

Policy Recommendations: Turnaround Schools

New Leaders for New Schools also advocates for school system policies that create the conditions for principals to turn around our nation's lowest performing schools and practices. States and philanthropic funders also have important contributions to make by providing expertise and financing to systems and by helping them to continuously learn about effective turnaround practices.

States

Encourage school systems to grant autonomies to turnaround principals. Through grants and formal guidance, create incentives for school systems to provide crucial autonomies to turnaround principals who, in their training, current, or past roles, have demonstrated the capacity to use autonomy effectively to improve student achievement. These autonomies include at a minimum full authority over human capital management, including teacher hiring, professional development, evaluation, leadership teams, and dismissal. Turnaround principals also benefit from flexibility over operational factors such as budgets, schedules, school support services, curriculum and instruction, and types and use of data.

Build coalitions of organizations and school systems focused on turnaround human capital. States can support school systems by building coalitions of like-minded organizations to provide what Mass Insight calls a "new paradigm of aligned, integrated support" for turnaround schools. At a minimum, these organizations must be focused on both the teacher and leader human capital needs of turnaround schools. They might also include organizations focused on the academic and social/emotional supports required for successful school turnarounds. States may also build coalitions of school systems with significant numbers of turnaround schools in order to facilitate the sharing of effective practices and the knowledge-building work described below.

Provide discretionary funds for school systems implementing proven turnaround strategies. Offer school systems the opportunity to compete for the additional financing they may need to implement the policies recommended below, including more expensive measures such as building turnaround human capital pipelines, providing wraparound school supports, and offering incentives for principals and teachers to serve in turnaround schools. By establishing a competitive grant process, states can ensure quality and coherence of systems' turnaround strategies.

Study and disseminate learnings from turnaround schools. Create learning cycles to identify and study turnaround schools that are achieving breakthrough gains in student achievement. Capture effective practices and examples of quality leadership and instruction from these schools, as well as key information about the system policies and structures that support them. Use the gathered information to share effective practices with other practitioners and systems across the state, and engage those who consistently achieve breakthrough gains as leaders of professional learning and development for others. Also use new insights to periodically revise state policies and practices related to turnaround schools.



School Systems: Districts and Charter Management Organizations

Revise policies to provide autonomies to turnaround principals. Grant crucial autonomies to turnaround principals who, in their training, current, or past roles, have demonstrated the capacity to use autonomy effectively to improve student achievement. These autonomies include at a minimum full authority over school-level human capital management, including teacher hiring, professional development, evaluation, leadership teams, and dismissal. Turnaround principals also benefit from flexibility over operational factors such as budgets, schedules, school support services, curriculum and instruction, and types and use of data.

Build a human capital pipeline for turnaround schools through a multi-faceted career ladder. Create a talent pipeline for turnaround schools by positioning them as the best places to work if you are a teacher or administrator who is interested in leadership and rapid professional growth. Identify effective teachers early in their careers and provide them with training and opportunities for advancement in turnaround schools that match their aspirations. Establish a variety of career paths for teachers who are interested in staying in the classroom and those who are interested in the principalship. Develop classroom teachers over time to take on positions as teacher mentors, instructional coaches, or instructional leadership team members. Those who wish to pursue the principalship can become senior leadership team members and assistant principals. It is from this pool that future turnaround principals and turnaround principal managers can be groomed. In all positions, offer additional financial incentives to effective teachers and leaders who serve in turnaround schools. Note that financial incentives are rarely adequate on their own, as research has shown that retention of effective teachers is closely linked with the opportunity to work with an aligned and effective principal.^{xxx} But taken as a whole, this long-term strategy provides for effective teachers and leaders within individual turnaround schools and across the system's entire turnaround portfolio.

Select turnaround principals who have demonstrated the capacity to create whole-school change. Turnaround principals require unique beliefs, orientations, and skills. Select for those who, in their training, current, or past roles, have demonstrated the following: an unwavering belief in the potential of every student to succeed academically; the instructional expertise to lead a whole staff; the ability to effectively manage others; the skill and orientation to use student learning data to drive breakthrough gains; and the operational skills to manage the school's day-to-day in such a way that allows the principal to maintain a focus on improving instruction and building school culture. Ensure that all turnaround principals demonstrate a strong interest in and ability to implement the high-level principal actions and school-wide practices known to spur breakthrough results in challenging schools. Also ensure that they are prepared to take the difficult actions necessary to build a staff that are aligned to these goals.

