



A Systems Approach to Rapid School Improvement

Turnaround requires a framework, not a quick fix.

by **Carlas McCauley**

School reform has a long history. Numerous well-intentioned efforts to improve low-performing schools have been rolled out over the decades, with the laudable goals of increasing academic achievement and otherwise equipping all students for the future. Perhaps no effort was so sweeping and ambitious as the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. In 2009, the Obama administration extended that effort by making rapid school improvement, commonly referred to as turnaround, a top priority under the U.S. Department of Education's School Improvement Grant program and its Elementary and Secondary Education Act waiver process. Yet despite intense local, state, and federal focus, these efforts yielded at best mixed results. Individual model turnaround schools appeared as islands of excellence in a sea of frustrated expectations.

Nonetheless, much has been learned. Reform efforts over the past two decades focused on increasing the rigor of instruction, graduation rates, and academic achievement, as well as ensuring these good outcomes were available to all children, so that the nation would be globally competitive. However, efforts focused on a given area often lacked a systems approach, and thus success was not sustainable. The education community has learned the importance of considering all levels of the education system, understanding that the system within which a school operates—encompassing both the district and the state education system—can bolster or stall rapid improvement.

To support systemic thinking about school improvement, the Center on School Turnaround at WestEd developed a framework to assist states, districts, and schools in leading and managing

rapid improvement efforts (figure 1). The framework has four domains that have proved central to rapid, significant improvement: turnaround leadership, talent development, instructional transformation, and culture shift.

Within each domain, the framework offers examples of practices to be put into action at each level: the state education system, the local education system, and the school. Strategic and collective enactment of these practices is more likely to produce progress across all the areas than piecemeal efforts will. That is, the domains are not meant to be considered in isolation or to be approached step by step. The domains and practices overlap, with some consistent threads tying them together, including the need for clear goals and expectations. Implemented well, the practices assist students assigned to failing schools but also have a cascading effect that improves the whole system.

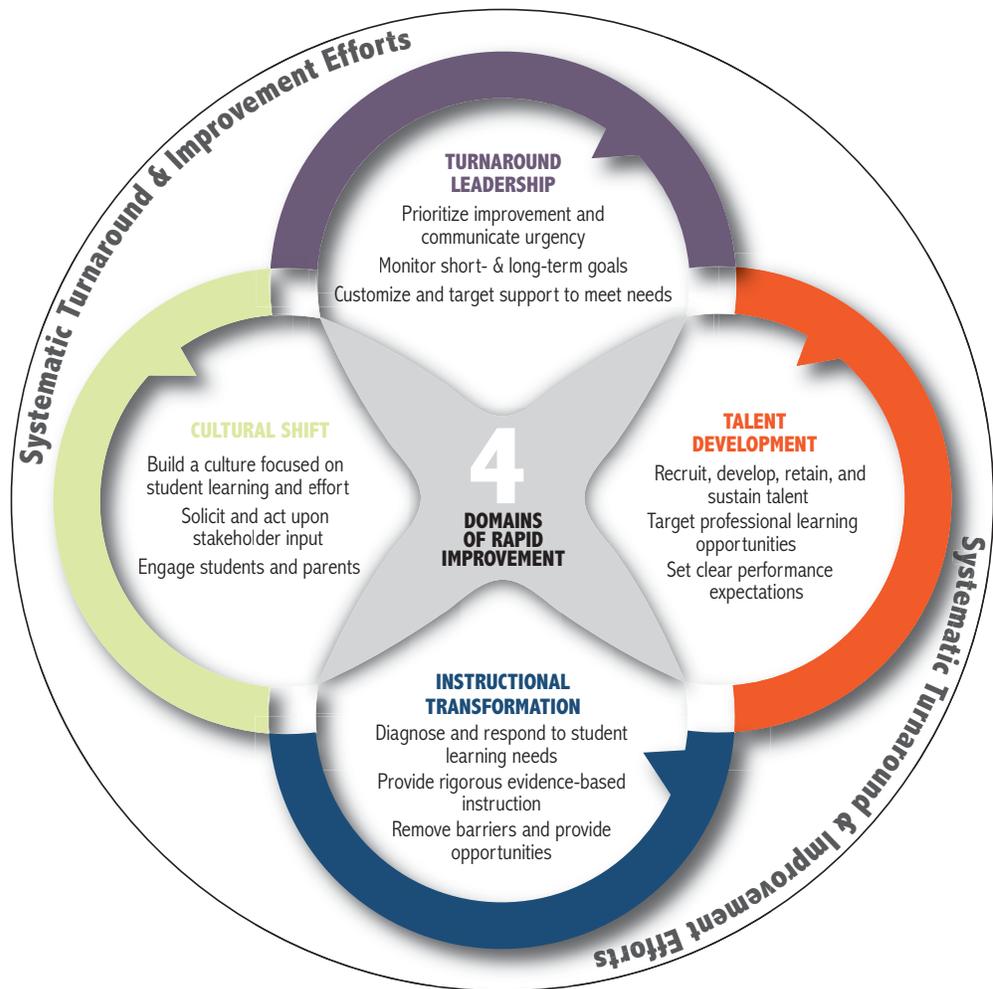
Local context and implementation influence the outcomes of any improvement initiative. Thus the framework is not a magic bullet. Instead, it organizes the issues that state, district, and school leaders must consider when planning a turnaround. Local needs and contexts drive decisions about what practices to implement, when, and how.

