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How to Succeed in School Turnaround: Practices That Characterize Successful Turnaround Schools in Massachusetts

In 2013, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) collaborated with American Institutes for Research (AIR) to measure the impact of School Redesign Grants (SRGs) on student academic performance. In 2016, AIR replicated these analyses with additional schools and years of performance data. Both studies showed that students in SRG schools performed better on the English language arts and mathematics sections of standardized state assessments than students in non-SRG schools.

Despite the positive impact of SRGs observed in these schools overall, compared with non-SRG schools, not all schools receiving an SRG have improved student outcomes and exited turnaround status. The current study explored why some schools receiving an SRG have been able to improve student outcomes while others have not. Results from the study contributed to a technical report for researchers, a turnaround practices field guide for practitioners, and this research brief, which summarizes key findings from both components, along with two new videos for ESE's Turnaround Practices in Achievement Gain Schools series.

Study Overview. For this study, AIR focused on a subset of current and exited Level 4 schools that have received SRGs. We used data collected from current Level 4 schools for the 2014–15 Massachusetts School Monitoring Site Visits (see sidebar on Page 2), along with survey data collected from exited schools, to identify a set of schools demonstrating promising practices for successful turnaround, as evidenced by high monitoring site visit ratings or prior exit from Level 4 status. The figure below shows the relationship between all Level 4 schools (dark blue) and the schools selected for inclusion in this study (light blue). Practices highlighted in this research brief were described as essential in improving and continuous improvement schools, while struggling schools often found these same areas challenging to address.



Turnaround Practice 1. Leadership, Shared Responsibility, and Professional Collaboration

Successful turnaround requires a number of initial, foundational steps. Perhaps the most important of these is ensuring that capable leaders are in place who can work together with teachers to triage the needs of the school and establish a strong core of personnel who are similarly dedicated to school improvement. In addition, improving schools were characterized by their strategic use of staffing and scheduling autonomy and focus on creating a culture of open, two-way communication.

Autonomy

All Level 4 schools in Massachusetts are afforded a level of autonomy by state statute that is not automatically extended to other schools throughout the Commonwealth. This policy is grounded in the assumption that if some of the traditional barriers to school improvement are removed, such as staffing and scheduling constraints, then schools can more nimbly and effectively implement strategies designed to improve student outcomes. However, only some Level 4 schools strategically use these autonomies to improve the quality of teaching and learning; principals from schools struggling to make gains, for example, had difficulty making full use of the staffing autonomy they had been given. Successful principals described using their autonomy to address core issues such as appropriate staffing and scheduling as a way to make targeted changes in their schools. With increased autonomy, principals can hire staff willing and able to improve instruction and dismiss those who are poorly matched or detrimental to the school's changing needs. By cultivating a set of staff who share a common commitment to the needs of their students and the challenges of turning around a history of low performance, these principals build buy-in among faculty. Many improving schools employed scheduling autonomy to increase instructional and intervention time for core subject areas as well as time for teacher collaboration and in-school professional development. According to one principal,

Background

In 2010, Massachusetts passed the Act Relative to the Achievement Gap, allowing the state to intervene in struggling schools. The Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education subsequently adopted regulations to formalize the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's approach to engaging with these schools to improve student performance.

Based on the regulations, all schools would henceforth be classified into Levels 1 through 5 based on a number of factors. Level 1 represents the highest performing schools in need of the least support, and Level 5 includes the lowest performing schools in need of the most support and placed under state control. Level 4 represents the state's most struggling schools not under state control.

Every year, each Level 4 and 5 school is monitored to determine the school's level of implementation with regard to four key turnaround practices and related indicators, which typically characterize achievement gain schools:

- Turnaround Practice 1. Leadership, Shared Responsibility, and Professional Collaboration
- Turnaround Practice 2. Intentional Practices for Improving Instruction
- Turnaround Practice 3. Student-Specific Supports and Instruction to All Students
- Turnaround Practice 4. School Climate and Culture

“Ensuring that professional time was built into the schedule—a significant amount of professional time (three to four hours per week)—was a critical component of the turnaround work.”

