



School Turnaround Strategies

A Literature Review on Effective Practices and Barriers

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OVERVIEW

School turnaround efforts have been a persistent challenge in education (Calkins et al. 2007; Herman et al. 2008). Despite significant attention from policymakers, educators, and researchers over the past two decades, traditional turnaround strategies have yielded limited success as studies consistently demonstrate low success rates for school restructuring, with only a small percentage of schools achieving adequate yearly progress (Smarick 2010). Economic shifts, advancements in educational research, business improvement literature, and educational policy have therefore influenced the evolution of turnaround mandates (Stuit and Stringfield 2012).

In response to this challenge, various interventions and strategies have been implemented to reverse declining student performance and overall school effectiveness. These efforts encompass comprehensive reform models such as restructuring, transformation, and restart strategies, which involve substantial changes to school operations, governance, and instructional practices. Initiatives such as the School Improvement Grants (SIG) program in the United States and network governance approaches in Shanghai, China, exemplify efforts to address the challenges facing underperforming schools through targeted funding and collaborative approaches.

There are several approaches to turning around underperforming schools. The transformation model involves replacing the principal, enhancing teacher and school leader effectiveness, implementing comprehensive instructional reforms, increasing learning time, fostering community-oriented schools, and providing operational flexibility and sustained support. A less drastic approach is to replace the principal and rehire no more than 50 percent of the staff while implementing similar improvements as in the transformation model. For more severe cases, the restart model involves converting the school, closing it, and reopening

under new management. School closure may be considered in extreme circumstances, with students being redistributed to higher-achieving schools within the district.

SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL TURNAROUND

Successful school turnaround involves rapid, strategic changes in school systems, significantly improving student achievement for persistently low-performing schools (Herman 2012; Lutterloh et al. 2016). Successful school turnarounds are associated with improved student outcomes in attendance, standardized test scores, and graduation rates. However, defining turnaround success is complex and often lacks clarity among states and districts (Lutterloh et al. 2016). While standardized test scores are commonly used to measure success, some argue for considering broader criteria, such as student motivation and preparation for productive citizenship (Berkeley 2012). Other turnaround programs, such as magnet school turnarounds, offer an alternative approach, focusing on increasing diversity, improving curriculum and instruction, enhancing school culture, and boosting academic achievement (Ayscue and Siegel-Hawley 2019). For this report, successful school turnarounds will be those that see a marked improvement in student test scores.

SIGNIFICANCE: IMPORTANCE OF IDENTIFYING EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

Identifying effective strategies for school turnaround is essential for several reasons. First, it directly influences the educational trajectories and future prospects of students in low-performing schools, who often originate from marginalized and disadvantaged communities (Redding and Nguyen 2020). Successful turnaround strategies can facilitate the closure of achievement gaps and advance educational equity. Second, understanding the efficacy of school turnaround initiatives provides insights for policymakers and practitioners, enabling optimized resource allocation and the development of more promising interventions (Murphy 2009; Murphy and Bleiberg 2019; Husain et al. 2022). Third, the achievements of school turnaround efforts can drive broader educational reforms and innovations, serving as exemplars for improving other struggling schools (Skedsmo and Huber 2022; Hill et al. 2023).

Research consistently emphasizes several pivotal factors contributing to successful school turnaround. These encompass strong, visionary leadership; a dedicated and skilled teaching force; effective data utilization for instruction and decision making; and external support and collaboration. Furthermore, strategies emphasizing local adaptation and continuous improvement, such as scaffolded craftsmanship and transformative social and emotional learning (SEL), have demonstrated promise across diverse contexts. While identifying effective strategies is important, a singular, universal solution remains elusive. Instead, successful turnarounds necessitate a comprehensive approach addressing multiple school facets and considering the unique circumstances of each struggling institution (Stuit and Stringfield 2012). Nevertheless, understanding these factors and their interactions within different educational environments is necessary for developing and implementing tailored turnaround strategies that address each school's specific needs.

LEADERSHIP AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

ROLE OF PRINCIPALS

Characteristics of Effective Turnaround Leaders

The role of principals in school turnaround is pivotal, as strong, effective leadership can significantly impact the school turnaround process (Herman et al. 2008; Aladjem et al. 2010). Research indicates that effective turnaround leaders possess distinct characteristics and competencies for driving rapid, sustained improvement in struggling schools (Leithwood and Strauss 2008; Duke and Salmonowicz 2010).

Consequently, the success of school turnarounds is heavily contingent upon the capabilities and actions of turnaround leaders. Steiner and Hassel (2011) identify specific competencies crucial for turnaround principals, such as achievement, impact, and influence. Turnaround principals, therefore, must exhibit a strong achievement focus, influence others effectively, and demonstrate a deep commitment to impact (Steiner and Hassel 2011; Copeland and Neeley 2013; Hitt et al. 2018). Such leaders establish high expectations, focus relentlessly on results, and employ data to inform decision making and track progress. Core leadership practices—setting a direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program—are equally pivotal for turnaround success (Leithwood and Strauss 2008). However, these practices necessitate adaptation across different turnaround stages.

