

## **Written Testimony of**

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**U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor**  
**Research and Best Practices on Successful School Turnaround**

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Good morning, Chairman Miller, Congressman Kline, and Members of the Committee.

Thank you for inviting me here today to discuss the important work of turning around our nation's lowest performing schools. The school districts and states we work with would be pleased that your committee is engaging in a deliberative conversation about how we can build upon the existing turnaround efforts to make this initiative even more effective.

My name is Jessica Johnson and I am the chief program officer for district and school improvement at Learning Point Associates, a nonprofit education research and consulting organization with 25 years experience researching and developing tools for educators that improve teaching and learning. We were on the front line of support for states, districts, and schools charged with implementing comprehensive school reform and the No Child Left Behind Act. Between 2004 and 2009, we operated The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement for the U.S. Department of Education, providing technical assistance and resources to improve schools and districts.

Since 2005, we have worked with more than 40 districts that failed to meet adequate yearly progress under NCLB. As you know, the law prescribed actions that state education agencies had to take to improve failing schools and districts. The sanctions were punitive, with the state generally dictating the plan and providing little direct formal assistance to the districts. We saw these efforts yield mixed results.

We have worked with Minnesota, Ohio, West Virginia, Michigan, Indiana, and other states to identify structures and supports needed for struggling schools. As I speak today, my staff are working with schools in Missouri and Illinois to complete grant applications for funding for school turnaround efforts. Learning Point Associates likely will serve as lead turnaround partner for some of these schools and possibly for others in various states across the United States.

I will provide three main points for your consideration today:

- The research literature on turnaround is not strong, but when combined with related research, it does suggest there are some elements of this work that seem to have positive impact. But the challenge still lies in implementation.
- Models and supports for school turnaround in ESEA reauthorization need to balance knowledge of the core elements above with the flexibility to create meaning and commitment, remove barriers, and foster innovation.
- The focus must extend beyond the school. The whole system matters.

**POINT 1. The research literature on turnaround is not strong, but when combined with related research, it does suggest there are some elements of this work that seem to have positive impact. But the challenge still lies in implementation.**

During the last decade, the issue of turning around schools surfaced as a natural extension of state and national efforts to identify schools that consistently underperform, as measured by state assessments. Early scholarship on turnaround is limited. Policymakers and researchers first established parameters around what it means to be a school in need of turnaround. Then they turned to the task of identifying the types of interventions needed to address the multiple challenges in persistently underperforming schools and districts. Currently, the “turnaround” arena is comprised of four possible options: turnaround, transformation, closure, and restart. These interventions have some components in common, while also incorporating some unique requirements. For example, a turnaround model requires the removal of an underperforming principal and at least 50 percent of the staff; closure requires that the entire school is closed and the students are transferred to schools with better academic success.

The amount of research literature specifically on the four options within turnaround is small. The majority of it addresses reforms that most closely match the transformation option. It is limited mainly to theoretical work (e.g., Murphy & Meyers, 2007), case study (e.g., Borman et al., 2000; Duke et al., 2005), and literature reviews of related research (Brady, 2003). The research of high-performing, high-poverty schools (such as Goldstein, Keleman, & Kolski, 1998; Picucci, Brownson, Kahlert, & Sobel, 2002a; 2002b) is frequently included in discussions of turnaround. Currently there does appear to be potentially fruitful turnaround research being conducted, but even the IES Practice Guide *Turning Around Chronically-Low Performing Schools* (Herman et al., 2008) states that all recommendations made within it are based on “low levels of evidence, as defined by the Institute of Education Sciences Practice Guide standards” (p. 1).

The research most closely tied to the turnaround and restart options is that of school reconstitution. Under school reconstitution, the administrator and often some or all of the staff are replaced. Some of the highest quality studies of reconstitution—including Goldstein, Keleman, and Koski (1998) in San Francisco; Hess (2003) in Chicago; and Malen and her team (Malen, Croninger,

Muncey, & Redmond-Jones, 2002; Rice & Malen, 2003) in Baltimore—still yield only equivocal results.

Finally, research on the option of school closure is most sparse. This option is generally reserved for only the largest urban districts in the country, because small to mid-size districts do not have alternate facilities to send students to, and would have to restart the school in some capacity. Both Chicago and New York engaged in deliberate school closure, but students were not always placed in significantly higher achieving schools. In Chicago, students placed into higher achieving schools did see higher gains than those placed in comparable schools (Torre & Gwynne, 2009). In New York, new schools were opened to provide better options for the students (Hill et al, 2009).

Although the specific turnaround research literature is not strong, when it is combined with related research, it is suggestive. Theoretical, anecdotal, and qualitative work agree on the components of turnaround, including strong leadership and knowledgeable and committed teachers among many others. These components of school turnaround appear to link strongly with the federal definition of transformation. However, it cannot be overstated that the significance of each transformative component is not yet known. If we focus solely on these factors, we risk giving too much credence to some while potentially precluding the relevancy of others.