Communication Culture

Along with strategic use of increased school autonomies, establishing effective two-way communication between leadership and staff emerged as a practice characteristic of improving schools. Successful principals encouraged open communication in many ways, including through regular staff meetings, newsletters, open committees, and teacher surveys. Staff from improving schools emphasized the importance of school leaders encouraging an open-door policy and having the opportunity to influence schoolwide decision making, whereas staff from struggling schools often described communication strategies as limited or ineffective. Communication of instructional goals, specifically, was reported as essential to school improvement efforts so that staff and students alike are aware of what is expected of them. Beyond this, leaders in these schools encouraged teacher agency and responsibility for helping meet schoolwide goals. Improving schools communicated and monitored expectations by reviewing lesson plans, conducting systematic classroom observations, and encouraging peer observations. Staff from improving schools reported that receiving timely and actionable feedback, from both formal and informal observations, further helped to ensure clear and consistent communication of instructional expectations.

Turnaround Practice 2. Intentional Practices for Improving Instruction

With regard to implementing intentional practices for improving instruction, two key practices characterized improving schools: (1) establishing clear, consistent, and aligned instructional foci and expectations, and (2) using regular classroom observations to improve instruction.

Instructional Focus and Expectations

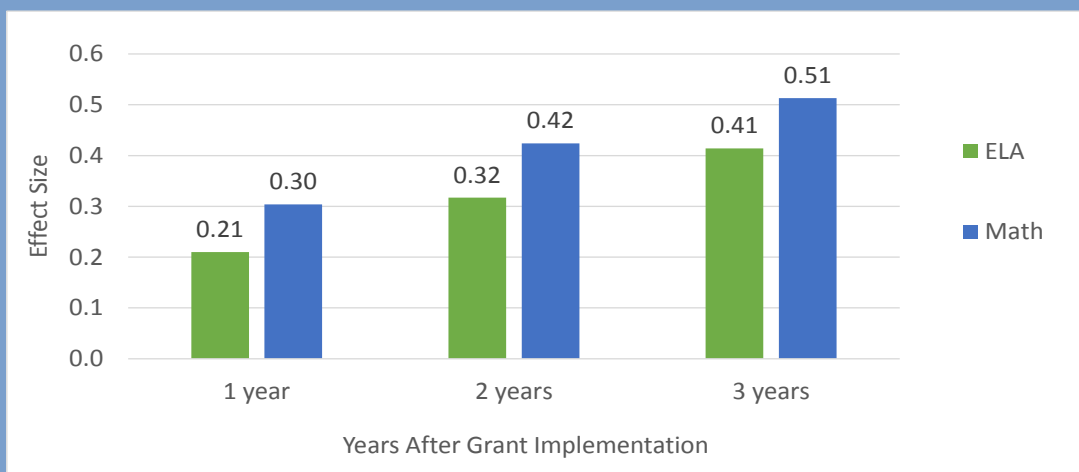
Improving schools described the importance of setting and communicating high and consistent expectations for staff and students, and then monitoring the consistent implementation of those expectations through regular observations or other mechanisms. Staff at many improving and exited schools reported a focus on increased instructional rigor as a key aspect of their turnaround goals. Many schools, both improving and otherwise, described using data to establish clear instructional goals and plans for monitoring progress throughout the year. Improving schools utilized many of the effective communication structures described above to ensure expectations were clearly and consistently communicated among and owned by all staff, whereas principals from schools struggling to make gains described consistent communication of expectations as an ongoing challenge during turnaround. Several improving schools also used targeted professional development to “establish expectations and common practices and language to use in the classroom” and to familiarize teachers with new materials, such as curriculum maps.