Turnaround principals exhibit exceptional leadership qualities and attributes (Meyers and Hitt 2017). Effective principals are adaptive and resilient because they must be capable of navigating the complexities of school environments while fostering a culture of continuous improvement. They also must employ strategic actions to build momentum, such as identifying short-term wins that can generate quick, visible improvements in student outcomes. This approach enhances morale and instills a sense of urgency and optimism among staff and students.

Quick wins are considered essential catalysts for organizational change in low-performing schools. Research indicates that many principals struggle to develop high-quality quick wins despite the relative simplicity of orchestrating quick wins compared to traditional improvement plans (Meyers and Hitt 2018; Meyers and VanGronigen 2020). A lack of strategic development often hinders these plans, as they frequently fail to identify root performance issues.

Meyers and Hitt (2018) find that the quality of quick wins developed by principals is generally low, which could hinder the effectiveness of school turnaround efforts. Successful principals prioritize meaningful and achievable goals that have the most immediate positive impact on students. Principals who use data to create detailed action plans specify what each school community member must do to achieve the set goals and identify and achieve short-term goals to build momentum for change. Principals should emphasize successful tactics, discontinue ineffective ones, and adapt systems and structures as needed (Whyte 2018).

Overall, comparative analyses of different turnaround models reveal that more effective approaches, such as Innovation Zones, prioritize experienced principals with advanced degrees, competitive salaries, and lower turnover rates compared to less successful models such as the Achievement School District (Dixon et al. 2022). These findings emphasize the importance of selecting and developing principals with the requisite competencies and characteristics for successful school turnaround initiatives.

Importance of Autonomy and Decision-Making Power

Autonomy is critical for turnaround principals (Thielman 2012). Leaders empowered with decision-making authority can swiftly implement necessary changes and tailor strategies to their school's unique circumstances. Research emphasizes the criticality of granting principals authority over staffing, curriculum, and budgetary decisions for effective school turnaround (Kutash et al. 2010; Backstrom 2019). This autonomy empowers them to recruit and retain high-performing teachers, modify instructional practices, and allocate resources strategically.

A case study of Cristo Rey Boston High School (formerly North Cambridge Catholic High School) exemplifies this. The school's turnaround, initiated internally by the principal and faculty, was driven by a shared desire for educational improvement without external mandates. The principal and a core group of teachers possessed autonomy to significantly modify curriculum, schedules, instructional practices, and staffing. Unlike many externally mandated public school turnarounds, this internally motivated transformation yielded dramatic improvements in student performance and overall school culture (Thielman 2012).

However, autonomy should be balanced with accountability. Principals should be supported by district and state policies that provide clear goals and expectations while allowing flexibility in achieving those goals (Meyers et al. 2017; Arora-Jonsson et al. 2024). Thus, providing appropriate support and autonomy to turnaround leaders is essential for achieving rapid and dramatic improvements in failing schools (Steiner and Hassel 2011). This equilibrium ensures that principals can innovate, respond dynamically to challenges, and maintain focus on significant student performance advancements.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

STRATEGIC HIRING AND RETENTION PRACTICES

Strategic hiring and retention are essential to cultivating a competent, committed staff capable of implementing turnaround plans (Henry et al. 2017; Kho et al. 2018). Effective principals prioritize recruiting teachers with strong instructional abilities who align with the school's vision and are dedicated to the turnaround mission. Retention strategies should emphasize creating supportive work environments, providing professional development opportunities, and recognizing teacher excellence. Additionally, data-driven hiring practices guide the selection of candidates possessing competencies aligned with turnaround demands. Retention initiatives often include mentorship programs, collaborative planning time, and the fostering of

a positive school culture to enhance teacher morale and retention. These practices build a stable, effective teaching force crucial for sustained improvement.

An essential component of talent acquisition and development in turnaround schools is a system-level, differentiated human resources approach that identifies and prioritizes the specific needs of low-performing schools (Hitt and Meyers 2017). This differentiation entails district and state education agencies acknowledging the need for equitable access and support of essential human resources services for these schools. Achieving this equity often necessitates overhauling district policies and procedures to address low-performing schools' unique challenges. The districts examined in Hitt and Meyers's report demonstrate a firm understanding that teaching and learning are positively impacted when talent management shifts from a compliance-focused approach to a dynamic approach prioritizing candidate fit and quality for turnaround environments.

Furthermore, rural School Improvement Grant (SIG) schools encounter distinct challenges due to their remote locations, including teacher recruitment and retention difficulties and parental engagement obstacles. Strategies to mitigate these challenges have included providing teacher commute support and offering signing bonuses (Rosenberg et al. 2014).

TARGETED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Targeted professional development (PD) is essential for equipping teachers with the skills and knowledge necessary to address the challenges of turnaround schools (Huberman et al. 2011). PD initiatives should align with school-specific needs and goals, focusing on data-driven instruction, classroom management, and culturally responsive teaching.

