

California Collaborative on District Reform

Policy and Practice Brief

Beyond the School: Exploring a Systemic Approach to School Turnaround

Executive Summary
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Educators and policymakers have long grappled with the challenge of chronically underperforming schools. Yet most remedies to date have suffered from a common fundamental flaw. By situating the causes—and thus the solutions—for persistent low performance solely at the school level, federal and state policies generally ignore the role that school districts can play in both producing and reversing school failure.

A recent exploration of eight California districts participating in the California Collaborative on District Reform builds on literature highlighting the critical district role in supporting school improvement and student learning. The experiences of these districts—Fresno, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento City, San Bernardino, San Jose, and Sanger Unified School Districts—reveal two equally central lessons for school turnaround:

Lesson #1: Long-term and widespread school turnaround often requires systemic, district-level (not just school-level) approaches.

Lesson #2: Systems attempting to reverse chronic underperformance must customize their efforts to meet the individual needs and conditions of each specific school.

Lessons for Practice

Within these broader lessons, several strategies emerged across the eight districts that highlight commonalities in their approaches to low-performing schools. While no single strategy will solve the problem of persistent low performance, leaders might consider these when developing a comprehensive district approach.

- **Establishing a district culture that supports school turnaround:** Districts can establish high expectations while orienting the central office to removing barriers and providing the supports schools need to meet student needs.
- **Developing and deploying strong leadership:** District leaders described strong school leadership as essential to dramatic improvement. Capacity building and placement practices for existing leaders, supplemented by pipelines for new leaders, can position strong principals in the schools with greatest need.
- **Fostering and deploying strong teaching:** Teacher preparation and assignment practices can help ensure high quality teaching in struggling schools. District leaders emphasized the need to foster positive union relationships at all times, not just times of crisis, to successfully navigate these issues.
- **Using data to identify effective and ineffective practices:** Effective data use can support agile and responsive systems in their efforts to expand effective practice and change course when approaches do not work.
- **Involving the community:** The school community—from families to business groups and institutions of higher education—can often help pinpoint school needs and possible approaches to meet those needs.
- **Piloting promising ideas:** By piloting new approaches, districts can provide immediate intervention in response to an urgent problem while learning from and expanding the most successful ideas, promoting system learning while ensuring that urgent efforts are not wasteful efforts.

Specific examples of these lessons and strategies are available in the full brief.

Implications for ESEA Reauthorization

While these eight districts operate within the California state context, their experiences apply to school systems nationwide. The lessons they have learned have implications for current debates about the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Using the two central lessons that emerged from the eight districts as a framing mechanism, we present the following considerations for legislators and others contributing to changes in ESEA.

Creating a Systemic Approach to Turnaround

Long-term and widespread school turnaround often requires systemic, district-level (not just school-level) approaches. Yet, current policies can thwart such systemic efforts. To alter this situation, district leaders urged that ESEA reauthorization efforts consider policies that allow districts to leverage their often limited resources to dramatically improve struggling schools.

- **Remove barriers by simplifying federal funding streams:** Restrictive federal funding streams can impair the execution of a coherent district strategy and siphon resources away from improving instruction. ESEA should take a comprehensive view of funding for the districts, and provide fewer, but larger and more flexible, funding streams for areas integral to student success.
- **Foster systemic approaches through competitive grants and regulation:** Beyond removing barriers, ESEA legislation should create additional competitive grants that encourage systemic activity and district-level innovation. Additionally, regulations for the turnaround process should explicitly acknowledge the role of districts in school improvement planning and implementation.
- **Incorporate district capacity into a differentiated accountability policy:** Not all districts (or states) are ready to take on a systemic approach to turnaround. By pursuing a differentiated accountability policy, ESEA can provide districts with higher levels of capacity more discretion to develop their own approaches, while giving districts with lower capacity more guidance and support. The federal government could serve as a broker in the dialogue of how states might define, understand, and work with differentiated district capacities.

Allowing for a More Customized Approach to Turnaround

To reverse chronic underperformance, districts leaders emphasized the need to customize their efforts to the individual needs and conditions of each specific school. Reauthorization provisions should enable this kind of customization.

- **Allow state flexibility in identifying lowest performing schools:** Rigid guidelines for identifying struggling schools can lead to misalignment between the schools in greatest need of support and those actually targeted for turnaround. Additional state flexibility is needed for identifying the appropriate schools for intervention.
- **Remove overly prescriptive and unsubstantiated elements from intervention models:** Districts and schools should have more freedom to intervene in struggling schools without the overly prescriptive elements of current federal intervention models that have little to no evidence of effectiveness, such as removing 50 percent of teachers in the “turnaround” model, or removing the principal in all four models.
- **Allow for appropriate planning time to design the intervention:** The urgency of improving schools for the students who attend them does not negate the time needed for districts and schools to thoughtfully design and plan their improvement efforts. ESEA should allow sufficient time for such planning.

Find Out More

The full brief is available at www.cacollaborative.org. In addition to more carefully developing the ideas presented here, it contains profiles of three individual districts—Long Beach, Los Angeles, and Sanger Unified School Districts—that demonstrate the ways in which discrete strategies cohere into a comprehensive systemic approach to addressing chronic low performance.