

# memorandum

**Date:** February 2015  
**To:** West Comprehensive Center on behalf of the State Departments of Education in Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah  
**From:** REL West Reference Desk Team  
**Re:** Summary of information on district's role in school turnaround

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**Request:** Please provide information on the district's role in turning around low-performing schools (i.e., what that role is, how it is carried out, what impact it has, etc.).

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## Response:

We conducted a search of the literature to answer your question (methods described at the end) and include relevant resources in this memo.

- Citations include a link to a free online version.
- Citations are accompanied by an abstract, excerpt, or summary written by the author or publisher of the document.

We have not done an evaluation of the methodological rigor of these resources, but provide them for your information only.

## References

American Institutes for Research. (2010). *What experience from the field tells us about school leadership and turnaround*. Naperville, IL: Author. Retrieved on February 17, 2015, from [http://www.learningpt.org/pdfs/leadership\\_turnaround\\_schools.pdf](http://www.learningpt.org/pdfs/leadership_turnaround_schools.pdf)

*Excerpt:* The issue of effective school leadership has been pushed front and center with the availability of Race to the Top funding for innovative state education plans and School Improvement Grants (SIG) to turn around the nation's lowest-performing schools. And that is exactly where the discussion needs to be if we have any hope of reviving our nation's weakest schools. Until recently, conversations about improving educator effectiveness focused nearly exclusively on teachers. Although standards and policies to recruit, develop, and train teachers have existed in most states for years, many states do not have equivalent policies for school leaders. However, policy makers are now beginning to address the issue more directly. This increased collective attention to strengthening the skills of school leaders leads to three important questions:

- What actions do successful school leaders take?
- Do the lowest-performing schools require a specific set of leadership skills?
- How do district leaders and school staff support improvement to sustain improvement when an effective school leader leaves?

*REL West note:* See pages 5–7 for district role.

Annenberg Institute for School Reform, Brown University. (2012). *Webinar: How can districts lead the way in school turnaround?* Providence, RI: Author. Retrieved on February 17, 2015, from <http://annenberginstitute.org/content/webinar-how-can-districts-lead-way-school-turnaround-71212>

*Abstract:* This webinar approached the school turnaround debate through the lens of the school district's role and provides examples of effective turnaround efforts, as well as key challenges for district leadership. Turning around the lowest-performing schools has become a major focus of education reform in the United States. In many cases, states and “turnaround specialist” organizations have taken the lead in improving performance in these schools. But what is the district's role in school turnaround? How can districts adapt to meet these new challenges while maintaining a focus on high achievement for all students? The Annenberg Institute's work with urban school communities has highlighted that school turnaround will be successful for all students only if it is driven by systemwide, coordinated strategies. And school districts, though often criticized for slow and inadequate responses to poor academic performance of its students, are still the organizations most invested in ensuring that school turnaround can succeed at scale.

Baroody, K. (2011). *Turning around the nation's lowest-performing schools: Five steps districts can take to improve their chances of success.* Washington, DC: Center for American Progress. Retrieved on February 18, 2015, from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED535862.pdf>

*Abstract:* Across the country, states and school districts are focusing on turning around the nation's lowest-performing schools. Unprecedented federal Race to the Top and School Improvement Grant funding accompanied by a more prescriptive approach for using the funds has raised the profile of turnaround efforts. This focus on school turnaround, while welcome, is not new. State, district, and school leaders have been trying for years to turn around persistently low-performing schools. But while some schools have made significant gains in student achievement, results overall are decidedly mixed. One of the overarching reasons for the uneven results is that districts generally have failed to recognize that persistently low-performing schools face unique challenges that require aggressive, customized, and sustained interventions. Education Resource Strategies, Inc., or ERS, has identified five steps that districts can take in designing and implementing their school improvement programs that will increase the probability that their efforts will achieve lasting improvement: (1) Understand what each school needs; (2) Quantify what each school gets and how it is used; (3) Invest in the most important changes first; (4) Customize the strategy to the school; and (5) Change the district, not just the schools. There is no silver bullet—no single solution for how to turn a failing school around. But by taking these five steps district leaders can improve their probability for sustainable and scalable success.

