for more than two years be removed, districts were largely on their own to find replacements, and in some cases, looked no further than the school across town. Others hired consultants to search nationwide and still came up empty-handed. States can help districts by conducting nationwide searches for leaders within the traditional public sector, the charter school arena, and beyond. They can also look closely at state licensure requirements and legislation to see if anything is limiting the potential leadership pool.⁷ Ongoing and intensive leadership training for principals is also critical.
- **Provide political cover:** SIG language from the Department of Education mandated that districts provide schools the flexibility needed to make quick changes when things are not working. If districts are to be both brave and bold, they need states to clear regulatory hurdles that slow the work down—including political resistance. Every district leader we spoke with had ideas that they wanted to implement but feared pushback from local unions, boards, and communities. States can threaten or require actions of the district, and take on the “fall guy” role, by pushing local officials to make bold moves while protecting them from inertia-induced backlash.

While it is likely that the SIG program will produce some isolated pockets of success in this state and others, our work suggests that outstanding principals doing turnaround work prior to SIG investments primarily drive these successes. The financial and technical supports provided by either the state or district are, at this point, having a marginal impact. If states hope to have large-scale improvement in their chronically lowest performing schools, they will need to be more strategic and aggressive. Districts need strong supports tailored to their needs, quick answers to their questions and problems, and political cover in making tough decisions.

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1 The name of the state studied has not been revealed in order to protect the confidentiality of the interviewees.

2 Andy Smarick, "[The Turnaround Fallacy](#)," Education Next, Winter 2010.

3 Boston's Mass Insight Education along with others like the American Enterprise Institute and Public Impact have doggedly pursued answers for schools, districts and states on how to build the capacity to move the needle for schools where one-third or less of the students are proficient in math and reading.

4 American Enterprise Institute and Mass Insight Education, "Turning Around the Nation's Worst Schools," March 11, 2008.

5 Mass Insight, "State Turnaround Office: The foundation of a statewide school turnaround strategy," 2010.

6 Mass Insight Education, "Enabling School Turnaround Through State Policy," May 2010.

7 Julie Kowal and Emily Ayscue Hassel, "Importing Leaders for School Turnarounds," July 2011.