Research highlights the insufficient preparation of educational leaders for managing turnaround efforts and the limited capacity of existing leadership development programs (Peurach and Neumerski 2015). This lack of preparation has resulted in calls for policymakers to prioritize engagement strategies, including teacher professional development, family capacity building, and community involvement from the outset (McAlister 2013).

Educational infrastructures, comprising policies, tools, and structures designed to support instructional improvement, are crucial for effective teaching and leadership. The relationship between infrastructure and practice is dynamic, requiring ongoing engagement from educators and leaders. Building teacher and leader capacity is essential for successful infrastructure implementation and subsequent educational reform. Collaboration among teachers and school leaders, facilitated by supportive infrastructures, enhances professional and organizational learning (Hopkins and Woulfin 2015).

Transformation and turnaround models emphasize increased investment in high-quality teacher professional development (Hill 2007). However, research indicates that traditional, one-shot PD programs often fail to improve teacher effectiveness (Garet et al. 2008; Garet et al. 2011). The TALAS (Turning Around the Lowest Achieving Schools) program in North Carolina, funded by Race to the Top, exemplifies the challenges of translating increased professional

development into improved student outcomes due to administrative burdens and resource constraints. Similarly, rural schools face unique challenges, including limited professional development opportunities (Rosenberg et al. 2014).

Effective PD programs are ongoing and embedded in teachers' daily work. They involve coaching, peer observation, and collaborative learning communities to support continuous practice refinement. Principals can empower teachers to drive and sustain student achievement gains by providing tailored support and fostering a professional learning culture.

In conclusion, leadership catalyzes school turnaround, with principals occupying a central role. Principal effectiveness is augmented by characteristics such as an achievement focus, resilience, and interpersonal influence. Autonomy and strategic decision-making authority are essential for principals to implement necessary changes. Additionally, staff development through strategic hiring, retention practices, and targeted professional development is crucial for cultivating a capable and committed teaching force. Collectively, these elements foster an environment conducive to rapid and sustained improvements in student outcomes.

DATA-DRIVEN DECISION MAKING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Data-driven decision making (DDDM) has emerged as a strategy for enhancing student achievement and overall school effectiveness. Research consistently shows a positive correlation between the implementation of DDDM and improved student performance, particularly in schools serving populations with low socioeconomic status (Van Geel et al. 2016). For DDDM to be effective, it requires a comprehensive school-wide commitment, active stakeholder involvement, and the integration of data analysis within collaborative professional learning communities (Denny 2020).

Despite growing international interest in data-driven education, empirical research linking data use to student achievement is still limited. One study examining a two-year DDDM intervention across fifty-three primary schools found a positive impact on student achievement equivalent to approximately one extra month of schooling, with notable benefits for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Van Geel et al. 2016). This result highlights DDDM's potential to address equity gaps in education.

Additionally, a district-level randomized control trial involving over five hundred schools demonstrated that a data-driven reform initiative positively impacted student mathematics achievement (Carlson et al. 2011). Similarly, a literacy intervention emphasizing data-informed instruction significantly improved reading achievement and secondary school qualifications (Lai et al. 2014). Further studies have confirmed the effectiveness of data-driven models in raising student achievement, with students showing gains of between three and four months of additional progress per year over three years, even in challenging contexts (McNaughton et al. 2012).

Data-driven school leadership can foster effective decision making. However, the lack of sufficient training for educators in DDDM remains a significant barrier to optimal utilization

(Denny 2020). To mitigate this, it is essential to complement input and outcome data with process indicators, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of school performance and promoting reflective professionalism (Kim 2012).

The implementation of robust data systems is fundamental to the success of DDDM. Huberman et al. (2011) showcased how schools such as St. Hope PS7 Charter in Sacramento effectively leveraged data systems to improve student outcomes significantly. The school exemplified the power of data-driven practices by analyzing student data weekly and using it to inform instructional decisions. Effective data systems should integrate multiple data sources, be user friendly, and be supported by ongoing staff training. Utilizing data to inform instructional practices requires regularly analyzing student performance, tailoring instruction to individual needs, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

Effective leadership is also essential for the successful implementation of DDDM. Player and Katz (2016) explored the impact of the School Turnaround Specialist Program (STSP), which emphasized building leadership capacity and using data to drive instructional practices. STSP schools in Ohio demonstrated dramatic improvements in student achievement compared to other Ohio schools. Statistical analyses revealed that STSP schools were three times more likely to be in the top 10 percent of annual growth than non-STSP schools.

While DDDM has shown promise in improving student achievement, its implementation requires careful consideration of the school context and the specific needs of student populations. Additionally, the impact of DDDM depends on effective leadership and resources. In conclusion, data-driven decision making helps drive school turnaround and enhance student outcomes. Schools can significantly enhance their effectiveness by investing in robust data systems, providing adequate training, and cultivating a data-driven culture.