Corcoran, T., Fuhrman, S. H., & Belcher, C. L. (2001). The district role in instructional improvement. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 83(1), 78–84. Retrieved on February 18, 2015, from [http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=gse\\_pubs](http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=gse_pubs)

*Abstract:* Are changing conditions affecting the capacity of districts to provide focus, to coordinate support, and to scale up successful reforms? From a study of the roles played by central office staff members in shaping and supporting instructional reforms in three large urban districts, the authors derive an answer.

David, J. L., & Talbert, J. E. (2012). *Turning around a high-poverty school district: Learning from Sanger Unified's success*. Palo Alto, CA: Bay Area Research Group, and Stanford, CA: Center for Research on the Context of Teaching. Retrieved on February 17, 2015, from <http://web.stanford.edu/group/suse-crc/cgi-bin/drupal/sites/default/files/Sanger%20Turnaround%2010-14-12.pdf>

*Excerpt:* Stories of turnaround schools are rare. Stories of turnaround school districts are even rarer, particularly those with a track record that is still strong after eight years. The Sanger Unified School District created an engine for continuous improvement. Other districts have some of the individual elements of Sanger's comprehensive reform but few if any have accomplished the sweeping changes in district culture that undergird and sustain their improvement strategies. How did Sanger manage to produce these results? Will they last? What can others learn from Sanger's evolution? With funding from S. H. Cowell Foundation in San Francisco, we have had the opportunity to investigate Sanger's successes and its struggles and document the path that led them from dire straits to one of the most talked about districts in the state. Our goal is to capture what it is about Sanger's approach that is so different from typical improvement efforts and to suggest the kinds of lessons that have relevance for district reform across the nation.

Herman, R., Dawson, P., Dee, T., Greene, J., Maynard, R., & Redding, S. (2008). *Turning around chronically low-performing schools: A practice guide* (NCEE #2008-4020). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U. S. Department of Education. Retrieved on February 18, 2015, from [http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practice\\_guides/Turnaround\\_pg\\_04181.pdf](http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practice_guides/Turnaround_pg_04181.pdf)

*Abstract:* This guide identifies practices that can improve the performance of chronically low-performing schools—a process commonly referred to as creating “turnaround schools.” The four recommendations in this guide work together to help failing schools make adequate yearly progress.

Honig, M. I., Copland, M. A., Rainey, L., Lorton, J. A., & Newton, M. (2010). *Central office transformation for district-wide teaching and learning improvement*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington, Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy. Retrieved on February 18, 2015, from <https://depts.washington.edu/ctpmail/PDFs/S2-CentralAdmin-04-2010.pdf>

*Excerpt:* This report summarizes main results from a national study of how leaders in urban school district central offices fundamentally transformed their work and relationships with schools to support districtwide teaching and learning improvement. All three study districts had been posting gains in student achievement and credited their progress, in part, to efforts to radically change their work at the central office level. We aimed to understand more specifically what these central offices were doing. The study breaks new ground in educational research by uncovering the daily work practices and activities of central office administrators as they sought not just to make the central office more efficient but also to transform the central office into a support system to help all schools improve the quality of teaching and learning. Our findings reveal that leaders in these systems, first and foremost, understood what decades of experience and research have shown: that districts generally do not see districtwide improvements in teaching and learning without substantial engagement by their central offices in helping all schools build their capacity for improvement. Central offices and the people who work in them are not simply part of the background noise in school improvement. Rather, school district central office administrators exercise essential leadership, in partnership with school leaders, to build capacity throughout public educational systems for teaching and learning improvements.

