



Turnaround Intervention: A Model for School Change & Impact

The Persistent Problem of High-Poverty, Low-Performing Schools

Across the country, thousands of public schools concentrated primarily in high-poverty urban communities are failing to achieve even the most basic educational goals.ⁱ Recently, Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* wrote, “[T]oday, educationally, we are not a nation at risk. We are a nation in decline[.]”ⁱⁱ Approximately 5,000 schools are now in need of restructuring for failure to meet progress targets under the terms of the No Child Left Behind Act, and the number continues to grow rapidly.ⁱⁱⁱ Given this failure of public education to keep students engaged in learning at the elementary and middle school levels, it is unsurprising that dropout rates continue to be unconscionably high: Four out of the five largest school districts in the United States graduate 55 percent or fewer of their starting freshmen.^{iv} Individuals who do not graduate from high school face severely diminished prospects for leading healthy, productive, economically secure lives and an increased likelihood of unemployment, incarceration, and single-parenthood.^v

Pointedly stated, failing public schools and plummeting graduation rates have created a sizable class of individuals who are unable to contribute meaningfully to the national economy. A study published earlier this year by McKinsey & Co. indicates that if every student who was performing below the current national average were brought up to that level, the United States gross domestic product would increase as much as \$710 billion^{vi}—yet, this still would not put American students on par with their peers “in countries that are more relevant competitors for service-sector and high-value jobs, like Canada, the Netherlands, Korea and Australia.”^{vii} The implications for the United States and its role in the global economy are sobering: According to McKinsey, closing the international achievement gap could have increased the 2008 G.D.P. by as much as \$2.3 trillion.^{viii}

Therefore, a system of public education that works *at every level* and *for every child* is not only central to any successful effort to eradicate poverty, it is essential to our economic viability as a nation.

Moment of Opportunity

This is an extraordinary and unprecedented time of promise for transforming low-performing, high-poverty schools into successful learning environments. Opportunity is created by:

- An emerging expectation that success is possible in high-poverty schools, coupled with widespread engagement of philanthropists and others concerned with public education.
- A commitment at the federal level to fund initiatives to turn around the lowest performing schools and the potential reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Together, these conditions create a growing national demand for strategies that successfully turn around failing schools and for organizations that can take the lead in developing and implementing these strategies. Further, to address the problem at scale, these strategies must include cost-effective options short of total reconstitution or closure that can deliver dramatic results in struggling schools.

Turnaround's Mission and Model

Turnaround for Children's mission is to transform the most challenged, low performing schools into positive centers for teaching, learning, and achievement, enabling these schools to help their students break the cycle of poverty and fulfill their potential as learners and citizens.

Turnaround understands that schools in high-poverty communities must be reorganized and reenergized to counteract the effects of poverty in the lives of their students. An extensive study by Mass Insight Education and Research Institute of high-poverty, high-performing schools uncovered that such schools "are able to generate such high achievement because they confront, in specific, comprehensive, ongoing ways, the systemic effects of poverty on their students' learning."^{ix} In particular, the study found that, to be successful, a school-change effort must encompass elements that create conditions for 'readiness' in the school. These include the capacity to:

- 'act against adversity' as it manifests in student needs;
- create a safe and orderly environment;
- support positive adult-student relationships;
- develop a strong and professional teaching staff who take responsibility for student achievement and can effectively support the learning needs of high-poverty students;
- establish leadership that is creative in addressing problems.

The Turnaround Model is designed to help schools develop these capacities. Turnaround works to create *a different kind of school*, one with the knowledge and skills, systems and resources to provide a powerful and integrated response to the adversity in children's lives so students can benefit from an education that truly prepares them for college, work and life. Strategies for school turnaround commonly emphasize new personnel and alternate management structures as the primary levers for change. However, current research indicates that the most important factor for school change is the organization of schools to systematically address the barriers to teaching and learning that typify high-poverty schools. This emphasis on an integrated, school-based approach rather than on people alone ensures that power is not concentrated in a single leverage point. Accordingly, Turnaround's comprehensive school transformation model gives the same weight to strategic leadership and staffing decisions as to those organizational systems and practices that have been demonstrated to effectively address the needs of students in high-poverty communities and that can be developed and nurtured in existing schools with existing practitioners to enhance the human capital already within the system. Thus, because it neither requires total school reconstitution nor relies on an already stretched supply of extraordinary individuals, the Turnaround model offers a more readily scalable solution, one that can even be used in new schools to prevent them from failing in the first place. Finally, even extraordinary individuals in newly reconstituted schools are challenged by the same social, behavioral and academic needs of their students and would benefit from systems and strategies for addressing them. The Turnaround Model represents an approach that can be nested within the basic operations of schools and districts as well as coordinated with other reform efforts in partnership with other organizations.

The On-the-Ground Challenge and Theory of Change

High-poverty schools encounter large numbers of students with limited knowledge of English, students who are years behind in mastery of skills and content, students with undiagnosed and unmet mental health needs, and students with widely varying learning styles. Without additional training and support, educators' best efforts to assist their students are likely to be thwarted when they are confronted with large numbers of children and adolescents with such extraordinary

needs.^x Moreover, these needs often manifest as highly disruptive behaviors that destabilize the school as a whole, distract other students, and take school leaders and classroom teachers off academic task.

