Turnaround schools shift the focus of education from a “conveyor belt” concept that moves students in a linear fashion from adult to adult, grade to grade, to a new model where adults rally as teams around students, particularly students in need. This model focuses on three “readiness” areas, which when aligned, rally adults to work collaboratively to transform learning: readiness to learn, readiness to teach, and readiness to act. A review of case studies revealed three commonalities of approach in successful turnaround efforts: increased instructional time in core areas, quick and intensive support for struggling students, and instructional strategy choices appropriate to the students being served and the school’s mission.

Researcher offered five recommendations for improving school turnaround efforts:

1. Recognize the nature of the change: The goal of public policy on failing-school intervention must be to spur fundamental, dramatic change that addresses the dysfunction of the status quo, produces significant improvement within two years, and readies the school to grow into a high-performance organization.

2. Recognize turnaround as a discipline: Turnaround should be viewed within education, as it is in other sectors, as a distinct professional discipline that requires specialized experience, training, resources, and support.

3. Change operating conditions: Turnaround requires protected space that offers leaders the authority to make mission-directed decisions regarding staff, schedule, budget, and program, and dismantles common barriers including inflexible contract and compliance requirements.

4. Build capacity of lead turnaround partners: States, districts, and foundations must develop a new resource base of external, lead turnaround partners to integrate multiple services in support of clusters of turnaround schools.

5. Cluster for support: States and districts should undertake turnaround in clusters organized around identified needs: by school type (e.g., middle schools or grade 6-12 academies), student characteristics (very high ELL percentage), feeder patterns (elementary to middle to high school), or by region.


Based on a growing body of evidence, Duke concludes that one person may not be able to turn a low-performing school around singlehandedly, but suggests that one person with the right talents, temperament, and training can mobilize the energies of many people to accomplish the task. In this article, Duke reports on the “school turnaround specialists” emerging from a pioneering program at the University of Virginia that adapts the
business model of turnaround specialists to reverse the process of school decline. Some of the findings confirm in some cases, and challenge in others, the conventional wisdom on what it takes to effect radical school improvement. Here are some highlights:

- There is no substitute for leadership. It is of utmost importance to identify individuals willing and able to play a leadership role
- Leaders must be very knowledgeable about literacy because illiteracy lies at the heart of every failing school
- Personnel problems must be addressed before significant improvements can be made which requires political savvy about policies, procedures, and contracts
- Leaders must be willing and able to manage the reforms they initiate
- No two underperforming schools are identical so leadership must be customized
- The same leader who successfully planned and implemented change may not be the best leader to sustain it


Report summarizes recent research on 15 low-achieving Virginia elementary schools that were able to turn around a pattern of low achievement and sustain that turnaround for at least two years. Most of the references listed were written no earlier than 2004. Each school had high percentages of students in poverty as well as many foreign-born and special education students. The primary guiding principles of the changes were: the changes made were comprehensive, customizing, and enacted a core of essential reforms. These principles in turn permeated eight “clusters of change” from leadership through school facilities. Every specific change fit into one of three categories:

- Eliminate negative influences, e.g., discipline problems or staff resistant to change
- Create conditions to support effective teaching and learning, e.g., teacher collaboration
- Improve instruction, e.g., allocating sufficient time to review

Most important lessons learned about successful turnaround from these cases were:

- Comprehensive reform throughout the school
- Customized school improvement plans based on local needs
- Ten key essential elements of reform that either improve instruction or create the conditions to do so
- Increased complexity of school organization
- Dedicated teachers to form the vast majority of the teaching staff
- Focus on what students need to know and preventative interventions

This guide points educational leaders to the best restructuring options for chronically failing schools with a focus on choosing change strategies that produce rapid and obvious success, even when complete culture change to sustain that success may take three or more years. It provides tools to support restructuring choices. Authors conclude that when a turnaround restructuring option is chosen, the primary factor in success is the presence of a capable turnaround leader willing to take the steps necessary to make dramatic change quickly. In a turnaround, new and different tactics that deviate from standard district policy and practice are necessary so district capacity for supporting turnaround efforts is critical to success. While an effective turnaround leader can improve school results dramatically without much support from the district, such improvements typically are not sustained or replicated without changes by the district. Experience with school turnarounds indicates that the number of teachers who typically need to be removed is small because dramatic results are often obtained with the same teachers responding to the right principal’s leadership.

