



# Creating Conditions for Effective State Support for School Turnaround

TN EDUCATION  
RESEARCH  
**ALLIANCE**

*A Report on Driving Improvement in Low-Performing Schools*

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## Introduction

In December 2017, the Tennessee Education Research Alliance (TERA) invited stakeholders from four states to a convening on school turnaround.

Representatives from state departments of education in Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, and Tennessee and their external research partners came together to share knowledge of effective turnaround strategies and develop core questions to drive future research.

The following report provides an overview of the conference, as well as summaries and subsequent discussions of research presentations covering three topics: turnaround policies, state supports for student needs, and teacher pipelines. The report also discusses the common areas of interest for future research and action as shared by the state teams.

# WHY WE FOCUSED ON SCHOOL TURNAROUND

Over the past decade, a number of states have implemented turnaround programs in low-performing schools and districts. A growing body of research is measuring the outcomes of these various turnaround strategies and providing new information on best practices for states looking to improve their lowest-performing schools. As states consider changes to their turnaround strategies under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), many are turning to this research for guidance.

Working with leaders from each of the four state education agencies, the Tennessee Education Research Alliance (TERA) used this moment to bring together states working on turnaround in similar ways and to give state policymaking teams the space to collaborate with research partners to discuss turnaround research to date. Leaders from the four state agencies worked together to determine

the research topics that felt important as they were thinking about implementation. Given that in each state, the state education agency (SEA) is governing local turnaround efforts to some extent, and that the turnaround systems across states vary, the first topic of interest for the states was systems of turnaround governance and support. Next, each state was interested in what the research said about how to create pipelines of high-quality educators interested in working in turnaround schools. Finally, the states wanted to focus on systems of supports for students, with a recognition that high-needs schools have an even greater imperative to provide the types supports needed to allow students to thrive. The conference also provided an opportunity for states to share their turnaround policy successes and challenges and for researchers to discuss current work and generate future topics of study.

## PARTICIPATING STATE TEAMS



### TENNESSEE

- *Tennessee Department of Education*
- *Vanderbilt University*
- *George Washington University*
- *University of Kentucky*
- *Tennessee Education Research Alliance*



### LOUISIANA

- *Louisiana Department of Education*
- *Education Research Alliance for New Orleans*



### MASSACHUSETTS

- *Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education*
- *American Institutes for Research*



### MICHIGAN

- *Michigan Department of Education*
- *Michigan State University*
- *University of Michigan*

# DIMENSIONS OF TURNAROUND



The bulk of the two-day meeting was comprised of presentations and discussions about three research topics: governance structures and supports, student academic and non-academic needs, and educator pipelines. After each presentation, state teams participated in both whole group and within-state discussions and with their research partners, considered how each research strand shaped their current and upcoming turnaround work. At the conclusion of the conference, states shared the core areas they identified for future research and policy action.

## What did we learn?

- *Successful turnaround schools and systems for turnaround at the state and district levels begin with a clear theory of action followed by fidelity of implementation.*
- *Research shows that schools must address both academic and non-academic student needs, and states can help by supporting school districts to develop data systems that provide comprehensive data on academic and non-academic needs.*
- *States and districts must support teachers and leaders to create structures and carve out the time needed to address the unique needs of students in poverty.*
- *Leaders of turnaround schools should conduct an inclusive and detailed hiring process that begins early, practices selective retention, promotes the development of strong professional environments, and invests in teacher development.*
- *States are grappling with many of the same implementation issues related to supporting and improving high-needs schools. Research studies within and across states should build on each other in order to grow the knowledge base.*

## DIMENSIONS OF TURNAROUND



### TENNESSEE

**Statewide Turnaround Intervention:** The Achievement School District (ASD) and Innovation Zones (iZones) serve 3.2% of Tennessee students in 74 schools.

**Key Initiatives:** Schools within the two programs have seen varying levels of success since their inception, and the state is looking to make research-driven adaptations to the programs to promote student achievement.



### LOUISIANA

**Statewide Turnaround Intervention:** Assists 271 comprehensive support schools statewide, serving approximately 15% of the Louisiana student population.

– *Support schools must submit turnaround plans demonstrating high-quality curriculum, teacher professional development opportunities, and student assessment goals.*

**In the 2018-2019 school year,** the state will support five Turnaround Zones in each of the state's largest districts.



### MASSACHUSETTS

**Statewide Turnaround Intervention:** 37 underperforming or chronically underperforming schools and three chronically underperforming districts.

**Turnaround schools** are supported by the Office of School and District Turnaround in the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE). The office provides comprehensive assistance to turnaround schools through:

- *ESE's Conditions for School Effectiveness and District Standards and Indicators*
- *Monitoring Site Visits (MSVs) of priority schools*



### MICHIGAN

**Statewide Turnaround Intervention:** Assists 162 Comprehensive Support and Improvement Schools (CSI) serving approximately 60,000 students statewide.

