

# The School Turnaround FIELD GUIDE

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## About FSG Social Impact Advisors

At FSG, we are passionate about finding better ways to solve social problems. Originally established in 2000 as Foundation Strategy Group, today FSG works across all sectors by partnering with foundations, corporations, school systems, nonprofits, and governments in every region of the globe. Our goal is to help organizations — individually and collectively — create greater social impact.

Our approach is founded on the beliefs that

- Social sector organizations can play a catalytic role, using evidence-based strategies and strategic evaluation to solve social problems;
- Corporations can create shared value by using their core capabilities in ways that contribute to both social progress and economic success;
- Better alignment within the social sector can lead to collective impact beyond that which individual organizations alone could achieve.

Our team brings the right combination of on-the-ground experience and world-class expertise in strategy development to tackle the world's most challenging problems in three ways:

- **Creating** fresh ideas and practical tools that boost the success of change makers in all sectors.
- **Consulting** with clients to build strategies and practices that lead to powerful results in the areas they care about most.
- **Connecting** peers and communities to each other and to proven practices, so each gains from the knowledge of all.

FSG's **Education and Youth Practice** works with foundations, nonprofits, state agencies, corporations, and school districts individually and collectively to solve education and youth-related issues. We work with clients on strategy development, learning and evaluation, operational planning, research and intellectual capital development. The practice is comprised of individuals who have direct previous experience in the education sector as well as at top strategy consulting firms. The mission of our practice is to improve the academic and personal outcomes of children and youth.

For more information, see [www.fsg-impact.org](http://www.fsg-impact.org).

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## About The Wallace Foundation

This report was funded in part by The Wallace Foundation, which seeks to support and share effective ideas and practices to improve learning and enrichment opportunities for children. The report’s conclusions are the authors’ own. The foundation’s current objectives are to: improve the quality of schools, primarily by developing and placing effective principals in high-need schools; improve the quality of and access to out-of-school-time programs through coordinated city systems and by strengthening the financial management skills of providers; integrate in- and out-of-school learning by supporting efforts to reimagine and expand learning time during the traditional school day and year as well as during the summer months, helping expand access to arts learning, and using technology as a tool for teaching and promoting creativity and imagination. For more information and research on these and other related topics, please visit its Knowledge Center at [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org).

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# Executive Summary

Despite the tremendous level of activity in the school turnaround field over the past two years, the effort is still in its early stages. The field is growing quickly, but remains highly fragmented. Interventions are moving forward rapidly, but reformers have little knowledge of what is working and how to scale what works. This report aims to increase education reformers' awareness of turnaround issues, to prompt those in the field to think about how to most effectively do turnaround work, and to encourage members of the field to work in concert with each other. If the U.S. is to transform thousands of its chronically underperforming schools, multiple actors must work together to identify and spread effective practices, create the policies and conditions for success, build capacity, and ensure the sustainability of turnaround work at scale.

## INTRODUCTION

### The Need

More than 5,000 schools, representing 5 percent of schools in the United States, are chronically failing, according to the latest U.S. Department of Education statistics. These schools serve an estimated 2.5 million students. The number of failing schools has doubled over the last two years, and without successful interventions, could double again over the next five years.

### Bold Action

To combat this problem, the Obama administration announced its intention to use \$5 billion to turn around the nation's 5,000 poorest-performing schools over the next five years. This is a bold challenge to a system that has succeeded at turning around individual schools, but has never delivered dramatic change at a national scale. To foster urgency and innovation, the federal government is providing unprecedented levels of funding and strong direction for policy changes to support school turnaround. District, state, private, and nonprofit education leaders across the country have responded with an unprecedented level of attention to school turnaround.

### The Challenge

The nation is at a critical juncture in its efforts to turn around schools. Over the past year, states and districts have been focused on policy change and planning. With turnaround strategies now in place, the announcement of the Race to the Top (RTTT) and Investing in Innovation (i3) winners, and the distribution of School Improvement Grant (SIG) funds, the emphasis is switching from planning to action. However, the field of actors is fragmented. While a large number of new organizations are entering the school turnaround field, there remain only a handful of proven providers — few of whom are operating at a meaningful scale. The capacity

of state, district, and overall human capital is also limited, while little research exists to identify what works and how to succeed at scale.