Four major actions are emphasized as necessary steps in the restructuring process:
1. Take Charge of Change – Big Change including organizing district restructuring teams and assessing capacity to govern restructuring decisions.
2. Choose the Right Changes including organizing a school-level, decision-making process, a restructuring analysis, and final restructuring decisions across the district.
3. Implement the Plan including setting goals for implementation and identifying and tackling likely roadblocks.
4. Evaluate, Improve, and Act on Failures including a list of options for continuous improvement upon the process.


Many thousands of schools across the country are in need of improvement: 2300 have failed to meet annual improvement targets for more than five consecutive years. In most cases, it is not that these schools have not tried a variety of strategies to improve student achievement but rather that these strategies have not resulted in rapid or clear successes. Students in these schools, many of whom are disadvantaged, continue to fall further and further behind their peers so leadership must look beyond slow, incremental change and examine practices that will raise and sustain student achievement quickly. To be identified as a “turnaround,” the school began as a chronically poor performer, (i.e., more than one-fifth of students were failing to meet state proficiency standards for more than two years in a row) and then showed quick and substantial gains in student achievement, (i.e., ten percentage points or greater reduction in proportion of failing students or drop out rate in fewer than three years).
Four specific and coherent evidence-based recommendations for quickly and dramatically improving student achievement in low-performing schools are:

- Signal the need for dramatic change with strong leadership. Because a failing school does not have the luxury of years to implement incremental reforms, leaders at the school should make a clear commitment to dramatic changes from the status quo and signal the magnitude and urgency of those changes. Specific leadership actions are student-centered and built on a belief that staff should have the skills and knowledge to provide strong instruction.

- Maintain a consistent focus on improving instruction. A sharp focus on improving instruction at every step of the reform process must be sustained. Schools must use data to set goals for instructional improvement, make changes to immediately and directly affect instruction, and continually reassess student learning and instructional practices to refocus the goals. Schools must look at diverse sets of data, including achievement and other student-level data, as well as teacher- and school-level data.

- Make visible improvements early in the school turnaround process (quick wins). Identify one or two clear goals that can be accomplished quickly, with notable success, and that don’t require district-approval or teacher buy-in. Quick wins show it is possible to move toward the overarching goal of raising student achievement and establish a positive climate for long-term change.

- Build a staff that is committed to the school’s improvement goals and qualified to carry out school improvement activities. Getting the right personnel in the right positions might require creating new positions, modifying job descriptions, organizing intervention teams, reviewing or expanding the roles of support staff, or replacing and transferring existing staff.


According to U.S. Department of Education, by 2008, under the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), nearly 11,000 schools are deemed in need of improvement. Of those schools, over 2,000 have failed to improve test scores for five straight years, making them subject to a mandated restructuring. At the current rates of schools falling into restructuring status, by 2010, five percent, or 5000, of American’s one hundred thousand public schools, representing more than 2,500,000 students, will be identified as chronic failures in need of restructuring. The NCLB-driven visibility of the growing number of these chronically failing schools has put the challenge of turning them around near the top of the educational policy agenda in most states.

Unfortunately, there is broad consensus that the rescue plans for chronically failing schools mandated by NCLB have not proved very effective and efforts to turn them around have largely failed. However, the NCLB standards and testing movement has spotlighted some impressive individual school success stories that have at least helped to demonstrate that schools serving highly challenged, high-poverty students can in some
cases succeed. There is very little research on what these schools are doing differently that would inform the extension of the successes of individual schools to the broader context. States need not only more and better research into what works, but also appropriate ways to gauge what’s not working in a school—an assessment derived not just from students’ test results but also from thorough analyses of school-level functions such as resource allocation, the quality of classroom instruction, and the capacity to use data to inform instruction.”

Hoff, D.J. (2009) “Schools Struggling to Meet Key Goal on Accountability Number Failing to Make AYP Rises 28 Percent.” Education Week, Vol. 28, Issue 16, Pages 1, 14-15

Almost 30,000 schools in the United States failed to make adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind Act in the 2007-08 school year. For states with comparable data for the 2006-07 school year, the number of such schools increased by 28 percent. Half those schools missed their achievement goals for two or more years, putting almost one in five of the nation’s public schools in some stage of a federally mandated process designed to improve student achievement. The number facing sanctions represents a 13 percent increase for states with comparable data over the 2006-07 school year.

Of those falling short of their academic-achievement goals, 3,559 schools—4 percent of all schools rated based on their progress—are facing the law’s more serious interventions in the current school year. That’s double the number in that category one year before. The rising number of schools failing to make AYP under the law is seen as inevitable by some because of what they think is an unrealistic requirement that student achievement rise on an annual trajectory that brings 100% of students to proficiency in reading and math by the end of the 2013-2014 school year.


