

Creating a Turnaround Office

Center on Innovation & Improvement

Emerging research indicates that states and districts are well positioned to take a lead role in enabling, driving, supporting, and sustaining school turnaround efforts through the creation of a designated turnaround office (Mass Insight Education 2007; 2009). Whether developed at the state or district level, a turnaround office should provide concentrated and coherent resources and expertise to priority schools identified due to chronic low performance. A turnaround office clusters together staff with turnaround expertise to focus their work on a set of schools included in a “zone” because they are engaged in intentional and substantial interventions to reverse their persistent low achievement. The turnaround office supports the interventions and the schools and external partners engaged in them. While the turnaround office enables the state or district to address the particular contexts and conditions of persistently low-achieving schools with strategies that are unique to rapid improvement, the offices should be connected conceptually and operationally with other state and district improvement efforts. In other words, the turnaround office provides a unique and specialized service within a coherent system of support that provides differentiated services appropriate to each school.

Examples of state turnaround offices are currently operating in Louisiana and Texas. Examples of district turnaround offices are those operating in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Chicago, New York City, and Philadelphia. A core principle driving creation of a turnaround office is that schools assigned to the office are treated differently than other schools. For instance, they may be given additional flexibility, released from collective bargaining agreements, and assigned additional resources. They are treated differently because they are identified as a priority for the state due to their chronic low performance.

Designated turnaround offices can provide the conditions (changes in rules and resource allocation) and capacity (identifying high-quality staff and external partners) for rapid school improvement to take place, all the while communicating a single-minded focus on improving student learning. Additionally, they are positioned to effectively build parent and community support, contract with external partners, monitor fidelity of plan implementation and progress, build leadership capacity, problem solve, and maintain coordination and communication. It may also be necessary for turnaround offices to intervene if improvement efforts are unsuccessful. By design, the turnaround office functions as the lead entity driving dramatic school improvement efforts, rather than simply a compliance monitor (Redding & Walberg, 2008).

While a district turnaround office is applicable primarily in large districts with multiple schools engaging in turnaround efforts, a small district can adopt a turnaround philosophy and define roles accordingly. A recent case study (Lane, 2009) of a rural Kansas district with fewer than 300 students illustrates this point. The superintendent redefined roles, focus, and relationships with school staff by more directly monitoring classroom instruction through use of observation protocols, by setting non-negotiable expectations and objectives, and giving teachers the autonomy to find ways to meet those objectives (Lane, 2009). In a state or larger district, creating a turnaround office could involve designating one or more staff members to coordinate the SIG improvement efforts. Discussions of how larger districts, such as Chicago, New York City, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg, restructured to support turnarounds may be found in Mass Insight (2007), the Mass Insight Resource Center and The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (2009), and Lane (2009). When many schools in a district or a state require restructuring, establish clusters of no more than 8-10 schools, each of which is led by a strong partner whose job is to build school capacity, manage the turnaround efforts, and monitor implementation (Mass Insight, 2007; 2009). The clusters operate within partnership zones, which function as districts-within-a-district. These partnership zones have flexibility in operating conditions and strong partnerships among the schools, the district, the SEA, and any external partners. A critical aspect of establishing turnaround offices is clear expectations related to academic growth in a compressed period reflecting the high priority nature of the schools identified for rapid improvement.

Each school, district, and SEA is part of a system that requires coherence among its component parts to function optimally (Redding, 2006), so the turnaround office should not be an add-on or a stand-alone operation. Rather,

it should function in concert with other parts of the state and district administration. At the state level, this means being an integral part of the statewide system of support for districts and schools (Redding & Walberg, 2008).

Action Principles

For States Creating a State-Level Turnaround Office

1. Create a designated school turnaround office charged with directing statewide turnaround efforts (e.g., Louisiana Recovery School District).
2. Assign senior staff and required resources to direct and coordinate the state's role in school turnaround efforts.
3. Pursue needed policy changes to give districts and schools needed freedom and flexibility to implement their turnaround strategies.
4. Identify schools to receive targeted turnaround interventions.
5. Develop strategies related to specific turnaround options (e.g., turnaround, restart, or transformation).
6. Devise procedures for determining which strategy to pursue at each identified school.
7. Integrate support to districts and schools receiving School Improvement Grants into the existing statewide system of support to maximize resources and reduce duplication of effort.
8. Develop explicit goals for schools and means of holding schools or external providers working with schools accountable for measurable progress.
9. Establish partnerships with external providers where appropriate.
10. Establish regular communication with districts and schools engaged in the turnaround process.
11. Hold schools accountable for short-term progress leading to long-term academic gains.

For States Supporting Creation of District-Level Turnaround Offices

1. Identify and address barriers to creating a district-level turnaround office.
2. Prioritize resources to district-level turnaround offices demonstrating commitment and capacity to school turnaround efforts.
3. Develop guidance related to turnaround options (e.g., turnaround, restart, or transformation).
4. Provide support as needed to district-level turnaround offices.

For Districts Creating a District-Level Turnaround Office

1. Create a designated school turnaround office charged with directing statewide turnaround efforts.
2. Appoint senior leadership to direct and coordinate district's turnaround efforts.
3. Allocate resources to support turnaround office.
4. Develop strategies related to specific turnaround options (e.g., turnaround, restart, or transformation).
5. Pursue changes to formal policy and informal standard operating procedures to empower schools to implement their turnaround strategies.
6. Identify schools to receive targeted turnaround interventions.
7. Devise procedures for determining which strategy to pursue at each identified school.
8. Provide schools "the appropriate operating flexibility, resources, and support required to reduce barriers and overly burdensome compliance requirements and to enable a school-wide focus on student needs and improved achievement" (Mass Insight, 2009).
9. Establish partnerships with external providers where appropriate.
10. Establish mechanisms for keeping stakeholders informed about the turnaround process at each school.

11. Establish regular communication with districts and schools engaged in the turnaround process.
12. Hold schools accountable for short-term progress leading to long-term academic gains.

References and Resources

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