FOCUS ON INSTRUCTIONAL QUALITY

Research consistently highlights the role of instructional quality and teacher characteristics in shaping student achievement, particularly for low-performing students. High-quality instruction, characterized by clear objectives, effective teaching strategies, and formative assessment, is strongly linked to improved test scores, especially in reading and mathematics (Stipek and Chiatovich 2017). Teacher quality, encompassing experience, education, and professional development, mainly influences instructional quality and student outcomes (Blömeke et al. 2016). Moreover, the impact of instructional time is amplified when delivered by high-quality teachers, with particularly pronounced benefits for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Motegi and Oikawa 2019).

Successful school turnaround efforts often require a reimagining of traditional educational practices to maximize learning for all students. This includes fostering collaborative, flexible teaching roles where teams of educators work together to execute a shared vision for excellent instruction and engage in continuous professional development. Schools that succeed in turnaround efforts strategically align teacher roles and assignments with individual skills and

expertise, ensuring that instructional time and attention are tailored to student needs. These strategies may involve grouping students based on subject, need, and activity and leveraging technology to enhance learning outcomes (McKown et al. 2020). Additionally, these schools prioritize professional development, curriculum flexibility, and strong support systems for teachers and students.

Case studies exemplify these principles. The San Francisco Unified School District's School Improvement Grant (SIG) program implemented strategies such as teacher replacement, revised job descriptions, and distributed leadership roles to enhance instructional quality. The three-year, \$45 million program improved student achievement, with teachers using data to inform instruction more effectively. Specifically, gains in English language arts nearly doubled, and gains in math nearly tripled compared to other schools, with marked decreases in suspensions and increases in enrollment (McKown et al. 2020). Similarly, Shelby County Schools (SCS) in Memphis established the Innovation Zone (iZone) to improve the performance of schools within the bottom 5 percent of the state. The initiative focused on providing teachers with intensive support, including iZone coaches with deep curriculum knowledge and mentorship, leading to significant student achievement gains. iZone schools achieved nearly 8 percent annual growth in aggregate proficiency rates from 2012 to 2015, significantly outperforming other district schools (McKown et al. 2020).

However, challenges relating to instructional quality persist. The New York City Department of Education's Renewal Schools program encountered difficulties recruiting and retaining effective leaders, resulting in limited instructional improvement (Heissel and Ladd 2018). Similarly, the TALAS program, aimed at improving low-performing schools, failed to generate substantial changes in teacher practices or leadership (Heissel and Ladd 2018).

These findings emphasize the complexity of school turnaround and the importance of carefully designed and implemented interventions. Practical turnaround efforts must prioritize instructional improvement, teacher development, and strong leadership while considering the specific needs of the school community. While instructional quality is essential, it is often insufficient to drive significant and sustained school turnaround. The research suggests that instructional quality is most effective when combined with other turnaround strategies, such as improved leadership, a positive school culture, and robust data-driven decision making (DDDM).

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

Community engagement and professional collaboration can drive student achievement and school turnaround, particularly in underserved communities. McAlister (2013) emphasizes the indispensable nature of community involvement for individual student success and long-term school enhancement. Schools with active community participation and a positive faculty culture often exhibit higher student performance, even in challenging socioeconomic contexts (Kirby and DiPaola 2011). Public engagement strategies, such as focus groups and

public meetings, foster community support and address social factors impacting learning (Cunningham 2002).

However, it is essential to recognize that, while crucial, community engagement is not a stand-alone solution. It functions most effectively when integrated with other school turnaround strategies, such as enhanced instructional practices, strong leadership, and data-driven decision making. A synergistic approach, combining community engagement with these other elements, is more likely to yield significant and sustained improvements in student outcomes.

Fullan (2010) underlines the importance of connecting change initiatives to the broader community, emphasizing the role of each individual in the change process. Successful turnaround plans thus necessitate the involvement of a diverse range of stakeholders, including community leaders, businesses, parents, and students (Trujillo et al. 2012; Whyte 2018). For example, schools implementing School Improvement Grant (SIG) models demonstrated increased utilization of community-oriented practices and extended learning time compared to nonimplementing schools. The SIG application criteria emphasized practices focused on increasing learning time and fostering family and community engagement while ensuring a safe and supportive school environment (Dragoset et al. 2017).

Consequently, this engagement has been shown to impact student achievement positively. Henderson and Mapp (2002) found compelling evidence of family engagement's positive influence on student outcomes, including grades, test scores, and social skills. Notably, increased parent involvement in school organizations during eighth grade was positively correlated with students' having higher educational expectations six years later. Specifically, a one standard deviation increase in parent-reported involvement in the school's parent organization was associated with a 22 percent increase in the odds of their students having high expectations. However, student-reported home-based parent involvement had an even more significant impact, with a one standard deviation increase linked to a 58 percent increase in the odds of students having high expectations six years later (Henderson and Mapp 2002). This suggests that active parental involvement within the school community and at home can be crucial in shaping students' aspirations and academic goals. These relationships persist across diverse ethnic and socioeconomic groups and educational levels. Schools partnering with community organizations to enhance parental engagement and leadership have improved school climate, social capital, and student performance (Mediratta et al. 2009).