Researchers developed a framework for understanding school turnaround drawn from efforts across a range of sectors, both public and private, and based on 59 sources from business, education, government, non-profit, and multi-sector research. Shared themes fell under two broad categories of factors that influence the success of the turnaround effort: environmental context and leadership actions and characteristics. Environmental factors include:

- Intense, focused reforms implemented on a very short timetable, during the first few months, focusing on a few high-impact activities. Seeing the reforms through was found to be crucial to success and incomplete implementation, a leading indicator of failure.
- Authority to hire and fire personnel and to alter working conditions.
- Support of districts or governing boards for the turnaround efforts and goals is critical for long-term success as is the realignment of existing human and fiscal resources to reflect the school’s new priorities.
Community outreach to make clear why change is necessary and to help staff and community members see the real consequences of failure. The capabilities of successful turnaround leaders reflect a combination of start-up and middle-management capacities. Strong turnaround leaders exhibit a range of traits that must balance those characteristics. The following actions of successful turnaround leaders were identified:

- Focusing on achieving a few wins in year 1.
- Implementing what has to be done even though some desired changes may conflict with current norms.
- Ensuring a rich source of data on key work and take personal responsibility for knowing what the data say as part of their analysis and problem-solving cycle. Make action plans based on data. Measure and report on data frequently and publicly.
- Making it clear that change is not optional and that everyone will be changing. Some of the staff will be replaced, but turnaround leaders rarely replace more than a limited number to sustain long-term stability.
- Funneling time and money into high-priority areas and stop unsuccessful efforts.
- Acknowledging progress but keeping focused on the goal not letting small success take the place of the overall transformation required.
- Communicating a positive, compelling vision of the future.
- Helping staff understand the problems from the “customers” point of view.
- Garnering key support for the change, and silencing naysayers early but indirectly by demonstrating success.


NCLB is a pledge to eliminate, in just 12 years, the achievement gap between black and white students, and the one between poor and middle class students. By 2014, the law requires that African-American, Hispanic and poor children, all of whom were at the time scoring well below their white counterparts and those in the middle class on standardized tests, would not only catch up with the rest of the nation; they would also reach 100 percent proficiency in both math and reading.

This writer looked at the evidence and found it difficult to ignore that when educators do succeed in educating poor minority students up to national standards of proficiency, they invariably use methods that are radically different and more intensive than those employed in most American public schools. So as the NCLB law comes up for reauthorization, Americans are facing an increasingly stark choice: is the nation really committed to guaranteeing that all of the country’s students will succeed to the same high level? And if so, how hard are we willing to work and what resources are we willing to commit, to achieve that goal?

The schools that are achieving the most impressive results with poor and minority students tend to:

- require many more hours of class time that the typical public school
treat classroom instruction and lesson planning as much as a science as an art
setting explicit goals and giving principals the authority to remove teachers who
don’t meet the goals
make a conscious effort to guide the behavior, and even the values, of their
students by teaching what they call character
reject the notion that all these struggling students need is high expectations: they
also need specific types and amounts of instruction, both in academics and
attitude, to compensate for everything they did not receive in their first decade of
life.

New Leaders for New Schools ((2008). *Key Insights of the Urban Excellence*
Framework: Defining an Urban Principalship to Drive Dramatic Achievement Gains.*
New Leaders for New Schools Version 3, June 18, 2008

Dramatic gains in student achievement are happening in individual public schools across
the nation even as we see only incremental improvements in education at scale. An
analysis of the small group of schools making these gains provides a window into what is
needed to get dramatic gains at scale, including a new kind of school principalship. This
report provides an initial framework for a new principalship, including five clearly
defined areas of principal responsibility, based on analyses of some of these schools and
a review of other research. The research literature on school improvement shows that
having a strong, highly skilled principal is an especially significant factor in effecting
dramatic improvements in student achievement.

From its three case studies of urban schools that have demonstrated such improvement,
this report presents a framework for one hypothesis of [such] a redefined urban
principalship and school leadership. It describes five "key levers" led by the principal and
involving the whole school community. For each of the five key levers, there are several
specific factors that enable principals to bring about rapid improvement in student
achievement. Principals and school leadership teams should emphasize each of the five
levers to a different degree during each of the three phases: dramatic turnaround, building
on a strong foundation, and maintaining and refining quality. After providing a detailed
summary of the three case studies, the report provides an annotated bibliography of
research on effective schools, turnaround schools, and turnaround leadership.