Knudson, J., Shambaugh, L., & O'Day, J. (2011). *Beyond the school: Exploring a systemic approach to school turnaround*. Palo Alto, CA: California Collaborative for District Reform. Retrieved on February 17, 2015, from [http://cacollaborative.org/sites/default/files/CA\\_Collaborative\\_School\\_Turnaround\\_0.pdf](http://cacollaborative.org/sites/default/files/CA_Collaborative_School_Turnaround_0.pdf)

*Abstract:* Recent attention to school turnaround often situates the causes for (and solutions to) persistent low performance at the school level. This policy and practice brief draws on the experience of eight California school districts to suggest a more systemic approach to school improvement. By looking at common approaches across all eight districts and by sharing three districts' stories more in depth, the brief demonstrates the ways that districts can leverage their capacity and resources to more effectively achieve growth in struggling schools. Based on this work, the brief concludes with a set of considerations for how the federal government can promote a more systemic and customized approach to intervention in our lowest-performing schools through the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

Kutash, J., Nico, E., Gorin, E., Rahmatullah, S., & Tallant, K. (2010). *The school turnaround field guide*. Boston, MA: FSG Social Impact Advisors. Retrieved on February 20, 2015, from <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/district-policy-and-practice/Documents/The-School-Turnaround-Field-Guide.pdf>

*Excerpt:* FSG's motivation in writing this report is to ensure that the school turnaround field is well-coordinated, fueled by promising practices, and guided by a focus on results. This report provides an overview of the school turnaround issue, identifies measures of success, surveys the policy and funding environment, compares the major turnaround models, and provides a guide to important actors in the field and a highly visual map of their interrelated roles and funding. We also explore early lessons learned, as well as key issues and gaps challenging the school turnaround field. Finally, we suggest a set of detailed actions that this widely divergent group of stakeholders could take—collectively and individually—to ensure that turnaround succeeds at scale.

Mass Insight Education, School Turnaround Group. (2010). *The District Turnaround Office: A comprehensive support structure for struggling schools*. Boston, MA: Author. Retrieved on February 17, 2015, from [http://alaskacc.org/sites/alaskacc.org/files/STG\\_District\\_Turnaround\\_Office\\_August\\_2010.pdf](http://alaskacc.org/sites/alaskacc.org/files/STG_District_Turnaround_Office_August_2010.pdf)

*Abstract:* An extension of Mass Insight's research on Partnership Zones, the findings in this presentation focus on the creation of a District Turnaround Office as a new internal unit within a Local Educational Agency (LEA). The District Turnaround Office is a centralized entity that has both the capacity and authority to manage and coordinate all turnaround efforts within an LEA. The model, when fully realized, will lead to a single office with a clear mandate for providing underperforming schools with everything they need to improve student achievement, including attracting and overseeing Lead Partners, providing streamlined access to district services, interpreting and applying state and federal policy, applying for SIG grants and other applicable funding, monitoring results, and assuring accountability. Recommendations are derived from both existing district structures similar to the DTO model, as well as internal Mass Insight analysis. External research included interviews with key district staff in Chicago, New York, Washington, DC, Los Angeles, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg, NC as well as artifact analysis and synthesis of information gathered from agency websites.

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE), Office of District and School Turnaround. (2014). *Statewide system of support*. Malden, MA: Author. Retrieved on February 17, 2015, from <http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/sss/turnaround/>  
*From the website:* The Office of District and School Turnaround (ODST) coordinates ESE's work to build partnerships with the lowest performing districts and schools to turn around student performance. ODST operates according to a theory of action that if the district uses a continuous cycle of improvement to turn around their lowest performing schools, the district will strengthen its systems of support necessary to continuously improve district and school performance. The Office is charged with working closely with the 10 largest urban school districts providing customized support to enhance their capacity to intervene successfully in their high need schools, in addition to all other schools in the district. To this end, ESE's assistance, activities, tools, and resources are purposefully designed to complement and strengthen district capacity to guide and monitor school improvement. *REL West note:* See website for the *Turnaround Practices* report and *Emerging Practices* reports, which highlight practices and strategies observed in schools that have shown significant and rapid gains in student achievement.

