

Lessons Learned from Research on the Effects and Implementation of School Turnaround Policies

Conference Summary

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and other accountability policies have shone a spotlight on the nation's lowest-performing schools, pressuring many schools, districts, and states to implement turnaround reforms aimed at rapidly improving the performance of these schools. Through School Improvement Grants and Race to the Top funding, the federal government provided states, districts, and schools with guidelines and funds to facilitate these turnaround initiatives. More recently, the 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) reinforced this priority by maintaining an expectation of accountability and action to improve the nation's lowest-performing schools.

Recently, a number of researchers have evaluated these initiatives, which varied in context, implementation, and effects (Gill et al., 2007; De la Torre et al., 2012; Dee, 2012; Dickey-Griffith, 2013; Henry, et al., 2015; Ruble, 2015; Schueler et al., 2017; Harris and Larsen, 2016; Strunk et al., 2016a; Strunk et al., 2016b; Strunk et al., 2016c; Sun et al., 2017; Zimmer et al., 2017; Chin et al., 2017; Dougherty and Wiener, 2017; Heissel and Ladd, 2018; Kho et al., 2018). Because of wide variation across these turnaround initiatives and because turning around the performance of the lowest performing schools continues to be a major policy initiative at the federal, state, and local levels, it is important to develop lessons from this research and next steps for researchers to help inform these policies going forward.

To that end, the University of Kentucky and Vanderbilt University, as part of a larger project supported by the Laura and John Arnold Foundation and Walton Family Foundation, hosted a two-day conference in the summer of 2018. The conference convened researchers as well as practitioners and policymakers at the front lines of implementing these policies. By including a wide array of stakeholders, the resulting conference discussion centered around not only the latest research findings, but also speculated on the reasons behind these findings and unanswered questions that need to be addressed in order for the turnaround movement to move forward.

FEATURES OF NCLB, SIG, and RTTT:

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

The goal of NCLB (2002-2015), which was succeeded by the Every Student Succeeds Act, was to “level the playing field” for K-12 students of color and other minority groups, including students with special education needs, students whose first language is not English, and students affected by poverty.

NCLB required annual student testing and reporting of results overall and for the subgroups mentioned above, with penalties for schools that did not meet annual yearly progress (AYP) standards, including: the stigma associated with being labeled as a school “needing improvement,” state takeover, and school closures.

NCLB gave states more control over how federal dollars were spent, but also included requirements regarding teacher quality and funding rigorous scientific research. (via understood.org)

School Improvement Grants (SIG)

School Improvement Grants were created under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). Recipient state educational agencies (SEAs) are responsible for administering federal grant dollars to local education agencies (LEAs) that are dedicated to improving student achievement in their lowest-performing schools. (via U.S. Department of Education)

Race to the Top (RTTT)

The largest investment in school reform in U.S. history, RTTT rewarded states for past accomplishments and incentivized further improvements in college/career preparedness, teacher recruitment and development, development of student achievement metrics, and school turnaround initiatives. (via U.S. Department of Education)

A Discussion of Lessons Learned from Current Approaches to Turnaround

While there is a long history of efforts to improve low performing schools, much of the recent history can be traced back to the “whole school” reform efforts in the late 1990s. Through the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration program between 1998 and 2007, the federal government spent over \$2 billion to improve low-performing schools through a holistic school reform approach often called “Comprehensive School Reform” (CSR). Despite this significant investment, the results for these reforms were mixed (U.S. Department of Education, 2010; Gross, Booker, and Goldhaber, 2009). With these mixed results and a general dissatisfaction with CSRs, a new generation of initiatives was created through School Improvement Grants (SIGs), Race to the Top (RTTT) competitions, and NCLB waivers.

This second generation of reform efforts strived to make deeper and more fundamental changes by emphasizing three components for turnaround: (1) disrupting the status quo; (2) building an educational infrastructure; (3) and sustaining the momentum. During the conference, these thematic topics related to the existing research and possible next steps were the focus of sessions. Below, we summarize discussions from each session and suggest next steps to build on these discussions.