### This Report

FSG's motivation in writing this report is to ensure that the school turnaround field is well-coordinated, fueled by promising practices, and guided by a focus on results. This report provides an overview of the school turnaround issue, identifies measures of success, surveys the policy and funding environment, compares the major turnaround models, and provides a guide to important actors in the field and a highly visual map of their interrelated roles and funding. We also explore early lessons learned, as well as key issues and gaps challenging the school turnaround field. Finally, we suggest a set of detailed actions that this widely divergent group of stakeholders could take — collectively and individually — to ensure that turnaround succeeds at scale. In writing this report, FSG drew upon more than 100 interviews with turnaround experts, practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and funders. Our research also included an extensive review of secondary reports and articles as well as a synthesis of discussions among 275 turnaround focused actors who attended the "Driving Dramatic School Improvement Conference" on January 11, 2010, cohosted by FSG and *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Finally, FSG drew extensively on the guidance and feedback of an advisory group consisting of a broad cross-section of turnaround actors, including state and district leaders, philanthropic funders, human capital providers, school operators, education entrepreneurs, and researchers. Please note that we use the term "school operator" throughout the paper to represent charter, private and other nonprofit school operators and management organizations. The appendices in the full report list interviewees and research sources, and advisory-group members are listed on the inside cover of this report.

# TODAY'S LANDSCAPE

## Defining Turnaround

While questions remain about the term “turnaround,” the definition that Mass Insight Education put forward provides a good beginning:

“Turnaround is a dramatic and comprehensive intervention in a low-performing school that: a) produces significant gains in achievement within two years; and b) readies the school for the longer process of transformation into a high-performance organization.”

Based on our analysis we would add to the definition those efforts that *take place in the context of performance improvement for the school system as a whole*. The addition captures the idea that turnaround should include the work of districts and states to continually improve all schools. Finally, we would also recommend expanding this definition beyond individual schools to address the need to turn around schools at scale.

## Measuring Success

While many states and districts have established criteria to identify schools in need of turnaround, less clarity exists around how to track progress toward turnaround, knowing when a school has actually been turned around, and if that success has happened in the context of system improvement. Stakeholders also strongly emphasize that turnaround is only successful if it achieves gains with the *same* student population. We heard broad agreement about the following themes surrounding measures of success:

- **At the School Level.** Measure student outcomes and improvements in the school culture and learning environment; employ absolute and value-added measurements; set the bar for success high; and strive for meaningful improvements within two to three years.
- **At the System Level.** Set turnaround-specific goals for students, schools, and the system; track performance of all schools, not just turnaround schools; evaluate state and district self-performance in supporting turnaround efforts; identify and share best practices.

## Federal Funding

The size of the U.S. Department of Education's current investments in education, coupled with the acute need of states and districts for funding, has put the federal government in a strong position to incent policy change and to set expectations for the types of turnaround strategies that states and local education agencies (LEAs) use. While the amount of funding is significant, much of it is short term, and states and districts have expressed concerns about how to sustain their turnaround efforts in the longer term. Funding that has an impact on the school turnaround field includes:

- **Race to the Top Funds.** \$4.35 billion in competitive grants to states, with turnaround being one of four focus areas. RTTT has already succeeded in driving state- and district-level policy change across the nation.
- **School Improvement Grants.** \$3.55 billion allocated to states according to a formula based on Title I funding levels, to be granted out competitively to districts within each state. SIG guidelines align with those of RTTT, including the requirement that districts use the four turnaround models.
- **Investing in Innovation Fund (i3).** \$0.65 billion in competitive grants awarded to nonprofits and school districts to expand innovative and evidence-based approaches that significantly improve student achievement, including those related to school turnaround.

## The Four Turnaround Models

To promote reforms that are dramatic rather than incremental, the federal government is requiring LEAs to use the following four approaches:

- **Turnarounds.** Replace the principal, rehire no more than 50 percent of the staff, and grant the principal sufficient operational flexibility (including in staffing, calendars, schedules, and budgeting) to implement fully a comprehensive approach that substantially improves student outcomes.
- **Restarts.** Transfer control of, or close and reopen a school under a school operator that has been selected through a rigorous review process.

- **School Closures.** Close the school and enroll students in higher-achieving schools within the LEA.
- **Transformations.** Replace the principal, take steps to increase teacher and school leader effectiveness, institute comprehensive instructional reforms, increase learning time, create community-oriented schools, and provide operational flexibility and sustained support.

Significant debate surrounds the models. They vary in the cost, human capital, provider capacity, and political will necessary for implementation, and they also may differ in efficacy. Some observers believe the models that require the fewest changes in staff — especially the transformation model, which may be the most widely implemented — are the least effective in turning schools around. And questions have arisen about how to align the needs of a school with the appropriate model and how to implement the models successfully at scale. Although the models are each being pursued at individual schools, as of yet, little research-based evidence exists to help answer these questions.

