

Leadership for Turnaround Schools

Turnaround is a dramatic and comprehensive intervention in a low-performing school that: a) produces significant gains in achievement within two years; and, b) readies the school for the longer process of transformation into a high-performance organization.

-Mass Insight Education and Research Institute, www.massinsight.org

The Challenge

In 2009, the Obama Administration announced its intention to use five billion dollars to turn around 5000 of the nation's poorest performing schools by 2014. The US Department of Education is using this large pool of money to foster urgency and fuel innovation, motivating educators and the broader education sector to step up to this challenge. In Georgia, 278 schools are in Needs Improvement status and could be considered to be in immediate need of a turnaround.

The Opportunity

The USDOE is providing tremendous financial support for school turnarounds and clearly define the type and scope of this national effort. Under the Race to the Top grant competition, which provides \$4.35 billion in competitive grants to states, and the Title I School Improvement grants, which provide \$3.5 billion to schools, Local Education Agencies must implement at least one of the following four turnaround models:

1. **Turnaround Model** – Replace the principal and rehire no more than 50% of the school's staff, adopt a new governance structure, and implement a research-based vertically aligned instructional program.
2. **Restart Model** – Transfer control of or close and reopen a school under a School Management Organization (SMO) or school operator that has been selected through a rigorous review process.
3. **School Closure** – Close the school and enroll students in other, higher-achieving schools.
4. **Transformation Model** – Develop teacher/principal effectiveness (including replacing the principal), implement comprehensive instructional reform, extend learning and teacher planning time, create a community-orientation, and provide operating flexibility and sustained support.

Conditions for Successful Turnarounds

Both school and district conditions are necessary to drive successful turnarounds. These conditions include:

- A coherent vision for school culture and instruction in support of all children learning at a high level;
- District Resources are re-allocated to allow for more autonomy at the site level;
- District leadership (including school boards) is aligned behind turnaround efforts and is willing to make or support difficult decisions (e.g., to replace principals or close schools);
- Effective school leader and leadership team is in place and willing to make difficult decisions (e.g., to turnover staff);
- All adults consistently and rigorously maintain a culture of high expectations and deliver strong instruction and programs; and,
- Data systems are in place to deliver timely, formative, and summative information based on rigorous state standards.

Turnaround Leadership

Turnaround leaders have many of the same characteristics and behaviors as all successful education leaders, including strategic planning, communication and instructional leadership, but they have will and commitment to implement these behaviors in a much more challenging environment. Therefore, the leaders must be relentlessly consistent, be willing to make difficult decisions, maintain urgency, resolve crises, and develop and rely on leadership teams within the school and among the broader community.