**Currently expanding the number of Partnership Districts supported by the state.** Potential Partnership Districts are identified based on having CSI schools within the district. The new model allows for more control at the district level, with the state providing supports as districts develop individual improvement plans for struggling schools.

## RESEARCH STRAND 1:

# GOVERNING STRUCTURES AND CONDITIONS FOR SUPPORT

Presentation by Dr. Brian Jacob

## CORE QUESTIONS:

- What are the characteristics of successful turnaround structures at the state, district, and local levels?
- How can states use research to better engage in turnaround practices?

Dr. Brian Jacob led the state teams through an overview of school turnaround research, with a focus on identifying successful state policies and structures. Dr. Jacob explained that recent rigorous studies of turnaround strategies have shown some positive effects, while others have found null or negative effects in student and school success (Papay et al., 2015; Schueler et al., 2017; Heissel & Ladd, 2016; Dougherty & Weiner, 2017). These studies demonstrate that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to successful turnaround—however, research points to a few characteristics that effective turnaround models share.

A comprehensive implementation plan including a clearly articulated theory of action, followed by fidelity of implementation, are critical pieces of successful school improvement, regardless of the turnaround model. In some states, district or state-level oversight of the implementation process has contributed to success (Papay et al., 2015; Schueler et al., 2017). Dr. Jacob's synthesis also identified minimized bureaucracy and strong partnerships with school leaders as features of successful turnaround models.

## Where do states come in?

This research on governance structures points to possible actions for states, including:

**Build evaluation in from the start:** Having a well-implemented evaluation system for turnaround work can encourage teacher and administrator buy-in and help states track long and short-term progress.

**Consider comparison schools:** States must ensure that the interventions in turnaround schools are thoroughly studied and evaluated, and that suitable comparison schools are identified at the beginning of the process.

**Include short-term outcomes:** States can use short-term indicators to gauge a school's growth while still being mindful of the extended time successful turnaround takes.

## State Discussion

**"People and theory matter."**

### Turnaround Theory

Teams contemplated how states can articulate a clear theory behind turnaround to improve implementation, while also allowing for flexibility as schools transition into these new systems. The idea of differentiated turnaround proved challenging to some practitioners and researchers—many members debated the competing interests of having a stable, standardized turnaround model versus a differentiated model that provided school-level flexibility, but could make implementation and tracking growth more difficult. Some states suggested more research into turnaround models where state, district, and school roles are clear, but specific actions are less prescriptive.

### Turnaround Specifics

Dr. Jacob's presentation also prompted states to review which practices have shown the most impact on school improvement. Each state team discussed the scaling up of turnaround schools during their breakout session, with state researchers cautioning policymakers from adding new schools or reforms too quickly. Some recent research has indicated that limiting the number of schools in a new turnaround structure is important (Strunk et al., 2017). The importance of stability led attendees to consider how much redesign is needed for successful turnaround in an individual school, with some states looking to further research if turnaround systems can be successful without extensive turnover in administration or staff.

## RESEARCH STRAND 2:

# BALANCING ACADEMIC AND NON-ACADEMIC SUPPORT

Presentation by Dr. Robert Balfanz



### CORE QUESTIONS:

- What unique student academic and non-academic needs exist in high-needs schools?
- How do we track student non-academic needs?
- How can states support districts and schools as they address these needs?

Dr. Robert Balfanz’s presentation highlighted the importance of supporting both academic and non-academic student needs. Turnaround schools tend to have both a greater number of students with social-emotional needs and a higher intensity of need than non-turnaround schools (Neild & Balfanz, 2006). The complex nature of students’ non-academic needs can prevent effective school improvement unless sufficient supports are given to both students and school staff.

As shown in Table 1, the clearest markers of student success at the secondary level include attendance, behavior, and course performance (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007). Studies of successful school supports in these areas point to the importance of positive adult relationships, classroom rigor, teacher supports, and community partnerships. Specifically, Dr. Balfanz cited improving the climate of the classroom and providing students with adult mentors as potential ways to address all three markers of student success (Bryk et al., 2010; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013).

**TABLE 1: ABC’s of Secondary School Success (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007)**

EARLY INDICATOR	ON PATH TO DROPPING OUT	ON PATH TO COLLEGE READY
Attendance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Miss 20 or more days – 10%</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Miss 5 or fewer days</li></ul>
Behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Multiple suspensions</li><li>• Sustained mild misbehavior</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Have self-management, regulation, and advocacy skills</li><li>• Have hope and purpose</li></ul>
Course Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• F’s and D’s (Failure often driven by not completing/turning in assignments)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• B average</li></ul>



## State Discussion

**“What can we take off schools’ plates so that they can sufficiently address students’ non-academic needs?”**

### Data Systems

Attendees discussed how to support schools’ collection and use of data on student needs. Some teams showed interest in exploring state-level action in creating comprehensive data systems that could be shared with administrators, while other states discussed using data already collected by schools and agencies to determine the intensity and type of student need. Critically, states recognized that data available at the state level are often too limited to identify unmet student needs. Instead, much of the critical knowledge about students’ familial, health, or social-emotional needs lies within the school and community structures. States therefore considered how they could facilitate relationships at the local level as well as how to free up time and resources for schools to address these needs. All groups planned to further study the development of non-academic indicators for student success to be used by schools, districts, and the state to track individual and school-wide growth.