## The Turnaround Sector

While some organizations have been providing turnaround services, or are now emerging with programs and services directed toward turnaround, the number and capacity of proven operators and providers serving the sector is still inadequate to meet demand. Additionally, the recent entry of a large number of new organizations, many of which have varying degrees of direct turnaround experience, has made it harder for states and school districts to assess and select quality turnaround providers. As a result, we found that states and districts are selecting only a small percentage of schools in need of turnaround for active interventions.

## Turnaround Actors

In addition to the federal government, whose role as a funder and a catalyst for policy change has been summarized above, key players shaping the turnaround sector include the following organizations:

- **States and Districts.** States are developing turnaround strategies, creating policies, and finding new ways to partner with and build the capacity of districts. Districts are directly implementing turnaround interventions, working with school operators and school support providers, and addressing human capital issues.
- **Unions.** Unions play a critical role in determining working conditions for teachers in many states. While they have been resistant to such approaches as replacing teachers, extending working hours, linking teacher compensation to student performance, and creating new teacher-evaluation approaches, our research and interviews show that a modest, but growing number of unions are now beginning to partner more closely with states and districts to address these issues, particularly as they apply to turnaround schools.
- **School Operators.** Several charter school operators, as well as public or private school operators, have begun to adapt their models to manage turnaround schools. In other cases, new school operators are being created specifically to turn around schools. In addition to managing individual schools, school operators that oversee networks of schools often take on many of the functions that a district traditionally fulfills and so need to think about turnaround at the systemic, as well as at the school level. When working with turnaround schools, school operators are typically granted substantial autonomy and are held accountable for results through a contract or charter.
- **Supporting Partners.** A variety of partner organizations support school reform in general and are evolving to support school turnaround specifically:
  - *Comprehensive School Redesign Specialists.* Work with schools to implement multidimensional turnaround strategies that begin with whole-school redesign and include coaching and implementation support.
  - *Human Capital and Professional Development Providers.* Work to increase the supply of quality teachers and leaders in turnaround schools, and work with districts and states to build their human resources management capacity.
  - *District and School Resource Management Specialists.* Help districts and schools institute financial and operational changes to support turnarounds.
  - *Integrated Services Providers.* Help schools to identify and address the cultural and mental-health issues of students, complementing the changes being made in the learning environment.

- *Community-Based Organizations.* Local nonprofit organizations play a variety of roles in supporting school turnarounds, ranging from providing students with out-of-school-time academic and nonacademic programs to engaging with parents and community members around advocacy issues.
- *Research and Field-Building Organizations.* These organizations conduct research and analysis, share best practices and tools, and help foster dialogue and partnerships among stakeholders to support turnaround activities.
- *Philanthropic Funders.* These organizations provide support to districts and states in formulating their turnaround plans; foster new approaches to turnaround; fund research and knowledge sharing; support collaboration among stakeholders; enhance the quality of teaching and leadership; and build the capacity of school districts, school operators, and supporting partners.

## Collective Impact

Although we have separately discussed the roles of major actors in advancing turnaround efforts, our research and interviews highlight the complexity of the turnaround ecosystem and the need for actors to work

together in new ways. For example, states should define relationships with districts that go beyond compliance. For their part, districts should work with unions to establish new conditions at schools, and they should partner with school operators to create new schools. Greater alignment among key actors will help ensure that resources are best utilized, that lessons learned are shared, and that needed conditions can be put in place.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Although many turnaround efforts are in the early stages, lessons are emerging from the work of pioneering practitioners. At the school level, practitioners that have taken on turnaround schools consistently say that they were unprepared for the severity of the student needs and school issues that had to be addressed. As a result, they have had to make fundamental changes in their approaches to building school culture, training and supporting staff, and driving student performance. Exhibit 1 summarizes these school-level lessons learned.

Practitioners also emphasize that successful efforts at the school level must be supported by corresponding changes at the system level, as summarized in Exhibit 2.

### Exhibit I: School-Level Lessons Learned

#### Planning

- Identify school leadership early so as to build in planning time to engage the community, establish the vision, and create a new school culture.
- Prepare to meet student needs that are severe and pervasive — hire specialized staff, recruit and train teachers with specific capabilities, and engage with effective external providers, as appropriate.