**Much more research is required. Connecting rigorous evaluative processes to the implementation of these models within diverse settings is critical to building an informed knowledge base that lends support to scaling up evidence-based programs.**

Some of the most promising components are outlined below:

- **Strong building leadership is essential for success of a school turnaround, and there must be enough capacity to meet the current demand.** Currently, schools in turnaround and transformation must replace their principal. With 5,000 chronically underperforming schools nationwide (Duncan, 2009), that means there will be as many as 5,000 openings for principals across the county in the next three to five years. To succeed, school leaders must be adept at using data, garnering teacher support, maintaining a focus on instruction, managing resources, fostering innovation, and engaging parents and community organizations in their turnaround efforts. They must be able to engage the school community in a dramatic shift in school culture and expectations early on. They must be given the trust, support, and flexibility to make dynamic changes. They also need to be accountable for performance. I cannot stress strongly enough: The challenge lies in the implementation.

Currently, there are not enough school leaders equipped with the knowledge and expertise to succeed at this gargantuan task—particularly in rural areas, where as many as

one third of these schools exist (Duncan 2009). A recent analysis of the Managing Educator Talent practices from Midwestern states (Bhatt & Behrstock, 2010) found that programs geared toward recruiting, developing, and supporting school leaders do not exist to the same extent as programs for teachers, if at all.

Higher education institutions need to be motivated to work with local schools and districts to develop job-embedded training programs, such as the Academy for Urban School Leadership and the Green Dot residency program, to build a cadre of strong leaders. Preparation and professional support are key to building and retaining strong leaders. There is a need to develop better and more accessible programs, provide additional resources to scale up those that are effective, and demand that our institutions of higher education respond to meet this need more efficiently and effectively.

- **Teachers must have an unwavering focus on instruction. Structural barriers and school culture that often prevent this goal must be removed.** Teachers need to know what to teach—understanding the alignment of curriculum with standards and assessments. They also must know how to teach—using differentiated strategies proven effective for all children. Teachers need to be supported with tools, expertise, and structured collaboration time. Research and best practice suggest that teachers are more successful when they use frequent formative assessment to drive instructional practices and have access to job-embedded professional development and coaching through professional learning communities, inquiry teams, and other teacher-led work teams. Furthermore, nearly all turnaround schools suffer from low reading achievement, so comprehensive literacy instruction, in particular, is critical (Salmonowicz, 2009)

Training on instruction of English language learners and special education students by general education teachers is sorely lacking across the board. Union contracts must allow for restructured and often longer workdays for teachers to build in collaboration time. Data systems and assessment tools that allow for ready access to formative data have to be available to these schools. Master teachers in literacy, mathematics, English language learning, and special education need to be provided incentives to work as coaches in these schools. Teachers must learn to accept peer review and begin to watch each other teach and provide feedback. Principals must be given flexibility and provided measurement tools to evaluate teachers fairly and consistently, allowing them to keep staff that can be coached and remove those who can't.

Teachers need, and state time and time again, that they desperately want the supports to do well. The Retaining Teacher Talent study from Learning Point Associates and Public Agenda found that 38 percent of teachers surveyed who stated they intended to leave the profession would definitely change their minds if they worked with a principal who helped teachers improve their effectiveness (Public Agenda, 2009).

- **Schools need a learning focused culture and climate with a disciplined approach to implementing school policies and practices, and a commitment to work beyond the walls of the school.** In many cases, this goal will involve creating safe passage ways to schools, implementing early warning systems to keep students from falling through the cracks, and developing outreach systems that attract and motivate students to come to school. Teachers must become culturally proficient and understand the needs of their diverse students. Finally, teachers must believe that all students can learn, and there is no single strategy to get there.
- **Both academic and nonacademic supports for students and families are needed at intense levels.** Decades of research show that school-based factors, such as principal and teacher quality, can have an enormous impact on student learning. However, the academic, economic, and social resources that students bring with them from home have, on average, a more profound effect. For example, research shows that parents’ use of academic language, teaching of reading, and provision of school-related general knowledge are strongly correlated with socioeconomic status, particularly maternal education. In addition, struggling schools often are located in communities with a high rate of poverty and a lack of resources and supports for parents and families. Turning around the school alone in these communities will not be enough. Educators will need to reach beyond their traditional role and devise innovative strategies that involve social services, community-based organizations, and youth development programs to improve the future prospects of their students and their parents.
- **The staff and community must be committed to change.** From our experience and experience of others, this situation can be the single most critical factor to whether or not a school turns around. A strong leader cannot turn around a school without inspiring staff to change the way they think about their students and engage with them on a daily basis. The best instructional programs often fail when teachers close their doors and do not implement programs with fidelity. A school culture and climate will not change if teachers don’t hold students accountable for their actions and set high expectations.

**POINT 2. Models and supports for school turnaround in ESEA reauthorization need to balance knowledge of the core elements above with the flexibility to create meaning and commitment, remove barriers, and foster innovation.**

When a school or district is identified as underperforming, the first and not necessarily correct response of its leadership is to “come into compliance.” From our experience, compliance-driven efforts to improve performance result in compliance plans and not sustained increases in performance. For example, in a review of current School Improvement Grant applications for one state, we noted that most schools indicated they would add an afterschool program to comply with the requirements of the transformation model, but almost none of them indicated that the criteria for extending learning would be to incorporate specific interventions that would strengthen

and align with existing programs and needs. This theme of coherence and alignment across curriculum, instruction, and assessment is often missing from plans that are compliance focused.