Turnaround schools face unique challenges in engaging families and communities due to factors such as poverty, marginalization, and high turnover rates. Deliberate and sustained efforts to foster family and community engagement, supported by adequate resources, are crucial for the success of these schools (McAlister 2013). Engaging parents of English language learners (ELLs) presents specific challenges due to language barriers and cultural differences. Schools can address these challenges by providing translation services, bilingual staff, and culturally relevant outreach programs (Golden et al. 2014).

In conclusion, community engagement and professional collaboration are essential components of successful school turnaround efforts, but they are most effective when integrated with other school turnaround strategies. Schools can significantly enhance student achievement and well-being by fostering strong partnerships, creating supportive school environments, and leveraging the power of community involvement.

SYSTEMIC SUPPORT AND RESOURCES

Research on the impact of resource allocation on school turnaround and student achievement presents varying conclusions. Some studies indicate that resource increases can positively influence student outcomes. For instance, using School Improvement Grants (SIG) has been associated with improved student performance, particularly after three years of implementation, showing gains in student achievement, decreased absenteeism, and better teacher retention (Sun et al. 2017). However, other studies suggest that resources alone may not be sufficient to drive significant improvements. For example, a national evaluation of SIG found no substantial effects on student outcomes, such as test scores or graduation rates (Dragoset et al. 2019). Similarly, a meta-analysis of thirty-five studies found a positive association between school turnaround and improved student outcomes, including attendance, test scores, and graduation rates (Redding and Nguyen 2020). However, the study could not link program cost to these positive outcomes definitively.

Furthermore, research highlights that the effectiveness of turnaround efforts might be contingent on factors beyond funding, such as the level of implementation and school context. For example, the Los Angeles Unified School District's turnaround initiative exhibited varied outcomes across different cohorts, highlighting the complexity of the relationship between funding and student achievement (Strunk et al. 2016). Also, turnaround efforts often yield modest positive results in secondary schools, but they can have negative effects in elementary and middle schools (Henry and Guthrie 2019). The variability in outcomes emphasizes the complexity of the relationship between resources and student achievement, suggesting that factors such as implementation strategies, local context, and the nature of the support systems in place are also important for understanding the success of these initiatives.

Ultimately, while increased funding can support school turnaround efforts, it is not a guaranteed solution. Effective use of resources, combined with strong leadership, targeted interventions, and sustained support, can achieve lasting improvements in student outcomes. Districts, therefore, must carefully plan and monitor the implementation of turnaround strategies to ensure that resources are used efficiently and that schools receive the support needed to succeed.

SCHOOL CULTURE AND CLIMATE IMPROVEMENT

There is a strong correlation between school climate and student achievement. A positive school climate emerges as a paramount predictor of a school's capacity to foster student

success (Shindler et al. 2016). Student perceptions of their learning environment significantly influence academic outcomes, with supportive conditions linked to improved achievement, while negative factors such as inadequate facilities and excessive surveillance hinder progress (Kwong and Davis 2015). Notably, in schools undergoing turnaround efforts, advancements in leadership and climate often precede academic gains, suggesting their role as early indicators of future success (May and Sanders 2013). A study conducted in North Carolina schools revealed an association between teacher perceptions of school culture and student achievement, with negative school cultures consistently linked to lower performance across grade levels (Smith 2014). These findings stress cultivating positive school climates to enhance student performance.

A positive school climate manifests as a supportive and fulfilling environment where learning needs are met and high expectations prevail. Successful turnaround efforts necessitate a cultural shift toward high academic expectations and concerted effort, blending strong community cohesion with an academic focus (Jackson et al. 2018). Developing a constructive school culture and climate involves building trust, establishing solid relationships, enhancing stakeholder voices, engaging families, and fostering a supportive environment. Relationships are central to students' well-being, and leaders must cultivate strong connections among adults, between adults and students, and among students. Teachers are vital in driving school change by actively contributing to this environment.

Student voice is another critical component, allowing students to share their learning experiences and participate actively in their education (Whyte 2018). When students feel safe and supported, they are more likely to progress through the stages of belonging, esteem, and confidence building, ultimately reaching self-actualization (Whyte 2018).

Combining a culture of achievement with strong leadership can yield sustainable success. While the fundamental elements of culture, climate, and leadership are universal, their implementation requires adaptation to each community's unique history, traditions, and rituals. The shared goal of improvement serves as a guiding principle, but the path to achieving it varies across contexts (Whyte 2018). Additionally, transforming conditions contributing to exclusionary discipline requires a sustained, multiyear commitment. This process involves stakeholder engagement and buy-in, and a comprehensive plan (Osher et al. 2014). Effective school turnaround strategies to improve school culture should address broader challenges, such as weak leadership and low teacher morale, to combat adverse school climate (Heissel and Ladd 2018).

A positive school culture and climate is essential for sustainable school turnaround. Strong leadership, active community engagement, effective teaching practices, data-driven decision making, and a shared vision foster it. These elements work together to create an environment that supports student success and fosters long-term improvement. For instance, in California, the support of District Assistance Intervention Teams (DAITs) has been associated with achievement gains in mathematics. These improvements are linked to increased focus on data-driven instruction, a shift toward high expectations, and enhanced accountability (Bridwell-Mitchell 2020).

