Addressing Persistently Underperforming Schools:
Evidence and Common Challenges

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Over the past thirty years, the federal government, states, districts, and schools have experimented with many different strategies to improve school quality when faced with persistent negative outcomes like low test scores and stagnant graduation rates. What do we know about the effectiveness of these varied strategies? What challenges emerge in implementation? And how can city leaders generate and sustain support for school improvement efforts?

There are numerous ways to try to improve schools. Some strategies, which we call *turnaround strategies*, aim to improve existing schools. These include reconstituting schools with new staff, innovation zones, and contracts with non-district operators to manage existing schools (see table 1 for more detail). Other strategies, which we call *new school strategies*, enable students to enroll in better school options. These include school closure and investments in new school pipelines for cities with few high-performing options. (We explain these more fully in table 2.)

Each of the five strategies represents a distinctive way to tackle the challenge of school underperformance. Design and implementation necessarily vary from place to place, and every initiative is constrained by local factors like resources, politics, and leadership. As a result, even the most rigorous evaluation evidence cannot tell us definitively whether the strategy will find success elsewhere.

This brief provides an overview of five strategies used for persistently underperforming schools that demand significant changes to how schools are organized. We conclude with questions that leaders can use to guide and assess implementation.

Assessing the Evidence Base on School Improvement

This brief draws upon published research, as well as the experiences of cities pursuing different types of improvement strategies. We conducted a scan of the literature in academic journals (e.g., *Journal of Education Finance and Policy*) using the search engine Google Scholar, and through public policy outlets (e.g., University of Chicago Consortium on School Research). We considered a broad array of evidence, including:

- Rigorous, quasi-experimental impact evaluations, such as those deploying regression discontinuity, which offer the best assessment of whether a school improvement strategy improved outcomes for students.[1]

- Qualitative and mixed method implementation studies, which can provide insight into both a strategy's mechanisms of action (how it works) as well as the systemic factors that shape success.

- Anecdotal evidence stemming from media accounts and conversations with system leaders to understand how school improvement strategies are perceived by stakeholders.

1. Experimental evidence, often referred to as the "gold standard," is generally not available on school improvement since it is rarely possible to randomly assign students or schools to receive tightly controlled interventions.

What We Know About Five School Improvement Strategies

While the features of the improvement strategies we review are varied, none provide any guarantees of success and each faces some common challenges.

- When it comes to results, how cities implement these strategies matters as much or more than what type of strategy is used.

- Implementation challenges are common, as citywide initiatives run aground in the face of political conflicts, organizational inertia, lack of qualified teachers and principals, and finite funding streams.

Tables 1 and 2 summarize the characteristics of each improvement strategy, results to date, and the implementation factors that research suggests shapes success.

Turnaround strategies aim to improve existing schools. While all states require improvement plans that put in place changes to curriculum, instruction, and educator effectiveness, in this brief we focus on three strategies that restructure schools through new governance and staffing arrangements. These include school reconstitution, innovation zones, and charter conversion (see Table 1). While each of these strategies represent distinctive approaches to improvement, there are important differences within the strategies that localities put into place. For example, cities employing reconstitution vary in terms of how many staff are replaced and the terms by which new staff are hired.

TABLE 1. Turnaround Strategies

Strategy	Approach	Rationale	Common Challenges	Notable Examples	Evidence*
School reconstitution	Replace most or all incumbent school leaders and staff.	New leaders and teachers will bring fresh energy and skills.	• Inadequate number of qualified teachers and principals to replace existing staff. • Lack of high-quality professional support staff. • Loss of effective incumbent teachers who leave during reconstitution process. • Support resources required may not be sustainable over time.	Chicago, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., Federal School Improvement Grants	Available evidence suggests reconstitution has uneven impacts. Effects of staff replacement depend on the recruitment and retention of effective teachers and principals. Two studies suggest schools that replaced more teachers were more likely to improve, but other studies find no difference and some identify negative impacts for historically hard-to-staff schools.
Innovation zones	Cluster of schools receives additional funding and flexibility over staffing and budgeting.	With greater autonomy and funding, schools will institute changes to improve student learning.	• Schools unable to recruit and retain effective teachers. • School leadership team lacks capacity to take on new responsibilities under autonomy. • District policy impedes school autonomy. • Extra funding sources dry up.	Denver, Indianapolis, Shelby County, Springfield	Positive results among TN iZone schools. Indications of positive results in Springfield, but not based on a rigorous analysis. Some indication that good results are driven by the selection and retention of effective teachers and leaders.
Charter conversion	Charter operator takes over management of a low-performing district school; typically changes staff, instructional practice, and schedule.	Using regulatory autonomy, charter schools will hire staff and alter instruction to better align with student needs.	• Operators often not prepared to deal with turnaround challenge in whole-school or neighborhood-based context. • Lack of strong charter school operator interest. • Politics around charter schools may limit conversion options.	Green Dot in CA and TN, Tennessee ASD, UP Education Network in Massachusetts	No positive impact in TN ASD. Anecdotal, positive evidence for Green Dot and UP Education Network. Indication that results are shaped by the preparedness of the charter operator, access to qualified teachers and support providers (e.g., special education), and local stakeholder support.

Note: See resource list for sources.

New school strategies are designed to help students enroll in a better school. These include school closure and the intentional development of new school pipelines by issuing requests for proposals (RFPs). Many districts have combined school closure with new school development by using phase-in phase-out, close-and-replace, or restart strategies. However, we present closure and new school pipelines separately (see Table 2).