Classroom Observation Feedback and Data Use

As previously mentioned, an important practice for all turnaround schools is the use of regular classroom observations to monitor instructional practice and ensure consistent implementation of instructional expectations. Staff appreciated that traditional classroom observations conducted by school leaders resulted in timely and actionable feedback. More importantly, teachers from improving schools also mentioned the value of peer observations, coupled with data use and collaboration, which allowed teachers to learn from their colleagues. As one teacher described, “We go around as department teams and we’ll observe people within our department, we’ll observe people in other departments, we’ll see those classrooms, and then we can see what’s working.” Teachers said that peer observations were especially helpful because they could see examples of high-quality instruction and, after observing instruction of higher grade levels, prepare their students for the instruction they would receive in future years. In contrast to struggling schools where data from classroom observations was primarily used only to provide feedback to individual teachers, improving schools often used data from classroom observations to target additional instructional supports, make decisions about professional development, and plan instructional leadership team activities.

Impact of School Redesign Grants on Student Outcomes

As part of this work, we conducted a comparative interrupted time-series (CITS) analysis of the impact of SRG receipt on student outcomes one, two, and three years after receiving the grant. CITS analysis compares pretreatment and posttreatment trends in student performance, where SRG receipt is considered the treatment, between SRG schools and non-SRG comparison schools. Consistent with findings from a 2013 analysis of the impact of SRG receipt on Commissioner’s District schools, the impact of SRG receipt on student outcomes is statistically significant (at the $p = .001$ level) one, two, and three years after receipt, and the impact of SRG receipt on outcomes for English language learners specifically is even greater. These findings suggest that, even though some schools may not show sufficient improvement to exit Level 4 status within three years (SRG funding timeframe), SRGs are accelerating student improvement, in both English language arts and mathematics, overall.



Turnaround Practice 3. Student-Specific Supports and Instruction to All Students

Turnaround Practice 3 focuses on providing individualized academic and nonacademic supports for each student, in a systematic way. Improving schools tend to have well-established, well-functioning multitiered systems of supports and offer a wide range of nonacademic student supports to meet social-emotional and behavioral needs.

Multitiered Systems of Support

Improving schools all established, or were in the process of establishing, a multitiered system of supports for struggling students that uses multiple data points to frequently identify and adjust both academic and non-academic student-specific supports. According to one principal:

We have a student support team that meets every week, on Fridays, to go through the list and analyze which students are struggling from a behavioral standpoint. They look at referral data, they look at notes that have come out of cohorts meeting as to who is struggling. Based on that, they develop interventions, follow-up or even sometimes go observe that student in class and provide advice to the teachers.

To be most effective, staff from improving schools explained that all staff members should be aware of the process for identifying and supporting students and should have access to pertinent data such as attendance, behavior, and academic performance. In addition, staff at many improving schools described receiving targeted training in identifying student academic needs and providing differentiated instruction. In contrast, staff from struggling schools often had difficulty articulating the process for identifying and addressing student needs, suggesting that systematic procedures were not yet in place or well understood.

Nonacademic Student Supports

In addition to providing tiered academic support, many turnaround schools struggle with how to address the behavioral and social-emotional needs of their student population. Most improving schools utilize their multitiered system of supports for identifying and addressing these nonacademic needs as well. Successful schools address these needs in many ways: by partnering with social workers, mental health providers, and external partners that provide social-emotional supports, as well as by establishing clear structures for developing adult-student relationships. Advisory periods and afterschool clubs are two ways in which schools have encouraged healthy relationships between teachers and small groups of students. Many improving schools have also established wraparound services to students and families, including local Departments for Children and Families, medical providers, food pantries, and homeless shelters. Struggling schools often lacked structures for developing positive adult-student relationships and had difficulty systematically addressing non-academic student needs, including social-emotional supports.

Turnaround Practice 4. School Climate and Culture

Turnaround Practice 4 focuses on creating a safe, orderly, and respectful environment for students and families. Establishing an effective schoolwide behavior plan and offering opportunities for meaningful family engagement emerged as two key practices characteristic of improving schools. In addition, most exited schools and all improving schools provide a number of expanded learning opportunities to students, including most commonly, afterschool tutoring.