Undoubtedly schools must address the needs of all students. Turnaround has found, however, that real transformation of a chronically underperforming, high-need school into a calm, engaging and effective place for learning and growth is only possible if the school *first* addresses its most serious problems and disruptive patterns. Turnaround's theory of action is predicated on the recognition that, as in a public health schema^{xi}, identifying, diagnosing and intervening intensively with students at the highest level of need or risk is critical not just for those students, but for the population as a whole^{xii} and is, therefore, the essential first step or entry point for the school-change process. Turnaround enables school staff to create and maintain systems for effectively addressing highly disruptive behaviors and the needs underlying them. This frees school leaders and staff from constant crisis response and allows them the time and resources to focus on developing staff knowledge and skills in classroom management, social emotional learning and instructional efficacy, moving the school toward greater student engagement and achievement. By giving staff the systems, resources, and skills to address student needs themselves, the Turnaround Model increases their sense of self-efficacy and enhances their willingness and ability to take collective responsibility for student success.

Turnaround Model Mechanisms and Facilitated Implementation

Turnaround works via a structured hands-on consultation process carried out by a team of highly-experienced education and mental health specialists. The Turnaround Model uses four primary mechanisms or levers for change:

1. Partnership with the Principal: The first critical mechanism, and a requisite condition for all of Turnaround's work with the school, is the development of a strong partnership with the principal, because without the active support of the principal, the ability to effectively implement or sustain any model in the school is severely constrained.^{xiii} Turnaround works with the school's leadership team to establish key attributes that facilitate school change, including: a mutually aligned vision about confronting the multiple factors negatively affecting student success and connecting with families in support of these goals; a belief in supporting high standards for student achievement; a readiness to empower staff and distribute leadership to act on behalf of students^{xiv}; the encouragement of staff collaboration and a strong professional learning community^{xv}; and an orientation toward the use of data to inform and improve school performance.

2. Establishing New Systems: These consist of problem-solving teams focused on identifying and addressing the individualized needs of high- and moderate-risk students and establishing universal supports and conditions for learning. The Student Intervention Team (SIT) and the Instructional Support Team (IST) identify those individual students at behavioral, social, and academic risk and develop and coordinate care and intervention strategies with all key stakeholders—family members, internal and external service providers, school administration and classroom teachers—enabling all to contribute to and reinforce intervention goals. The Core Team operates at the whole-school level and oversees efforts in three key areas—pro-social values and positive behaviors, family engagement, and instructional planning and improvement—to create and sustain a healthy school environment.

3. Access to Expanded Resources: Because high-poverty communities are typically under-resourced and, where clinic-based services do exist, obstacles to access are often great, the model

includes the development of internal resources to meet student needs and the creation of an effective interface between schools, families, external service providers and public agencies. The primary internal resource is a Turnaround-created role, the Student Support Social Worker (SSSW), a Master's level professional certified in field instruction, with experience working in schools and community agencies. The SSSW takes the lead in the problem-solving teams, provides counseling and support for students, and is on the frontline for crisis management and ongoing coordination of services with outside providers and families. Turnaround helps each school select an SSSW and has designed the specific functions associated with this position. Aside from having clinical and consulting skills and the qualification to supervise social work graduate interns, the SSSW must be equipped to establish a coherent, smooth-running interface with the child-serving systems that are vital to the support of high poverty schools, i.e., mental health, social service, health, foster care and juvenile justice. The SSSW also develops preventive and strength-based programs for promoting healthy youth development school-wide.

4. *Development of Targeted Knowledge and Skills:* The Turnaround Model ensures effective comprehensive support for high-need students by supplementing systems and resources with targeted professional development for teams, the SSSW, and all school staff. Trainings include such topics as youth and adolescent development, recognizing early warning signs of risk, deescalating crises, best practices for identifying and evaluating students' psychosocial and academic needs and developing intervention plans for addressing them. Teams also receive foundational trainings in team development and family outreach. For school-change efforts to improve student achievement, it is also critical that they address the "core" of educational practice^{xvi} through rigorous curriculum content, strong instructional practice, and the relationship between students and teachers.^{xvii} The Turnaround Model includes working with school leadership and staff to identify and introduce professional development initiatives that most effectively address the needs of students in high-poverty schools and fill the gaps in standard teacher training. While specific initiatives can be customized by school, the model includes a core set of evidence-based programs in three key areas—Classroom Organization and Management Practices; Instructional Efficacy; and Social-Emotional Learning—and helps schools sequence and integrate these into ongoing practice.

These mechanisms unfold in an integrative manner as an iterative organizational change process. Functionally, this comprises targeted systems to address the individual needs of students at the highest levels of risk and school-wide systems to promote the development of universal conditions for success for all students. Together, these become a system of comprehensive student support for social/behavioral development and academic achievement that reaches across the school, deep into the classroom, and out into the community.