A growing number of cities are also employing partnership strategies, where a district works with a charter operator or nonprofit to manage a district neighborhood school on an annual, renewable contract. This includes Atlanta, Camden, Indianapolis, and Philadelphia. There are a number of specific issues related to this improvement model, all of which are captured within "charter conversion" and "RFPs for new schools."

TABLE 2. New School Strategies

Strategy	Approach	Rationale	Common Challenges	Notable Examples	Evidence*
School closure based on persistent low performance	Schools are held to high performance standards. Schools that cannot meet the standards are closed.	Poor-performing schools in a system will either close or improve (motivated by threat of closure). If the school closes, students will attend better schools elsewhere.	• Lack of quality options for students to transfer to. • Politics of closure and unavailability of empty facilities can make strategy unsustainable over time. • Poor community engagement practices impede poor-performing schools from closing. • Destabilizing impact of school closure on students and communities.	Boston, New Orleans, New York City, Oakland, Washington, D.C.	Most studies on school closure find no short-term or long-term positive impacts on test scores for students in the closed schools. Results are more positive when students from closed schools transfer to higher-performing schools or when schools use phase-outs. Test scores for students in welcoming schools are not impacted long-term. The impact on attendance and graduation rates is mixed.
RFPs for new schools	District requests proposals for new school designs, often identifying the location where a new school is needed. New schools are operated by districts or charters.	New staff, students, and school will bring a "fresh start" and build new culture. Intentional development will result in a good match with community needs.	• City unable to attract qualified operators and/or school leaders. • Politics, lack of facilities, and lack of funds limit growth of quality school options (especially in the case of charters). • New schools are not vetted to ensure they are prepared to succeed. • Students most in need of high-quality options cannot access the new schools (information, location).	Baltimore, Cleveland, Denver, Indianapolis, New Orleans, New York City, Philadelphia	New Orleans showed initial, sustained improvement, but there has been recent decline. NYC's small high schools improved graduation rates and college-going rates. In Philadelphia, diverse provider schools performed similarly to other district schools. In Baltimore, new "transformation" schools struggled to make academic gains and most eventually closed.

Note: See resource list for sources.

None of the five strategies outlined here offers a surefire way to improve schools, but any of them is more likely to succeed when operating under the right circumstances. Pursuing multiple strategies, making the most of the capacities that exist across both the district and charter sectors, and regularly taking stock of what's working increase the odds that cities will find success. Varying the approach may also help education leaders manage the inevitable political fallout that comes from overuse of any one strategy.

Questions to Ask When Choosing or Assessing an Improvement Strategy

Each strategy represents a distinctive approach to improving schools, but all require city leaders to address the following critical questions:

1. **Do schools have the staff they need?** If not, is there a strategy to develop or attract talent? All school improvement strategies require dedicated and qualified teachers and school leaders, but certain strategies, like an autonomy or innovation strategy, may require specific leadership or teacher skills. A city will need to assess the quantity and quality of its talent across both district and charter schools and be prepared to adjust policies related to recruitment, placement, training, or development.

2. **What role can charter operators play?** In a number of cities, school districts have sought to tap capacity in the nonprofit charter sector to support school improvement. Leveraging charter schools to support school improvement requires attention to the spillover effects that such strategies often generate. This includes preparing for shifts in enrollment, transportation, special education, and other services that impact families' access to charter schools and paying attention to the policy environment that shapes charter school efficacy (e.g., accountability, facilities, and funding). District and charter leaders must be prepared to work together to make sure charter schools can productively contribute to the improvement strategy, which can prove challenging when the sectors lack a history of collaboration.

3. **Can you build support and survive opposition?** Every school, even a persistently underperforming school, has a loyal constituency. As cities consider an intervention, success may well ride on their ability to make a clear and compelling case to families and educators that the time has come for bolder action. Finding natural leaders among the current families who are willing to work in partnership – whether around closure, charter conversion, or reconstitution – will help to create a more authentic solution and manage the inevitable backlash from opponents. A citywide improvement strategy will need support from multiple levels, including community-based organizations, families, and educators as well as members of the civic, funder, and business communities. Education leaders can build trust by being transparent and realistic: avoid overpromising and underdelivering.

4. **Can education leaders monitor the success of the strategy?** Cities should clearly communicate the challenges that exist in low-performing schools and the strategies they are using to address underperformance. They also need to be transparent about progress or lack thereof so that families can hold the district or charter schools accountable, and so that leaders can understand which strategies work best under which conditions. To do this, the city needs capacity to collect, analyze, and publish data about how the improvement strategy is working, with special attention on the schools and student populations that are not finding success. Progress, or the lack thereof, should be relayed to families and community members throughout the process.

5. **Are long-term financial resources available?** Many of the improvement strategies discussed in this brief require the infusion of resources. City leaders must carefully assess what each strategy means in terms of long-term financial obligations and put in place plans to ensure that strategies can find success over the longer term, regardless of changes in short-term revenues. This may include funding for talent development or longer days/years, new schools, new organizations, or community engagement efforts.

Every city struggles with some schools that persistently underperform and most have tried some array of interventions. Some cities have had success with the five strategies we explore in this brief, but there has been little in the way of understanding the elements that contributed to their success. Going forward, cities should consider building a strategy that incorporates multiple improvement strands and that tracks their efforts so they can determine which ones are promising and why.

Resources

Research on multiple improvement strategies

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Charter conversion and partnership schools

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