#### Human Capital

- Provide strong classroom and teamwork skills and additional support to teachers.
- Empower principals and leadership teams with key autonomies over staffing, program, budget, schedule, and data.
- Ensure principals and school leadership teams have the will, skill, and authority to drive change in demanding environments.

#### Maintaining Support and Building Sustainability

- Signal change early and build momentum by delivering and communicating “quick wins.”
- Build capacity for long-term sustainable results.



## Exhibit 2: System-Level Lessons Learned

### Planning

- Articulate a powerful vision for turnaround and make tough decisions.
- View turnaround as a portfolio of approaches, with closure as a viable option.

### Creating Conditions and Building System Capacity

- Create the necessary school-based conditions for success, partnering with labor unions as relevant.
- Develop turnaround-specific capabilities and capacity.
- Build accountability and data systems to track progress and inform decisions.
- Build systems and structures that allow for sharing lessons across schools.

## KEY GAPS

Our interviews highlight significant gaps that must be addressed to ensure that school turnarounds succeed at scale. These are summarized in Exhibit 3. While the gaps apply generally to all turnaround schools, our research and interviews suggest that they are particularly difficult to address in rural schools and in high schools.

### Exhibit 3: Key Gaps

**Capacity:** There are not enough proven turnaround experts or organizations, and existing organizations are still building capacity and infrastructure. Additionally, there is little capacity to assess the quality of the large number of new entrants to the school turnaround field.

**Funding:** There may be a lack of ongoing operational funding to sustain efforts. Additionally, the requirements for the distribution of federal funds are putting pressure on states and school districts to act without adequate planning time.

**Public and Political Will:** Key actors find it challenging to make the difficult decisions required for dramatic school turnaround.

**Conditions:** Policies and conditions in districts and states are frequently at odds with what is necessary for success in turnaround.

**Research and Knowledge Sharing:** There is not enough research or evidence to identify, share, and scale effective turnaround interventions.

**High Schools and Rural Schools:** While improving the performance of any school is difficult, it is particularly challenging to implement and succeed in school turnaround at high schools and at schools in rural areas.

## CRITICAL ACTIONS

To turn around thousands of schools, actors should work collectively and individually to scale nascent efforts, build capacity, and address key gaps. The entire sector should develop common metrics for success, understand and learn from what is and is not working, build capacity and expertise, create conditions for success, and maintain urgency around turnaround efforts to sustain political will. Exhibit 4 summarizes actions that can be taken collectively to address the gaps.

Through our research, interviews and discussion with conference participants, we also identified important actions for each type of actor:

- **U.S. Department of Education.** The federal government already plays a key policy-setting and funding role, but can expand its efforts to support more research, rigorous evaluation, and knowledge sharing.
- **States.** States can focus on developing scalable solutions to human capital and operator capacity issues, creating conditions for success through policy change, assessing the quality of turnaround providers and operators, and investing in the IT and accountability infrastructure that underpins turnaround success.

## Exhibit 4: Collective Actions to Fill Gaps

Gaps	Collective Actions
<b>Capacity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Promote the entry of new quality providers and scale proven operators.</li> <li>▪ Create training and recruitment approaches to attract and develop turnaround talent.</li> <li>▪ Create and staff distinct turnaround offices or divisions.</li> </ul>
<b>Funding</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ As possible, repurpose current ongoing funding sources to address turnaround needs.</li> <li>▪ Ensure that specific turnaround funding streams are included in ESEA reauthorization.</li> <li>▪ Promote the use of one-time funding to build long-term capacity and infrastructure.</li> </ul>
<b>Public and Political Will</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Build awareness of the need for change among students, parents, educators, policy makers, and communities.</li> <li>▪ Engage and mobilize stakeholders, and build public demand to advocate for needed changes.</li> <li>▪ Establish laws and policies that support those making difficult decisions.</li> </ul>
<b>Conditions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Change the culture of engagement between schools, districts, and states from compliance to cooperation.</li> <li>▪ Establish laws and policies that ensure needed school and district autonomies and capacity.</li> <li>▪ Develop and implement shared accountability systems at the system and school levels.</li> </ul>
<b>Research and Knowledge Sharing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Ensure funding and attention are directed to rigorously studying and comparing the efficacy of turnaround interventions.</li> <li>▪ Document and share turnaround successes and challenges to improve implementation.</li> <li>▪ Create opportunities and infrastructure to collect, organize, and share research and best practices.</li> </ul>