Disrupting the Status Quo

The first of three conference themes focused on the theory of action for improving low-performing schools. Dr. Henry (Patricia and Rodes Hart Professor of Public Policy and Education, Vanderbilt University) in his comments in introducing the first speaker highlighted the challenges low performing schools face with high rates of student and teacher turnover as well as high rates of student absenteeism. For instance, he highlighted that in low performing schools he studied in North Carolina, 10.7 percent of the students transferred in *within* the 2014-15 school year while high performing schools only had 4.8 percent. Also, in that same year, low performing schools had 7.9 percent turnover rate among teachers within the school year compared to 3.7 for high performing schools. Finally, 11.5 percent of students in low performing schools missed eighteen days or more of schooling while high performing schools only had 3.5 percent.

What are NCLB waivers?

The Obama Administration bypassed Congress and announced that states could apply for waivers in order to set their own, more realistic, standards for schools rather than NCLB standards.

According to the Obama Administration archived White House blog, waivers allow states more flexibility in setting their own standards for achievement and methods for closing achievement gaps, which was a major departure from NCLB. States that wanted a waiver had to prove that they were doing three things: (1) addressing college and career readiness, (2) measuring and rewarding schools that showed the most progress as well as those schools with the highest absolute achievement, and (3) measuring teacher and principal performance.

(via obamawhitehouse.archives.gov)

Because of these and other similarly disheartening statistics, some have advocated for significant reforms to American schools including famously, John Chubb and Terry Moe. In their provocative book entitled “Politics, Markets, and American Schools” (1990), they argued that schools are too entrenched in bureaucracy to reform themselves and only through the outside intervention can schools improve. Over time, this theoretical notion of entrenched bureaucracy led to the concept of “disrupting the status quo.” In this context, Dr. Henry asked the group what constitutes the status quo, and what is the status quo that needs to be disrupted in introducing Dr. Donald Peurach (Associate Professor, University of Michigan) as the conference first presenter.

In his presentation, Dr. Peurach defined disruption in two ways: disruption *of* the status quo (positive intervention aimed at supporting school turnaround) and disruption *as* the status quo (problematic interruptions that complicate school turnaround efforts). Disruption *of* the status quo includes the introduction of an educational infrastructure specifically designed to support low-performing schools; comprehensive supports for classroom instruction; a strong emphasis on implementing evidence-based strategies with fidelity; and the creation of resources for collaboration, adaptation, and continuous improvement aimed at refining and extending evidence-based practices. Disruption *as* the

status quo describes common conditions in-and-around chronically-underperforming schools that both contribute to their underperformance and complicate their improvement, such as high rates of transiency among district and school leaders, agenda instability, rapid rates of program adoption-and-abandonment, high rates of teacher turnover, and turbulence in family and community environments.

A general theme from Dr. Peurach's presentation and the resulting discussion is that whether disrupting the status quo ultimately has a positive or negative effect could depend on a number of factors, including whether or not the reform has a strong theoretical design, good leadership, community support, strong funding, quality implementation, and buy-in from school staff. However, some conference participants pushed back on the concept of "disrupting the status quo" itself, arguing that, as an idea originating from the private sector, it has limited applicability to public education, and its use implies that only through major changes can schools succeed.

During the conference, both researchers and practitioners noted that reform efforts could build staff buy-in through "quick wins"—visible evidence of success in the short-term. Without these quick wins, staff may lose motivation to sustain the reforms. However, the quick win attitude raises the natural tension with the fact that positive disruption of the status quo in low-performing schools takes time, commitment, and persistence. This tension raises questions whether or not a reform effort can recover from some initial missteps. With these questions, it is natural to turn to research for answers as we continue to examine additional turnaround efforts. Through this research, we can hopefully answer questions such as:

- (1) Is disruption of the status quo needed?
- (2) What types of changes to the status quo have been associated with positive or negative effects of turnaround?
- (3) What strategies have been used to establish stable conditions in-and-around chronically-underperforming schools to support turnaround efforts?
- (4) Can you "right the ship" in chronically underperforming schools without early wins?
- (5) What types of quick wins can turnaround leaders target in the initial stages of turnaround?

Learning from Implementation Fidelity

Dr. Emily Penner (Assistant Professor, University of California Irvine), in her comments in introducing the speaker for the second session, outlined key questions for implementation including (1) What are the elements in a theory of action and a turnaround plan? (2) Who is involved in a turnaround effort? (3) At what point do we consider a turnaround effort to be successful and have taken hold? She briefly addressed these questions by talking about her own observations as a teacher in a school that had been through a turnaround process. At the end of this discussion, Dr. Penner pivoted by outlining the challenges for implementation turnaround efforts with fidelity under the latest federal initiative, ESSA. This includes the challenge of developing criteria for identifying "turnaround schools".