Turnaround Leadership

The research on school turnaround commonly identifies high-quality school leaders as a central factor in successful school turnaround.¹ In a comprehensive literature review, Leithwood and colleagues found that school leadership quality is second only to teacher quality in its impact on student achievement.² Other research has established school leadership as a prerequisite for other aspects of school turnaround to take

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Figure 1.



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hold, such as improved instruction and school climate.³ The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) reinforces these findings by allowing states and districts to use federal funding more flexibly to improve and support their school leaders.

Turnaround leaders at the state, local district, and school levels must drive initiatives to facilitate rapid, significant improvement for low-performing schools. The practices within the leadership domain that research highlights are as follows:

- prioritize improvement and communicate its urgency;
- monitor short- and long-term goals; and
- customize and target support to meet needs.

Turnaround leaders at all levels must prioritize elevating improvement at low-achieving schools and must communicate to all stakeholders the urgent need for turnaround so that all students can receive the high-quality education they deserve. Moreover, turnaround leaders at all levels must be catalysts for change and must organize the coordinated work of the staff charged with implementing efforts to rapidly improve schools.

One example of an activity undertaken at the state level to prioritize improvement is to establish an office or core cadre of personnel responsible for supporting policy, programmatic, and implementation efforts to lead turnaround initiatives.⁴

Talent Development

School turnaround requires competent, committed personnel at each level and in every position.⁵ The research-informed practices in this domain are as follows:

- recruit, develop, retain, and sustain talent;
- target professional learning opportunities; and
- set clear performance expectations.

Recruiting and retaining staff pose a challenge across a number of low-performing schools.

Policies and procedures to identify, select, place, and retain and sustain personnel—especially teachers and school-level leaders—enable turnaround efforts to succeed. For example, a board may allow low-performing schools priority in hiring teachers and leaders by modifying hiring dates for those schools. Turnaround competencies are identified by district leaders and used to select and develop turnaround teachers, model teachers, and leaders.⁶

One example of an activity undertaken at the state level to promote targeted professional learning opportunities in this domain is training districts on how to develop and implement a teacher professional learning model with individualization and job-embedded processes as the focus.⁷

Instructional Transformation

Improving student learning outcomes depends on systemwide support for changing classroom instruction. The practices in this domain are as follows:

- diagnose and respond to student learning needs;
- provide rigorous evidence-based instruction; and
- remove barriers and provide opportunities.

Effective instructional practice—including strong standards-based instruction, data-based planning, pedagogical approaches such as differentiation and personalization, and classroom management—must be identified and supported at each level of the system. Schools cultivate an environment of high expectations and support for student academic accomplishment.⁸ While districts and schools focus their attention on in-school factors affecting student

performance, they also attempt to address those traditionally considered to be out-of-school factors so that every student is ready for the task of learning.

One example of a state-level activity to support diagnosing and responding to student learning needs is to provide funding incentives and support to districts and schools that seek to ensure teachers have the time and capacity to carry out this work.