**NCLB granted too much flexibility with funds, and that situation often leads schools to shy away from implementing the dramatic reforms that are needed.** A report from the Center on Education Policy (Scott, 2009) found that in six states and 48 schools facing restructuring under NCLB, more than 80 percent chose the option “other,” which allowed schools to implement single reform strategies—in one area—without making significant changes in the school, and often resulting in little to no gains.

Some steps to consider:

- **Focus on the desired outcomes for each core element of turnaround. Focus on coherence and alignment of efforts.** For example, regarding teachers, consider requiring all turnaround models to demonstrate that the staff they plan to retain and/or hire are committed to the change process and are willing to be accountable for student performance results. There must be funding to develop tools for schools to use to make the effort more efficient, such as interview guides and scoring rubrics to assist principals in a strong recruitment effort. For each element of turnaround, a school starting implementation should be required to demonstrate coherence—from how it engages kids to how it engages staff, parents, and the community. For example, for the schools mentioned above that indicated they would implement afterschool programs, require them to demonstrate alignment between traditional school-day activities and those beyond the school day (whether those activities are school based or community based). There is case study evidence to suggest that successful schools have multiple, *coordinated* efforts around school transformation (Smith, 2009).
- **Turnaround requires an intensity of change that schools and districts must understand. They must have adequate time and support to assess their needs, select models, and write turnaround applications.** In our experience, struggling schools often don't have the capacity to turn around on their own. It is difficult for them to develop the vision and embrace the magnitude of change needed, even if they have seen the research, requirements, and case studies. Under The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, we developed *School Restructuring: What Works When* as a tool to guide school leaders through selecting appropriate interventions, and we are updating this guide to align with the four turnaround options. That said, many of the schools in the bottom 5 percent today are there because they failed at restructuring under NCLB. Policy and funding streams should be structured to allow these schools to engage with support partners early on, to ensure they are able to develop and implement plans suited to the context of individual schools—plans that not only meet requirements but also address specific challenges in a given school and district. Building the capacity up front with schools and districts to self-assess will give them the tools and skills they need to engage

in a process of continuous improvement, adapting to the needs of the changing student populations over time.

**POINT 3. The focus must extend beyond the school. The whole system matters.**

- Schools don't operate in isolation. **Districts and charter authorizers provide important supports for schools in hiring, policies, and curricular and instructional supports—to name a few.** Especially in rural and smaller urban settings, the district is the primary source of direction and support for the school. In these cases, district staff capacity needs to be built to do this work because they will be responsible to sustain improvement when the principal leaves the school. Districts need help understanding their role in fostering the environment for successful turnaround and in offering the right supports for success.
- **States and their regional systems of support provide varying levels of assistance.** Attention needs to be paid to the state-level policy mechanisms that support and hinder school turnaround. These mechanisms include teacher and leader credentialing, seat time requirements, funding formulas, performance sanctions, and others. States and intermediate education agencies also play a role in providing direct technical assistance to districts and schools. The Ohio statewide system of support, for example, provides tools and teams to facilitate needs-assessment processes in schools. For rural schools, the statewide system of support is often the only option for intensive technical assistance for the schools. State education agencies across the country have been downsizing over the last few years due to enormous budget constraints. They are struggling to find the balance between meeting the compliance requirements that come with federal funding and the need to deliver the right kinds of technical support to districts and schools. There must be new and innovative mechanisms to engage state education agencies in the process of support or intentionally define their role and provide the necessary funding and accountability structures to make it happen.
- **Social services, community-based organizations, and youth development organizations also can play a critical role in providing supports to students and families in alignment with the larger goal of improved student achievement.** In communities where these struggling schools exist, funding opportunities for these groups should be in alignment with the larger objective.
- External service providers—for profit and not-for-profit—provide significant supports to schools. Today, **there are not enough providers with a track record of success in school turnaround. But many, with some support, will be able to retool to meet the turnaround demands.** Focused networks of schools and providers at the regional, state, and national levels will be critical mechanisms for sharing learning, establishing national benchmarks, and replicating turnaround success at an accelerated pace across the nation.

## Summary

There are elements in the research and our experience that tell us that efforts to improve poor performance work best when we work intensively with school leaders and teachers from a sense of shared accountability rather than demanding accountability on a narrow range of behaviors. We also know that meaningful change is more often sustained when a more comprehensive approach is taken and community and parents as well as educators are involved in the solution. The flexibility to orchestrate these variables is critical to success. Finally, resources need to extend beyond individual schools and into the larger system of support for long-term sustainability and replication of success. We must build capacity in a system from the state to the classroom in order to provide every student access to and opportunity for a world-class education. Our children deserve this, the complexities of society demand it, and we have a moral responsibility to make sure it happens.

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