Partner effectively with teachers unions to revise school system turnaround policies. Re-negotiate teachers union contracts to allow principals in turnaround schools to serve as effective human capital managers as described above. Ensure that there are efficient and fair systems for dismissal of chronically underperforming teachers. Also ensure fair compensation for the additional work teachers in turnaround schools may perform as described in the summer planning and leadership team recommendations below.

Hire turnaround principals as early as possible. Hire turnaround principals early to afford them greater time to plan and to meet with existing staff. Placement prior to the end of the school year preceding their formal adoption of the role can be enormously beneficial because it also provides the opportunity to observe staff, students, and the outgoing leadership in action. The new principal can then build a much more complete picture of the school's current state and its assets in advance of designing an improvement plan.

Require turnaround school staff to spend more time planning and developing over the summer. In addition to principals and assistant principals who work year-round, require the full school staff to spend at least one month in planning and professional development during the summer of the first year, and at least two weeks for the next four summers with additional requirements for leadership team members at the discretion of the principal.

Provide turnaround principals with funds to compensate an expanded group of principal-selected leadership team members. In turnaround schools, leadership team members provide crucial instructional support to other teachers and drive the overall learning program of the school, in addition to providing some operational support to the principal. This work is particularly important in larger schools where the principal has less time to coach each individual staff member. Thus we believe it is imperative that school systems provide turnaround principals with the flexibility to create larger leadership teams than might be needed in other schools and to select the candidates best suited for each role. Furthermore, leadership team members do their work in addition to teaching full-time, and therefore require additional compensation. School systems must provide principals with the monies to fully fund a leadership team of appropriate size. Given that service on the leadership team is also an important step for developing the skills necessary to become an assistant principal or principal in a turnaround school, these funds represent a valuable investment for the long-term system strategy to transform chronically underperforming schools.

Ensure aligned principal managers for turnaround schools. Hire principal managers who can successfully support and evaluate turnaround principals against an evidence-based framework for effective turnaround principal actions. These managers must fully understand the difficult process of school change and the sometimes drastic measures required for students to make breakthrough learning gains. They must also believe deeply in the possibility of school turnaround and manage with a sense of urgency and accountability for student outcomes. Candidates can best demonstrate these competencies by having served as highly effective turnaround principals themselves. It is unlikely that most school systems will have a large pool of principal manager candidates with this experience and expertise; therefore, one strategy for ensuring aligned principal managers can be to create "clusters" of turnaround schools that may not be geographically close but nonetheless face similar challenges. The aligned principal manager can then focus exclusively on supporting turnarounds. Clusters may also help systems to facilitate the sharing of effective practices between turnaround principals and teachers, adding an additional layer of support for staff development.

Philanthropic Funders

Invest in capacity-building efforts of turnaround schools and school systems. Provide startup funds and outside expertise to states, systems, and schools to help them implement the above recommendations. Few systems or states are likely to have the funds or expertise to develop on their own a turnaround human capital pipeline, robust learning cycles, or the full range of wraparound supports for turnaround schools, and they also may need support in establishing the critical school-level autonomies for turnaround schools

Fund ongoing implementation for turnaround schools and school systems. After initial implementation, provide ongoing funds to support the continuing work of human capital development and hiring incentives, learning and policy adjustment, and supports such as expanded leadership teams and extended summer planning time.

Invest in the study of turnaround schools making breakthrough student achievement gains. Invest in states or education reform organizations that formally identify turnaround schools making consistent breakthrough gains in student achievement and capture key learnings from these breakthrough gainers. Invest in systems for capturing and disseminating examples of effective practices, including studies of the system policies and practices that support these schools. Support pilots of new methods for distributing this effective practice information using a combination of technology and more traditional professional learning structures.

Invest in efforts to provide effective principals and leadership teams for turnarounds. Invest in states, school systems, and organizations that select, develop, and support effective principals and leadership teams for turnaround schools. Require that they collect performance data and conduct ongoing learning and program improvement processes.

New Leaders for New Schools' initial recommendations can help build a comprehensive approach to improving principal effectiveness and creating the crucial policy contexts of autonomy, accountability, and support that will foster school transformation at scale.