Culture Shift

Successful turnaround depends upon many people working together to achieve extraordinary results.⁹ Practices in this domain are as follows:

- build a strong community intensely focused on student learning;
- solicit and act upon stakeholder input; and
- engage students and families in pursuing education goals.

Mustering the necessary commitment to achieve results requires a dramatic culture shift toward raised academic expectations.¹⁰ A turnaround culture fuses community cohesion with academic press; one without the other is insufficient.¹¹ Leadership establishes the structures and opportunities for faculty and staff to work together around common goals, engendering a culture of mutual respect, shared responsibility, and focused attention on student learning.¹² A strong school community attends to the culture both inside and outside the school, gathering input from stakeholders and gauging perceptions about the school and its turnaround efforts.

One example of a state-level activity to support such community building is to provide districts with tools for tracking, analyzing, and sharing data on school performance, professional practice, and student opportunities.¹³

To the extent that educators across all levels of the system are able to implement practices across the four domain areas, a state's education ecosystem will be strengthened, with the system bolstering rather than hindering school improvement. In this supportive ecosystem, dramatic improvement is no longer manifested in islands of excellence. Instead, these routinized practices help low-performing schools across the board, making excellence the norm

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rather than the exception. Through these practices, systemic improvement becomes “the way we do business” at the state, district, and school levels.

What the Framework Means for State Boards

Substantial research undergirds the four domains for rapid improvement outlined in this turnaround framework. In an effort to drive systemic reform efforts, state boards of education might consider the following actions to support its recommended practices:

- **Examine current policies that promote practices across the four domains.** State boards may consider better ways to promote sustainable, systemic reforms by first taking the measure of the current landscape of the policies that may be driving what schools and districts, as well as the state education agency,

are currently doing. As a part of this effort, state boards could conduct audits of existing policies that support or hinder systemic school improvement. State boards can usefully seek input from local education agencies and others regarding the impact that a given policy has had on existing school improvement efforts.

- **Identify policy levers that may strengthen areas across the four domains.** State boards may consider new policy opportunities to enhance systemic efforts to support students in low-performing schools, such as those that govern principal preparation programs. As a part of their review of current policies, state boards can highlight gaps. These gaps will point the board toward considering policies that can strengthen systemic efforts across the four domain areas.
- **Create opportunities for ongoing discussions around implementation that can inform policy developments.** To spur ongoing improvement, state boards ought to consider ongoing reviews of identified

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priority areas across the four domains. Through collaborative efforts with stakeholders, state boards could set up an ongoing schedule of briefings with districts that are implementing turnaround efforts. These briefings may help scale school improvement efforts across a state as well as scaling up leading state policymakers' understanding of these efforts. ■

¹See Mary Klute et al., "Summary of Research on the Association between State Interventions in Chronically Low-Performing Schools and Student Achievement (REL 2016-138)," report (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2016); Charles Thompson et al., "School Turnaround through Scaffolded Craftsmanship," *Teacher College Record* 118, no. 13 (2016): 1–26; Kenneth Leithwood et al., "Leading Data Use in Schools: Organizational Conditions and Practices at the School and District Levels," *Leadership and Policy in Schools* 9, no. 3 (2010): 292–327.

²Kenneth Leithwood et al., "Seven Strong Claims about Successful School Leadership" *School Leadership & Management* 28, no. 1 (2008): 27–42.

³Thompson et al., "School Turnaround through Scaffolded Craftsmanship."

⁴Center on School Turnaround, "Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement: A Systems Framework" (San Francisco, CA: WestEd, 2017).

⁵Barnett Berry, "Recruiting and Retaining 'Highly Qualified Teachers' for Hard-to- Staff Schools," *NASSP Bulletin* 88, no. 638 (2004): 5–27; Francis Crowther et al., *Developing Teacher Leaders: How Teacher Leadership Enhances School Success* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2009); Linda Darling-Hammond et al., "Preparing School Leaders for a Changing World: Lessons from Exemplary Leadership Development Programs," report (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, Stanford Educational Leadership Institute, 2007).