SUSTAINABILITY OF SCHOOL TURNAROUND EFFORTS

The sustainability of school turnaround efforts, particularly regarding long-term outcomes, is fraught with challenges. Research consistently shows that while initial improvements can be achieved in low-performing schools, maintaining these gains over time is difficult due to various systemic, structural, and contextual factors.

INITIAL SUCCESS VS. LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY

Turnaround efforts often yield positive short-term results, but these improvements frequently falter in the long run. For instance, Hochbein (2012) found that while schools undergoing turnaround initiatives managed to avoid reverting to their previous poor achievement levels, many struggled to sustain high levels of achievement beyond the first three years. Similarly, other studies have observed that the initial boosts in student performance in turnaround schools often plateau or even decline over time, highlighting the difficulty of achieving lasting change.

SYSTEMIC AND STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES

The long-term sustainability of school turnaround efforts is heavily influenced by the systemic and structural challenges these schools face. Chronic issues such as ineffective leadership, low instructional capacity, high staff turnover, and insufficient resources are common in low-performing schools (Dee 2012). These deep-rooted problems often require more than short-term interventions; they necessitate comprehensive, systemic changes. For example, comprehensive school reform efforts have often been marked by inconsistent implementation and have shown little evidence of sustained improvements in student outcomes (Gross et al. 2009). The multidimensional nature of the challenges in these schools suggests that turnaround efforts are unlikely to produce sustained positive outcomes without addressing underlying structural issues.

ROLE OF LEADERSHIP AND CAPACITY BUILDING

Leadership plays a crucial role in the sustainability of turnaround efforts. Effective leadership is necessary not only to initiate reforms but also to maintain momentum over time. Pham et al. (2020) found that high staff turnover rates, particularly among teachers and principals, were linked to the ineffectiveness of school reforms. In their study of Tennessee's Achievement School District (ASD) and Innovation Zones (iZones), they observed that schools with stable leadership and lower turnover rates successfully sustain positive student outcomes. Specifically, iZone schools, which had more consistent leadership and offered pay bonuses to attract and retain effective educators, showed overall positive effects on student achievement. In contrast, ASD schools, which experienced high staff turnover, showed null effects.

In Miami-Dade County Public Schools' turnaround initiative, the district learned that improvements made with initial support often diminished once that support was withdrawn. This highlights the importance of building long-term capacity within schools and creating systems that allow for sustained improvement even after the initial phase of intensive intervention has ended (McKown et al. 2020).

COMMUNITY AND STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

Community and stakeholder involvement is another critical factor in sustaining turnaround efforts. Building trust and gaining local support are essential, particularly in state-led turnaround models. The ASD in Tennessee, for example, faced significant community resistance, hampering its ability to recruit effective educators and sustain reforms. Glazer and Egan (2018) documented how community backlash against the ASD model, which was perceived as an external takeover of local schools, contributed to its struggles in achieving sustained positive outcomes.

SYSTEMIC INTEGRATION OF INNOVATIONS

For turnaround efforts to be sustainable, innovations must be integrated into the broader educational system rather than remaining isolated initiatives. This systemic integration ensures that the new practices become part of the school's culture and operations, supported by policies, infrastructure, and ongoing professional development. Adelman and Taylor (2003) emphasized that sustainable school turnaround requires aligning innovations with existing structures and practices, building capacity, and ensuring adaptability to changing conditions. Continuous evaluation and adaptation are also necessary to keep the reforms effective over time.

The sustainability of school turnaround efforts is contingent upon several factors, including leadership stability, community involvement, and the systemic integration of innovations. While short-term gains are often achievable, the challenge lies in embedding these improvements into the fabric of the educational system to ensure they endure over time. Without addressing the underlying structural issues and building capacity for long-term change, turnaround efforts risk losing momentum and failing to produce lasting positive outcomes. Therefore, a systemic approach that includes strong leadership, community engagement, and continuous adaptation is essential for achieving and sustaining school turnaround success.

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS IN SCHOOL TURNAROUND EFFORTS

Contextual factors significantly influence the success or failure of school turnaround efforts. Research indicates that these initiatives encounter unique challenges shaped by socioeconomic conditions, community dynamics, and the preexisting cultures within schools (Murphy and Bleiberg 2019). These factors create a complex environment where one-size-fits-all solutions are often ineffective, emphasizing the need for tailored approaches that account for the specific circumstances of each school.

GAPS IN SCHOOL TURNAROUND RESEARCH

Research on school turnaround policies reveals significant gaps in understanding their effectiveness and implementation.