Turnaround Impact

Over time, Turnaround's work creates a safer, calmer school environment, more productive classrooms in which teachers are able to positively connect with their students, a student culture engaged with learning, and better academic and behavioral outcomes for all students. In addition, because Turnaround's model is designed to embed these systems, practices, and capacities in the school itself, they become sustainable over time and, therefore, do not require a constant funding stream to support an open-ended service relationship.

In the first year, the Turnaround Consulting Team introduces the intervention model into the school. At the close of year one, schools can expect to see that new systems are securely in place

and beginning to function effectively and that the adults in the school are beginning to adopt those practices that will create the conditions and climate for student success.

- The Student Support Social Worker becomes a valuable resource as a consultant to school staff, a liaison to families and community agencies, and a source of direct guidance and counseling for students, both individually and in groups.
- Teams (SIT and IST) meet on a regular basis and begin to develop the ability to identify, evaluate, and establish targeted behavioral and academic intervention plans for high need students, to ensure that those students are connected to appropriate services/supports and that families and school staff understand and positively reinforce intervention goals.
- In a typical school, as many as 10 to 12 percent of the students will be seen by the school social worker, as many as 5 percent provided with ongoing school-based counseling, and the highest-risk 2 to 4 percent referred to a community-based mental health agency for evaluation and care.
- As a result of the work of the teams with individual students as well as the workshops and coaching for teachers in classroom management, classrooms begin to be more orderly and productive with fewer disruptions, more time spent on-task, and more positive interactions between adults and students.
- The school climate as a whole begins to calm. Crises taper off, suspensions typically fall by as much as 10 percent, and reports by school staff and parents improve.
- Academic performance begins to trend upward, outpacing city gains and beginning to close the gap with other city schools. Schools have seen improvements of as much as 10 to 15 points in the percentage of students meeting state standards in math and English Language Arts.

In the second year, the Turnaround Consulting Team transfers greater responsibility and ownership to members of the school community. Systems begin to operate more productively. Universal interventions reach deeper into all classrooms to transform practice and the school strengthens its gains in climate and achievement.

- Teams are able to effectively discuss and plan interventions for a larger number of students, including those ‘silent sufferers’ who may not be overtly disruptive but are nevertheless at risk for failure.
- The Student Support Social Worker provides valuable services within the school and is able to extend her/his reach through the placement in the school of social work interns, whom the SSSW supervises.
- Community partnerships are strengthened and the interfaces between schools, families, and agencies operate more smoothly.
- Students treated through team interventions show signs of greater adjustment and wellbeing and are therefore better able to engage with academics, as evidenced by teacher ratings and school records. These students also account for fewer disruptive incidents in the school and the classroom.
- Teachers begin to institutionalize new practices for classroom management. Training begins to focus more on instructional practices and on incorporating programs in Social-Emotional Learning to help develop students’ social and civic skills. Classroom climate and productivity continues to improve.
- There are greater gains in staff and parent ratings of school climate.
- The working climate begins to evolve. The multidisciplinary problem-solving teams help solidify a wider leadership structure and classroom teachers become more involved in the team process.

- Academic performance continues to trend upward, moving closer toward citywide levels.
- Use of Special Education referrals as an intervention strategy declines and the rate of appropriate referrals increases.

In the third year, work centers on supporting the ability of the school to independently sustain these organizational systems and practices and to develop the internal capacity for ongoing professional collaboration and learning. With the school a safer and more orderly environment and systems in place to address the behavioral and social needs of students, school leaders and staff can concentrate even more intensively on academic goals.

- Problem-solving teams function independently to effectively identify students at risk and develop, implement and monitor intervention plans.
- The Student Support Social Worker and interns have been institutionalized as in-school support for students and a resource for school-wide learning.
- The range of effective connections to community agencies continues to expand, encompassing mental and behavioral health, child services such as ACS, and family supports.
- Students at risk of failure due to unmet social, behavioral, and academic needs have a safety net for individualized help. With services in place, they become better adjusted and begin to achieve academically.
- Professional development focuses more squarely on instructional efficacy with workshops and coaching in the full range of practices that best address the gaps between pre-service training and the specific needs of students in high-poverty communities, such as differentiated instruction, intensive literacy strategies, and efforts aimed at English Language Learners and students classified as requiring Special Education services.
- With more students identified for individualized behavioral and academic interventions by the teams, a greater percentage can be effectively taught in less restrictive environments and the rate of referral to Special Education is reduced.
- The working climate in the school continues to evolve. Successfully addressing student needs engenders a greater sense of self-efficacy, higher morale, greater relational trust, and a sense of collective responsibility among staff for making the school a positive force in the lives of its students. Staff turnover rates decline.
- Academic achievement continues to improve and schools that started well below average begin to perform on par with the city as a whole.
- Freed from the necessity of responding to constant crises, the principal is able to assume the role of instructional leader and to think and act creatively in enriching school programs. Further, the environment is sufficiently calm to support the establishment of clubs, art and music programs, strategic partnerships with cultural institutions, and other programs that expose the students to a broader range of experiences that enhance their educational and personal growth.

References

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