⁶Lucy Steiner and Sharon Barrett, "Turnaround Principal Competencies," *School Administrator* 69, no. 7 (2012): 26–29; Lucy Steiner and Emily Hassel, "Using competencies to improve school turnaround principal success," report (Chapel Hill, NC: Public Impact, 2011).

⁷Center on School Turnaround, "Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement."

⁸Clifford Adelman, "The Toolbox Revisited: Paths to Degree Completion from High School through College," report (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2006); Marcia Masumoto and Sharon Brown-Welty, "Case Study of Leadership Practices and School-Community Interrelationships in High-Performing, High-Poverty, Rural California High Schools," *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 24, no. 1 (2009): 1–18; Kristin Moore and Carol Emig, "Integrated Student Supports: A Summary of the Evidence Base for Policymakers," report (Bethesda, MD: Child Trends, 2014).

⁹Linda Lambert, "A Framework for Shared Leadership," *Educational Leadership* 59 no. 8 (2002): 37–50; Karen Seashore Louis et al., "Learning from Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning," report (St. Paul, MN: University of Minnesota, 2010); William Saunders et al., "Increasing Achievement by Focusing Grade-Level Teams on Improving Classroom Learning: A Prospective, Quasi-Experimental Study of Title I Schools," *American Educational Research Journal* 46, no. 4 (2009): 1006–1033.

¹⁰Rebecca Herman et al., "Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools: IES Practice Guide," report (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2008); Marcia Masumoto and

Sharon Brown-Welty, "Case Study of Leadership Practices." ¹¹Joyce Epstein, *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001); Karen Mapp and Paul Kuttner, "Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships," report (Austin, TX: SEDL, 2013); Sara McAlister, "Why Community Engagement Matters in School Turnaround," *Voices in Urban Education* 36 (2013): 35–42.

¹²Rebecca Herman et al., "Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools"; Marcia Masumoto and Sharon Brown-Welty, "Case Study of Leadership Practices."

¹³Oregon provides such data in its district dashboard, <http://www.ode.state.or.us/data/reportcard/reports.aspx>.

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Education Press, 2011); Reform Support Network, "Turnaround Leadership: How to Identify Successful School Leaders," December 2012, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/implementation-support-unit/tech-assist/turnaround-leadership.pdf>.

³Mark Shellinger, then coordinator of the Wallace Foundation-funded Leading Education Achievement in Districts team in Kentucky's Jefferson County School District, based the SAM role on a position in the Victor Elementary District in Victorville, California, although that position was not part of a larger effort to track principal time use. See National SAM Innovation Project (NSIP), "SAMS Connect," 2015, <http://www.samsconnect.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/SAM-Info.pdf>; and Christina A. Samuels, "Managers Help Principals Balance Time," *Education Week* (February 11, 2008).

⁴Martha Bruckner, superintendent of Council Bluffs Community School District, email exchange with authors, April 2017.

⁵The exceptions are three alternative schools in the district, which do not have a SAM.

⁶While principals are not required to share time-tracking data with the central office, many reported voluntarily to the Iowa West Foundation as evidence of the investment's impact.

⁷Staff perceptions about this model were gathered in conversation with authors by Paula Giaquinto, assistant superintendent of Fitchburg Public Schools; Rowan Demanche, director of pupil services; Alicia Berrospe, director of special education (March 9, 2017); conversation with Andre Ravenelle, superintendent (May 2, 2017); e-mail correspondence with Rick Zeena, administrator of human resources (June 6, 2017).

⁸Fitchburg teacher focus group discussion with authors, March 8, 2017; Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Education, "Re: Onsite Follow-up Monitoring Report: Coordinated Program Review Corrective Action Plan Verification and Special Education Mid-cycle Review," 2005.

⁹Conversations with Giaquinto, Demanche, and Berrospe.

¹⁰Education Resource Strategies, "A New Vision for Teacher Professional Growth and Support: Six Steps to a More Powerful School System Strategy" (Watertown, MA: ERS, May 2013), 27.

¹¹Scott Thompson, deputy chief, innovation and design, Office of Instructional Practice, DCPS, conversation with authors, December 15, 2016.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Rebecca Herman et al., "School Leadership Interventions under the Every Student Succeeds Act: Evidence Review," research report (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2017).