She then introduced presenter Dr. Rebecca Herman (Distinguished Chair in Education Policy at the RAND Corporation). In her talk, Dr. Herman stressed that both the intervention and its implementation matter in turnaround. In other words, it is important to consider whether interventions have been implemented according to design—i.e., with fidelity. Dr. Herman underscored the need to understand not only whether participants received the intended services, but the level of implementation quality, which can be affected by clear communication, a culture of support, and how well the intervention aligns with school needs.

Dr. Herman noted that when evaluating fidelity of implementation, it is important to define topics and practices; measure both the presence and quality of interventions (i.e., using dichotomous and continuous measures); and reference the reform's theory of action. She also noted the importance of recognizing that most school turnaround research takes place in urban settings and findings may not generalize to rural settings. Finally, Dr. Herman noted that all schools make changes over time, so comparisons are essential to determine if intervention schools are doing something different.

In reaction to the presentation, conference participants noted that adaptation of the reform design at the school level is inevitable and may be necessary. Some of this adaptation may be the result of staff labeling existing practices using the reform terminology, which could reduce the likelihood of reform success if the adaption results in practices that are no different from what already happening in these schools. However, in some

cases, adaptation may be necessary for success, because effective strategies in certain settings (e.g., rural versus urban) and populations (e.g., elementary versus middle or high school students), may not work in other settings and populations.

In terms of research, the participants all agreed that measuring implementation fidelity often requires detailed information that is typically provided by case studies or qualitative methods. However, even with case studies, researchers need to keep the research specific and focused. The participants suggested that future research efforts be directed toward answering questions such as:

- (1) What reform strategies can be implemented with fidelity in turnaround schools? Are there particular design features associated with the improvement of the lowest performing schools?
- (2) How does implementation fidelity vary across context, settings and populations? Does implementation vary based on the experience level of teachers and leaders? Does the fidelity of implementation vary over time?
- (3) What are the distinct roles of states, districts, and schools in designing and implementing reforms with fidelity?
- (4) What are the critical components of the theory of action for reforms? How much fidelity of implementation versus flexibility for adaptation can occur without reducing effects?
- (5) What are effective ways to measure and monitor implementation fidelity?

Building Education Infrastructure and Sustaining Momentum

Dr. Josh Glazer (Associate Professor, George Washington University) began the session titled “Infrastructure and Sustaining Momentum” by arguing that school turnaround is not actually about “turnaround.” Rather, it is more about building and maintaining a workable educational infrastructure. He noted that building infrastructure requires an increase in capabilities and organizational redesign.

He then introduced the speaker Dr. Katharine Strunk (Professor and Erickson Distinguished Chair, Michigan State University) who laid out a set of questions to be addressed for building infrastructure and sustaining momentum:

- (1) How can turnaround reforms be both top-down and bottom-up?
- (2) What is the role of community partners in implementing and sustaining reform?
- (3) Who should pay, when, and for how long?
- (4) How can we generalize from specific turnaround reforms to a broader strategy?
- (5) What happens if reforms don’t work?
- (6) Should reforms differ over time?
- (7) What systems and policies must be in place to sustain reforms post-intervention?
- (8) What specific strategies are the most successful, and in what contexts?
- (9) What barriers exist in specific contexts but not others (e.g., rural districts without sufficient labor supply)?

In the ensuing conversation, it was clear that we currently are in the initial stages of answering all of these questions. Participants noted that there is a difference between conceptualizing a two-year intervention and building a long-term infrastructure. Some participants invoked the analogy: “If you build a bridge but do not maintain it adequately, the bridge will collapse.” The conversation ended by noting that we not only need further research, but we also need it to be coupled with input from teachers, principals, and other school staff, who are on the front lines of the reforms. Through this research, we can hopefully address some of the questions above.

Implications for the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

ESSA, which was the reauthorization of the 50-year-old Elementary and Secondary Education Act, was signed into law by President Obama on December 10, 2015. ESSA replaced NCLB as the guiding law for providing equal opportunities for all students, and in recent years, states have been developing plans to meet the requirements of ESSA.