NONLINEAR, ITERATIVE PROCESSES OF SCHOOL TURNAROUND

The school turnaround process is often depicted as a linear sequence of actions leading to predictable outcomes. However, the process is much more complex, with schools frequently undergoing nonlinear, iterative processes that require continual adjustments and changes. This complexity is not adequately reflected in the current literature. Research is needed to acknowledge the adaptive, nonlinear processes inherent in leadership roles within turnaround contexts. Further studies should aim to capture the dynamic and evolving nature of turnaround strategies, which are often not straightforward or linear in execution (Thompson et al. 2016).

Moreover, existing research concentrates on the initial phases of turnaround efforts, neglecting the ongoing adaptations crucial for sustained improvement. There is a noticeable lack of studies that follow schools through the entire turnaround cycle—from crisis to stabilization and, finally, to sustained success. Thus, there is a need for longitudinal research that tracks the entire trajectory of school turnaround efforts.

PARENT AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Another significant gap in the literature is the inadequate attention given to parent and community engagement in the school turnaround process. While the involvement of these stakeholders is recognized as potentially beneficial, there is limited understanding of how they contribute to or hinder turnaround efforts. Research is needed to explore the impact of parent and community engagement on sustaining student outcomes in turnaround schools and how these forms of engagement can be leveraged to support long-term success (Redding and Nguyen 2020).

Parental and community involvement is often cited as a key factor in successful school turnarounds. However, there is a lack of comprehensive studies that delve into practical strategies for engaging these stakeholders in the turnaround process. Existing research tends to focus on superficial involvement, such as attending meetings or events, rather than on deep, sustained engagement that can drive meaningful change. Furthermore, there is little guidance on navigating the challenges of engaging parents and communities, particularly in schools characterized by mistrust or prior disengagement. More authentic and participatory approaches to school improvement plans (SIPs) are needed to genuinely involve school communities (Redding and Searby 2020).

COMPARATIVE STUDIES OF TURNAROUND STRATEGIES ACROSS DIFFERENT CULTURAL CONTEXTS

Most research is situated within specific national or regional settings, limiting the applicability of findings to other environments. There is a need for cross-cultural studies that compare the effectiveness of different turnaround strategies in diverse cultural contexts. Such research could provide valuable insights into the factors influencing the success of turnaround efforts in varied environments and help develop more culturally responsive approaches to school turnaround (Ong 2015).

Additionally, there is a gap in understanding the specific mechanisms through which external community factors influence school performance and student outcomes (Dragoset et al. 2019). More research is needed to explore how these external factors, such as socioeconomic conditions and cultural expectations, shape leadership practices and school turnaround strategies, particularly in non-Western contexts (Harris et al. 2017).

SCALABLE AND ADAPTIVE MODELS FOR SCHOOL TURNAROUND

The literature also reveals a gap in understanding how to effectively scale up turnaround strategies while maintaining their adaptability to local contexts. While many studies provide insights into what works in specific situations, there is a need for more research on adaptive, flexible models that can be tailored to different school environments while adhering to the core principles of successful turnarounds (Whyte 2018; Backstrom 2019).

EMERGING TRENDS AND PROMISING PRACTICES IN SCHOOL TURNAROUND

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY

Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) is increasingly recognized as necessary for effective school turnaround efforts, particularly in diverse and underserved communities. CRP involves the integration of students' cultural references into all aspects of learning, which can enhance engagement and academic achievement. Recent trends indicate a shift toward more intentional implementation of CRP, with schools adopting curricula that reflect the cultural backgrounds of their students and training teachers to be more culturally aware. Schools employing CRP are more likely to create inclusive environments that support the needs of all students, thereby fostering improved educational outcomes. However, the adoption of CRP is uneven, with some schools lacking the necessary resources or expertise to implement these practices effectively.

THE IMPACT OF CRP ON STUDENT OUTCOMES

Studies have consistently demonstrated the positive impact of CRP on student performance, particularly for marginalized student populations. For example, research by Howard and Terry (2011) found that CRP can improve student performance, leading to increased graduation rates and college attendance for African American students. Implementation of CRP-based interventions, such as Fresh Prep, has resulted in higher scores and pass rates on state exams compared to control groups (Cherfas et al. 2021).

In Australia, incorporating Indigenous concepts such as "country" as a foundation for CRP has demonstrated the potential to foster a sense of belonging among students. By leveraging "country" as a pedagogical approach, schools can create a sense of belonging and improve learning outcomes for Indigenous students (Harrison and Skrebneva 2020).

While CRP offers significant potential, challenges remain. The lack of resources and expertise can hinder implementation, and the uneven adoption of CRP highlights the need for targeted support and professional development. Culturally responsive pedagogy is a promising approach to enhancing educational outcomes for diverse student populations. By integrating students' cultural references into all aspects of learning, CRP can create inclusive environments that support the needs of all students. However, successful implementation requires planning, adequate resources, and ongoing professional development.

TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATION

Technology integration in education has gained significant attention due to its potential to enhance student learning outcomes. Research from India indicates that successful integration requires a structured, organization-wide approach with extensive professional development and ongoing support for teachers (Gupta and Goel 2024). When implemented effectively, technology can positively impact student learning and academic achievement, transforming the roles of students and teachers (Gupta and Goel 2024).