Schoolwide Student Behavior Plan

Many turnaround schools must address pervasive behavior issues before they can focus on improving instruction. Improving schools established a schoolwide behavior plan and ensured consistent implementation of the plan across all staff. Some improving schools included teachers in the behavior management planning process to encourage buy-in. Many improving schools embed aspects of the positive behavioral intervention system (PBIS) or other positive behavior models into their structures and provide incentives for students for good behavior. Many improving schools display behavior expectations prominently throughout the school. In contrast, all of the struggling schools examined described consistently implementing behavior expectations as a major challenge to their turnaround efforts.

Family Engagement

Family engagement is a constant struggle for many schools, not just turnaround schools. However, improving schools found ways to engage parents both socially and in planning for and collaborating in the implementation of academic and nonacademic supports, whereas struggling schools had difficulty overcoming these common barriers to family engagement. Improving schools did this, in part, by communicating with parents proactively, not reactively. Teachers at these schools routinely reached out through phone calls and home visits to build a relationship, giving parents positive information about their children and breaking down negative associations some parents may have previously held about the school. One school restructured its parent teacher conferences in an attempt to more positively involve parents in their children's education. According to a staff member:

Our school has restructured our open house model to engage our parents in their child's learning. Teachers share classroom data on two to three specific skills and then model and share activity materials with parents that they can do to help support the skill presented.

These schools improve parent engagement in many ways, including hiring a parent liaison or coordinator, implementing regular home visits, conferences, and phone calls for positive communication as well as expressing concerns, and sending regular communications via e-mail and newsletters in multiple languages.

Sustaining Efforts

How can schools implement and sustain these promising turnaround practices after exiting turnaround status and losing targeted funds? Reports from exited schools highlight the importance of establishing systems that can be sustained after turnaround, particularly comprehensive multitiered

systems of support, and prioritizing turnaround practices once exited. One way some exited schools have successfully sustained key practices is by incorporating additional time for instruction, collaboration, and professional development into the school-day and school-year schedule. Others have leveraged district staff, systems, and resources to sustain efforts and ensure continued flexibilities and autonomies after exiting Level 4. In addition, continuous improvement schools recognized the limited nature of time, resources, and staff willingness and strategically prioritized continued improvement efforts, whereas less successful schools often tried to do it all. Although this work has already begun, as more schools exit Level 4 and move farther away from the SRG-funding period, the exited sample size increases and we can learn more about *how* schools sustain improvements over time. Ensuring that schools on the verge of exit have established strong systems and are poised to sustain certain key practices is critical to increasing the likelihood that targeted supports, such as SRGs, consistently lead to long-term success and continuous improvement.

New 2016 Turnaround Practices Resources

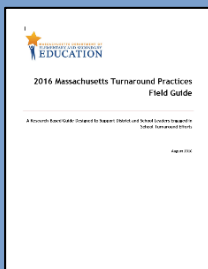
Evaluation of Level 4 School Turnaround Efforts in Massachusetts

This two-part technical report summarizes findings from our 2016 implementation and impact studies of SRG schools.

- Part 1: Implementation Study, summarizes the specific practices that characterize successful turnaround schools and keys to sustaining improvement efforts
- Part 2: Impact Study, summarizes findings from a comparative interrupted time series analysis of Level 4 SRG schools, as compared to non-SRG schools.



2016 Massachusetts Turnaround Practices Field Guide



This guide, designed for school- and district-level practitioners, describes how successful turnaround schools implement the Massachusetts Turnaround Practices. The guide highlights strategic turnaround actions especially important in the first year of turnaround, and includes four detailed school profiles. Each profile describes how school leaders and staff implemented school-specific strategies that contributed to successful turnaround. Authentic artifacts from each school are included in the Appendix.

Turnaround Practices in Achievement Gain Schools Video Series

ESE has developed a video series to highlight the work of achievement gain schools. In each video, school staff and leadership tell their unique story through the lens of the four key turnaround practices. Two of the four schools profiled in the field guide (Connery and Union Hill) are featured in new videos for the Achievement Gain Schools series, and a third (Burke High School) had been featured previously.