Building off the discussion of turnaround strategies, Mr. Martez Hill (former Director of the North Carolina State Board of Education) provided an overview of the similarities and differences between NCLB and ESSA, addressing the accountability annual report card, school improvement, and local school district requirements. He then turned over the conversation to Ms. Erin O’Hara (Director of Tennessee Education Research Alliance (TERA)). In efforts to improve low performing schools through ESSA, Ms. O’Hara echoed previous speakers suggesting the need for a theory of action that distinguishes separate roles for the

state, district, and schools. Ultimately, she argued, there needs to be a culture of support from the district that includes funding.

In response to Ms. O’Hara’s call for a supportive culture, participants noted that there needs to be a way for schools to communicate with each other, which

currently does not exist. In addition, districts may play a significant role as ESSA gives districts more flexibility in oversight and funding for low-performing schools. However, conference participants recognized that providing support while also holding schools accountable will require a delicate balancing act for districts and states.

A Comparison of ESSA and NCLB		
	ESSA	NCLB
Focus of Accountability Measures	<p>Focus extends past test scores, which, along with reading and math test scores and English language proficiency test scores, includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High school graduation rates • Another state-chosen academic measure for grade schools and middle schools” (understood.org) • A school quality measure that could focus on: Kindergarten readiness, college readiness, school climate and safety, chronic absenteeism, etc. (understood.org) 	<p>State reading and math test scores were initial primary measures of accountability. Graduation rates for high schools were added later.</p> <p>(understood.org)</p>
Goals	<p>States set their own achievement targets, overall goals, and goals for low-performing students.</p> <p>No federal penalties for struggling schools.</p> <p>(understood.org)</p>	<p>Stipulated “proficiency” levels for state test scores for students, including those with special needs.</p> <p>Defined adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirements and penalties for not meeting these goals.</p> <p>(understood.org)</p>
Requirements for Identifying and Improving Lowest Performing Schools	<p>States identify and improve lowest performing schools, and have the flexibility to set their own goals within a federal set framework. (understood.org)</p> <p>However, they MUST also have a plan for schools that have high drop-out rates, and have students in special education that are having difficulty meeting these standards.</p> <p>These school plans must also use “evidence-based methods.” (understood.org)</p>	<p>States also had control to identify and improve lowest performing schools, however with far less freedom and flexibility in drafting their own plans. (understood.org)</p> <p>Federal law also stipulated that all students must reach proficiency in reading and math. (understood.org)</p> <p>Federal government provided only a few specific ways that the school could try to be improved by the state, by law, which only allowed for a small amount of local autonomy. (understood.org)</p>

(via understood.org)

Next Steps for Research

Through the conference discussion, it became clear that in order for future research to be helpful, researchers cannot work in isolation from one another or from practitioners and policymakers who have first-hand knowledge of challenges in developing strong policies and implementing these policies effectively. It also became clear that if we want a broader understanding of these reforms, we must recognize the degree to which these areas of research overlap and complement each other. Indeed, in developing and examining some of the questions across the three sections above, it is clear that the boundaries between questions around the theory of action, implementation fidelity, and infrastructure-building are ambiguous. We need to recognize that these issues overlap, which requires researcher to tackle them simultaneously.

In sum, a community of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers should continue to come together to communicate their latest findings, challenges, and hurdles for designing and implementing effective policies. This may take the form of additional invited conferences focusing on specific themes around reforming low-performing schools or themed sessions within national policy and education conferences, which participants saw as the next practical step. Themes for future discussions among reform researchers and practitioners could include developing multi-level theories of action, the identification of effective reform strategies or components, or reliable and valid measures of implementation. Researchers, policy-makers and practitioners have laid the foundation for understanding whether or not these reforms achieve their goals. The next step is to understand the mechanisms driving these outcomes and conditions under which success is most likely. While the first generation of questions have used research tools to identifying causal effects, the next generation will need to add a different set of tools, including qualitative approaches which could lead to the collection of data through surveys, focus groups, interviews, and case studies, to complement the administrative data, which most prior studies of the effects of reform have relied upon. The next generation of studies of the reforms of the lowest performing schools may be more costly and require broader collaboration among researchers but may allow greater insights into what was done and how did it work than prior studies.

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