### Policy and Timeline Flexibility

The presentation prompted states to explore how to include more flexibility in turnaround plans for individual schools. States expressed interest in researching the benefits of including more school-based variation in turnaround policies to account for the variety of student needs found in schools. The teams also touched on the importance of realistic growth timelines for turnaround in low-performing schools, and how turnaround plans could include measures of non-academic markers of success.

States need to recognize the schools that have high student need, and support the implementation of early-warning indicators for students struggling in the core areas of attendance, behavior, and course performance.

## Where do states come in?

**Build or enable data systems that highlight student needs:** According to Dr. Balfanz, states and districts can best support schools by helping them understand their specific level and type of student need. Much of this support comes in the form of having strong, comprehensive data systems that can be used by school staff. States can start by recognizing the subset of schools that have high student need in both scale and intensity, and supporting the implementation of early-warning indicators for students struggling in the core areas of attendance, behavior, and course performance.

**Build or enable systems of support and training on non-academic student needs for educators and staff:** States can also help schools understand and invest in staff training and adult support. As Dr. Balfanz discussed, teachers often have the best information for determining if a student is at risk in one of the three indicators of success, but can become overwhelmed by the time and energy it takes to report and address student need. To better assist teachers, states can offer schools direction on how to build systems of support for teachers and staff. Additionally, Dr. Balfanz challenged states to think about creating teacher teams in schools to review and address student non-academic needs. States and districts can also provide guidance to school leaders on how to develop community partnerships with organizations and agencies that may be better positioned to address certain non-academic student needs.

## RESEARCH STRAND 3:

# BUILDING AND MAINTAINING A PIPELINE OF EDUCATORS

Presentation by Dr. John Papay

### CORE QUESTIONS:

- What does the successful hiring, training, and retaining of teachers look like in turnaround schools?
- What can the state do to support and build successful teacher pipelines?

Dr. John Papay covered research on teacher pipelines during the final presentation of the conference, giving teams an opportunity to reflect on how state policies could support schools and districts during the hiring, training, and retention process.

Research shows that successful turnaround schools attend to both recruiting and hiring efforts (Simon et al., 2015). Since school labor markets tend to be local, schools should employ active, detailed, and inclusive hiring that concludes as early as possible, ensuring that schools are adequately prepared for the upcoming school year (Simon et al., 2015; Cannata, 2011). There is some evidence that hiring bonuses for highly effective teachers can help schools fill these positions with qualified candidates (Springer et al., 2015). Successful schools focus on cultivating a strong organizational identity, which creates a foundation for both recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers (Simon et al., 2015).

Dr. Papay's research synthesis also noted that successful schools practice selective retention and put effort into developing and supporting the teachers that remain (Grissom, 2011; Johnson et al., 2012; Ladd, 2011). Effective staffing requires that schools replace teachers who are not aligned with the school's mission or organizational identity, and focus on building a collaborative, feedback-rich environment for teachers who stay.







## State Discussion

**“How can we incentivize creating stronger educator pipelines for high-needs schools?”**

### Principal Roles

While the conversation started out on the teacher pipeline, it quickly turned to the responsibilities of principals in recruiting, developing, and retaining effective teachers. Teams looked into ways states could better support principals who may become overwhelmed by managing comprehensive and strategic personnel processes on top of day-to-day school operations. Some states proposed both implementing and studying distributed leadership, where core responsibilities are spread amongst multiple school leaders. Attendees also explored how state and district policy could support hiring timelines and practices, including adjusting hiring schedules and shifting more of the discretion in hiring from districts to principals.

### Educator Preparation Programs

State teams examined how evaluating and partnering with educator preparation programs (EPPs) could also benefit the hiring, retention, and training of educators in high-needs schools. Some attendees showed interest in further research on how a statewide evaluation of EPPs could help principals target their hiring to the most effective programs. Attendees also considered how strengthening partnerships between the districts and EPPs could lead to more new teachers arriving to schools prepared for the classroom environment, and how training programs could improve teacher knowledge of socio-emotional learning skills and meeting students’ unique academic and non-academic needs.

## Where do states come in?

Research suggests a few core areas where states can assist schools and districts:

**Support teacher recruitment and hiring:** States can provide both financial and other resources for more targeted recruitment and networking, and help facilitate earlier hiring timelines for districts.

