AASA NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON EDUCATION

Beyond School-Based Turnaround:
Lessons on Successful District-Led Strategies

Chris Steinhauser, Long Beach Unified School District
Jonathan Raymond, Sacramento City Unified School District
Heather Zavadsky, EdPractice Connect

YEARS OF REFORM LESSONS

Piecemeal reform will not work. Rather it should:
- Move beyond single schools, programs, or practices
- Address the K–12 or ideally K–16 pipeline.
- Connect the central office, school administration, and classroom levels.
- Improve and support the instructional core.
- Consider the interaction of essential reform elements:
  curriculum & instruction; human capital strategies; performance management;
  interventions; & influencing factors
- Leverage the district’s ability to align, coordinate, inform, and support reform.
WHY DISTRICT-LED TURNAROUND?

- Heroic principals and teachers will not stay in one place forever.
- Consistency and quality across schools matters.
- Kids move to different schools.
- Students need a seamless instructional program that will prepare them for each transition.
- Resources can be used more effectively and efficiently across the system.

DISTRICT IS KEY FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

“School system instead of a system of schools”
-Tom Payzant

- Coordinate planning, communication, resources, and supports across the system.
- Create collective ownership and accountability for student progress.
- Provide a coherent educational program.
- Create consistency for mobile student populations.
- Create system equity.
DISTRICTS ARE ESSENTIAL FOR TURNAROUND

To Set Policy and Practices Regarding
- Personnel
- Curriculum
- Instruction
- Performance Management
- Interventions
- Influencing Factors & Relationships

CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG

Employs far-reaching and coherent human capital strategies.
- Began with Achievement Zone.
- Implemented district-wide Strategic Staffing Initiative.
- Succession Planning at all district levels.
- Nuanced method of ranking staff for promotion and development.
- Results (2010-2011): Positive growth in math and reading in almost all 20 schools targeted for improvement.
SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA

Implemented large-scale effort targeting 95 schools through district-led and charter-led models.

- Began with Empowerment Zone.
- Moved to tiered approach using Promise Academies (in-district) and Renaissance Schools (external).
- Extremely strong parent engagement practices.
- Encountered numerous political challenges resulting in superintendent resignation.
- Lost court battle to protect Promise Academy teachers from seniority-based layoffs.
- Results: positive achievement increases, student attendance improvement, and a decrease in violent incidences.

DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Implemented two regional improvement approaches using various innovative models.

- Attracted students back to struggling schools by having high-performing charters share buildings with under-populated schools.
- Created a strong accountability system guided by their School Performance Framework.
- Outlined a clear and coherent strategy through the Denver Plan.
- Results: In 2010, 6 out of 7 of their targeted schools moved out of the “Does Not Meet Standard” accountability category to either Approaching or Meets Standards categories.
**SACRAMENTO CITY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT**

Inability to fund more than 6 initial “Priority Schools” resulted in their capability to better analyze their small-scale improvement “pilot.”

- Reorganized central office to focus on instruction and accountability and to provide close oversight and service to struggling schools.
- Principals given flexibility to implement educational initiatives and train staff in same to meet student needs.
- Improved instruction through an in-depth data inquiry approach.
- Results: composite math and English Language Arts (ELA) gains on 2010 state assessments in all six Priority Schools.

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**LONG BEACH UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT**

Represents a longstanding, high-functioning organization that exemplifies strong coherence and prevention.

- No schools that meet the SIG grant criteria.
- Targeted 8 middle schools for improvement (called PLCs), and moved all 2,000 6th-graders into a self-contained 6th-grade model.
- Results: Data from 2010 shows the 6th-grade PLCs were only a few percentage points behind the district; due to large improvement gains from the first year.
TURNAROUND CHALLENGES

- Union contracts impacted ability to allocate people and time as needed.
- Seniority layoffs decimated teaching staff at many Philadelphia Promise Schools.
- Sacramento City USD avoided seniority-based layoff by demonstrating employee training and experience.
- Recruiting leaders and teachers to struggling schools is difficult.
  - Many paid stipends or offered salary increases.
  - Charlotte-Mecklenburg made leading a turnaround school an honor.
  - Philadelphia had to hire mostly new teachers.
  - Teachers were often motivated to follow strong, supportive principals.

TURNAROUND CHALLENGES (CONTINUED)

- Community opposition to the four turnaround models, particularly closures and charter re-starts.
  - Felt their community schools were being taken away or taken over by “outsiders.”
  - Denver and Charlotte-Mecklenburg invested time and money in positive marketing campaigns and in community meetings.
- Lack of resources.
  - Sacramento did not initially receive SIG funds; limited to starting with just six schools.
  - Charlotte struggled with how to maintain teacher stipends in strategic staffing schools.
LESSONS – MANAGING TURNAROUND

- Consider grouping schools in a cohort that functions like a professional learning community.
- Implement turnaround in feeder patterns if possible.
- Consider the political and cultural aspects of schools when selecting one of the four reform models in SIG.
- Plan carefully for whatever model is implemented and communicate it clearly and early to all involved stakeholders.
- Provide ample support for turnaround principals; consider moving principals to new schools in teams.

LESSONS – MANAGING TURNAROUND (CONTINUED)

- Engage partners as needed and work with them closely to ensure alignment with district and school goals and strategies.
- Actively communicate and engage with partner CMOs and EMOs, even if their schools are considered to be separate from the district.
- Consider piloting dramatic changes on a small scale and then scale successful work.
- Consider the benefits of a “clean start” vs. changing embedded culture.
- Be prepared for midcourse corrections.
CONCLUSION

- Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Denver, Philadelphia, Sacramento, and Long Beach all raised student achievement through district-led strategies.
- No magic formula or model; success driven by commitment and coherence.
- Well-aligned, high-functioning systems rather than individual schools serve more students well.
- Alignment is best driven from a centralized source focused on providing: oversight, expertise, support, and resources.

MORE INFORMATION

School Turnarounds: The Essential Role of Districts
by Heather Zavadsky
Harvard Education Press, 2012

www.hepg.org/hep/book/162/SchoolTurnarounds
hzavadsky@EdPracticeconnect.org