- **Districts.** Districts need to create strong talent pipelines, build their accountability and school support capacity, and ensure the availability of critical, high-quality partners, particularly to fill human capital needs and operate schools.
- **Unions.** Unions can consider turnaround schools as a “laboratory” in which they are more willing to experiment with new types of contracts, new ways of collaboratively partnering with districts, new work rules, and new teacher-evaluation and pay-for-performance approaches.
- **School Operators.** School operators can scale existing successful models, identify and train turnaround professionals, and build organizational capacity to run turnaround schools.
- **Supporting Partners.** Supporting partners can build turnaround-specific services. The most pressing need is for greater action from human capital providers. University and alternate-certification programs should focus on developing turnaround-specific training approaches and recruiting and training teachers and school leaders who can drive success in turnaround situations.
- **Community-Based Organizations.** Community-based organizations (CBOs) focused on parent engagement can mobilize community support for turnaround efforts and the difficult political decisions that often need to be made for those initiatives to succeed. CBOs focused on providing out-of-school-time supports should partner with turnaround schools to improve access to academic and personal support programs that help students catch up academically.
- **Research and Field-Building Organizations.** Research and field-building organizations are vital to studying and evaluating existing efforts, identifying tools and effective practices, filling important knowledge gaps, and disseminating findings.
- **Philanthropic Funders.** Foundations can seed innovative models in leadership, teaching, curriculum, support services, community engagement, and other areas vital to turnaround work, as well as invest in partnerships with states and districts in applying these practices at scale.



## Advisory Group

An advisory group made up of key practitioners and experts in the education field provided vital counsel for this project. FSG sincerely thanks them for their guidance and insight.

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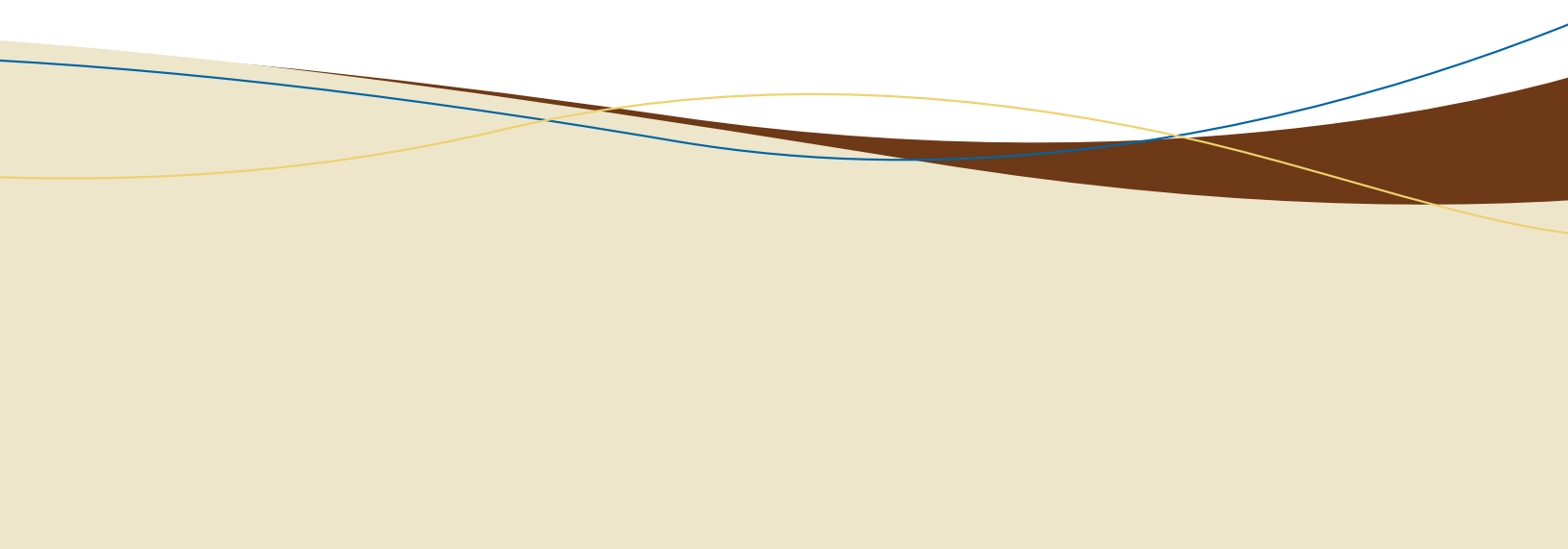
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## Disclaimer

All statements and conclusions, unless specifically attributed to another source, are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of any individual interviewee, the funders, or members of the advisory group.



# SCHOOL TURNAROUND LANDSCAPE



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