**Support selective retention:** States can support development of stronger professional environments within schools to boost teacher retention, and can promote policies that favor selective retention.

**Focus more on teacher development:** Developing teachers should be viewed as a core component of staffing schools—states could devote more research toward what works to support ongoing teacher growth through professional development.

A focus on high-needs schools in educator preparation programs could lead to more new teachers arriving to schools prepared for the classroom environment, and training programs could improve teacher knowledge of socio-emotional learning skills and meeting students’ unique academic and non-academic needs.



# WHAT HAPPENS NOW?

## NEXT STEPS FOR STATES

At the conclusion of the conference, state teams worked with their research partners to identify areas for further research and policy action. The following core topics came from the final all-group discussion.

### **Creation of Indicators**

Every team noted that consistent and comprehensive data collection and analysis are essential to successful school turnaround. Specifically, Massachusetts' comprehensive framework for tracking progress in turnaround schools provided a strong example that other states were interested in replicating and adapting. Additionally, teams showed interest in seeing how schools, districts, and the state could collect data on student non-academic needs and use that data to create early-warning indicators to effectively support students. States expressed a desire for continued research into the specific characteristics of turnaround models that led to the most student growth, and some plan to study how turnaround models can be adapted to support schools with unique student needs. More broadly, attendees plan to explore what a long-term framework of success looks like for turnaround schools, and how to leverage both research and data to track growth and make adjustments in low-performing schools.

### **Teacher Pipeline**

The state teams continued to wrestle with how the state can support schools and districts to create the conditions for recruiting, developing, and retaining effective educators. Some states proposed studying variation in planning and implementation among schools and districts that prioritize the strategic hiring, retaining, and training of teachers. The idea of facilitating strong partnerships between districts and EPPs to produce a more highly effective and prepared teacher workforce also gained traction. Finally, the presentation on student needs also highlighted the importance of continued research on how to prepare teachers to meet the various needs of students.



### **Principal Role**

Throughout the conference, states focused intensely on the essential role principals play in successful school turnaround implementation. Some states saw implementation and study of distributive leadership as a priority. States also pledged to explore how they could work with districts to facilitate additional flexibility for school leaders. The state agencies also intend to pursue how they can help school leaders to augment current data systems with information from community partners to determine the intensity and type of student need in a school, and how state policies could support these partnerships.

### **Turnaround Policy**

Finally, states considered the composition of turnaround models and next steps to take as their turnaround systems evolve. Some plan to research if introducing increased flexibility into turnaround models leads to greater school improvement, and if reforms can still be successful if schools retain most of their original staff. Others committed to studying the scaling up of successful turnaround programs—specifically, researching the optimal number of schools that should be engaged in turnaround at one time and how to move from a theory of action to high-quality implementation.

## STATE SPECIFICS:

# WHERE ARE THEY HEADED?



### TENNESSEE

The Tennessee team left the conference focusing on next steps for monitoring and evaluating progress in turnaround schools. Specifically, they plan to emulate the Massachusetts model of school monitoring by creating a monitoring framework for success in turnaround schools that leverages both research and school-specific information.



### MASSACHUSETTS

The state agency team noted a need for deeper research into the practices and policies of turnaround schools across the state. They plan to study the role of the school and district in the teacher hiring process and ways the process can be adapted. They also hope to explore including more differentiation in warning indicators within turnaround schools where many or all students are already identified as high-need. Finally, the team expressed interest in continuing the ongoing study of the current turnaround system.



### LOUISIANA

The 272 schools on Louisiana's comprehensive support list were required to make plans for improvement in preparation for the 2018-19 school year. The strongest of these plans focused on the adoption of high-quality curriculum and teacher professional learning on implementation of the curriculum and these plans were funded through the 7% ESSA set-aside for school improvement. In 2018, Louisiana will require similar plans from schools that have historically struggled to serve diverse learners—students with special needs and English learners.



### MICHIGAN

Similar to Tennessee, the Michigan team committed to examining the state-wide Partnership Districts through a research lens. They hope to use research to create clear metrics for success in turnaround schools, to develop next steps for schools that aren't meeting their goals, and to further study how to sustain their partnership work in the long-term.

# WHAT IS NEEDED GOING FORWARD?



**As states move into ESSA implementation in turnaround, the use of research evidence is going to be paramount both because of the requirements of ESSA and the imperative for improvement in high-needs schools.** These four states have taken bold steps over the past several years and have learned alongside their research partners about where to go next. In the coming years, research in each state should build upon the most critical lessons learned and attempt to bridge gaps in evidence. Evidence gathered from these four states as they implement changes under ESSA offers critical opportunities for the entire nation to learn about better supports for non-academic needs, conditions for strong governance models, and improving educator pipelines to our highest needs schools.





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