Player, D., Hitt, D. H., & Robinson, W. (n.d.). *District readiness to support school turnaround: A user's guide to inform the work of state education agencies and districts*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Partnership for Leaders in Education, Darden School of Business & Curry School of Education. Retrieved on February 17, 2015, from [http://centeronschoolturnaround.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/District\\_Readiness\\_to\\_Support\\_School\\_Turnaround.pdf](http://centeronschoolturnaround.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/District_Readiness_to_Support_School_Turnaround.pdf)

*Abstract:* This guide, from Center on School Turnaround partner, the University of Virginia's Partnership for Leaders in Education, provides SEAs and districts (LEAs) with guidance about how to assess the district's readiness to support school turnaround initiatives. Often, school turnaround efforts focus only on the school's structure and leadership. Rarely do policymakers or practitioners think about school turnaround as a system-level issue requiring fundamental changes in district-level practice to establish the conditions for school turnaround to succeed.

Zavadsky, H. (2012). *School turnarounds: The essential role of districts*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press. Retrieved on February 17, 2015, from [http://hepg.org/hepg-home/books/school-turnarounds\\_162](http://hepg.org/hepg-home/books/school-turnarounds_162)

*Book description:* The inspiration for this book was a crucial observation: that if the school turnaround movement is to have widespread and lasting consequences, it will need to incorporate meaningful district involvement in its efforts. The result is a volume that considers school turnaround efforts at the district level, examining the evidence thus far and indicating fruitful directions for district-based initiatives going forward. At the heart of the book are case studies of districts—in Philadelphia, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Denver, Sacramento, and Long Beach—that have developed systemwide policies and programs for instituting turnaround reforms in their member schools. These cases—and the book as a whole—bring district-based initiatives and options into the larger discussion of the turnaround movement and its potential for improving chronically low-performing schools.

## **Additional organization to consult**

### **Center on School Turnaround**

<http://centeronschoolturnaround.org/>

The Center on School Turnaround is part of a federal network of 22 Comprehensive Centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education. There are 15 Regional Comprehensive Centers, serving individual states or clusters of states, and 7 national Content Centers. The centers are charged with building the capacity of state education agencies (SEAs) to assist districts and schools in meeting student achievement goals.

The partners and collaborators in this Center—WestEd, the Academic Development Institute, the University of Virginia’s Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education, the National Implementation Research Network, Public Impact, the National Center on Time and Learning, Education Northwest, and a panel of nationally known education experts—strongly believe that efforts to turn around the nation’s persistently low-achieving schools can move from a system that focuses on islands of excellence to the “way we do business” in the United States.

The goal of the Center on School Turnaround is to provide technical assistance and identify, synthesize, and disseminate research-based practices and emerging promising practices that will lead to SEAs’ increased capacity to support districts in turning around their lowest-performing schools.

## **METHODS**

### **Keywords and Search Strings Used in the Search**

“School district” OR “district” AND “school turnaround” AND “role”

### **Search of Sites and Databases**

EBSCO Host; What Works Clearinghouse; Google; Google Scholar

### **Criteria for Inclusion**

When REL West staff review resources, they consider—among other things—four factors:

- **Date of the Publication:** The most current information is included, except in the case of nationally known seminal resources.
- **Source and Funder of the Report/Study/Brief/Article:** Priority is given to IES, nationally funded, and certain other vetted sources known for strict attention to research protocols.
- **Methodology:** Sources include randomized controlled trial studies, surveys, self-assessments, literature reviews, and policy briefs. Priority for inclusion generally is given to randomized controlled trial study findings, but the reader should note at least the following factors when basing decisions on these resources: numbers of participants (Just a few? Thousands?); selection (Did the participants volunteer for the study or were they chosen?); representation (Were findings generalized from a homogeneous or a diverse pool of participants? Was the study sample representative of the population as a whole?).
- **Existing Knowledge Base:** Although we strive to include vetted resources, there are times when the research base is limited or nonexistent. In these cases, we have included the best resources we could find, which may include newspaper articles, interviews with content specialists, organization websites, and other sources.

This memorandum is one in a series of quick-turnaround responses to specific questions posed by educators and policymakers in the western region (Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah), which is served by the Regional Educational Laboratory West (REL West) at WestEd. This memorandum was prepared by REL West under a contract with the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences (IES), Contract ED-IES-12-C-0002, administered by WestEd. Its content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.