However, there are notable gaps in technology use in schools versus outside of schools and in outcomes achieved by schools compared to other sectors (Sansanwal et al. 2023). To bridge these gaps, schools are leveraging various funding sources to implement technology plans, from providing individual devices to equipping classrooms with interactive whiteboards (Short and Uzochukwu 2018). Realizing the full benefits of these technologies necessitates teachers redesigning their instructional strategies and participating in technology-focused professional development supported by administration (Short and Uzochukwu 2018).

Therefore, turnaround schools can leverage technology to personalize learning, enhance student engagement, and improve data-driven decision making. For example, educational software, online assessments, and digital tools allow for more-tailored instruction that meets students' needs. Moreover, technology integration supports continuous monitoring of student progress, enabling timely interventions.

KEY LEARNINGS FROM TWO DECADES OF TURNAROUND EFFORTS

Over the past two decades, extensive research and numerous initiatives have focused on turning around underperforming schools. A key insight from this body of work is that successful school turnaround requires more than just structural changes; it necessitates cultural shifts within the school. This involves fostering a shared vision, enhancing leadership capacity, and building strong, trust-based relationships among staff, students, and the community. Another lesson is the necessity of sustained effort and focus. While quick fixes may yield temporary gains, long-term improvement depends on continuous adaptation and commitment to the turnaround process.

Furthermore, the importance of context cannot be overstated—strategies that prove effective in one school or district may not necessarily yield the same results in another. This demonstrates the need for flexible and adaptive approaches considering each educational environment’s unique challenges and opportunities. Turnaround efforts must be tailored to the specific context in which they are implemented, ensuring that interventions are responsive to the school’s and its community’s needs. This involves understanding the socioeconomic, cultural, and political factors that shape the school environment so that comprehensive approaches not only address academic deficits but also support students’ social and emotional well-being, engage families and communities, and create a positive school climate.

POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

Several policy and practice implications arise from the accumulated knowledge on school turnaround. Research on school turnaround policies reveals significant challenges and disconnects between policy and practice (Husain et al. 2022). Persistent myths within turnaround efforts often contradict established organizational theories (Meyers and Smylie 2017). The turnaround movement is characterized by paradoxes that highlight both its potential and its pitfalls (Peck and Reitzug 2014). Policymakers must recognize that effective turnaround efforts require adequate time, resources, and support, particularly in professional development and leadership training. Furthermore, there is a pressing need for policies that promote flexibility, enabling schools to tailor their strategies to their specific contexts.

Despite these challenges, insights from organizational sciences offer valuable lessons for education, mainly through the suggestion of a two-stage model of retrenchment and recovery (Murphy 2009). Common themes across these studies emphasize the necessity of better alignment among research, policy, and practice, as well as a deeper understanding of organizational change theory.

WHAT IS A REASONABLE ESTIMATE OF THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL TURNAROUND PROGRAMS?

Estimating the impact of school turnaround programs is complex and influenced by several factors, including the quality of implementation, the specific context of the program, and the metrics used to assess success. Although some turnaround programs have achieved notable short-term improvements in student achievement, their long-term effects are more variable. For example, a meta-analysis of sixty-seven studies revealed moderate positive impacts on math achievement but no significant effects on English language arts (Schueler et al. 2022). Specific interventions, such as extending learning time and replacing teachers, were linked to more significant improvements (Schueler et al. 2022). Additionally, a study conducted in an urban district reported gradual improvements, with significant positive effects on student achievement emerging by the third year of implementation. This study also noted improvements in teacher retention, professional capacity, and family preferences for turnaround schools (Sun et al. 2017). However, a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis remains challenging in evaluating these programs’ effectiveness (Murphy and Bleiberg 2019).

In schools that were taken over by charter management organizations (CMOs), students experienced significant learning gains postturnaround. Specifically, these students gained an average of twenty-one more days of learning in reading and thirty-eight more days in math compared to their peers in traditional public schools (TPS). These gains were statistically significant when considering all students before and after the turnaround. For students who were continuously enrolled throughout the turnaround, the gains were even more pronounced: forty-two days in reading and 113 days in math (Raymond et al. 2023).

Additionally, introducing turnaround schools into CMOs did not adversely affect the performance of other schools within the CMO network. Although there was a slight decline in reading gains by twelve days, the results remained statistically significant and positive compared to TPS peers, suggesting that the overall impact of adopting turnaround schools was neutral to slightly positive for existing CMO schools (Raymond et al. 2023).

Overall, the evidence indicates that while turnaround programs can lead to substantial academic improvements in some instances, outcomes are contingent on various factors, including student retention and the management of the turnaround process.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, school turnaround efforts have been a persistent educational challenge over the past two decades. While traditional strategies have yielded limited success, recent advancements in educational research and policy have led to the development of various interventions and approaches. Successful school turnaround requires a comprehensive approach addressing multiple facets, including strong leadership, effective teaching, data-driven instruction, and external support. Identifying and implementing effective strategies can improve student outcomes, advance educational equity, and inform future policy and practice.

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