



# Turning Around the Nation's Lowest-Performing Schools

Five Steps Districts Can Take to Improve Their Chances of Success

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Karen Baroody January 2011

Center for American Progress



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Front cover: First-graders give a thumbs up during a phonics exercise at the Kelso Elementary School in Inglewood, California. Kelso ranks as one of the highest performing schools in the state of California.

# Introduction and summary

Across the country, states and school districts are focusing on turning around the nation's lowest-performing schools. Unprecedented federal Race to the Top and School Improvement Grant funding accompanied by a more prescriptive approach for using the funds has raised the profile of turnaround efforts. This focus on school turnaround, while welcome, is not new. State, district, and school leaders have been trying for years to turn around persistently low-performing schools. But while some schools have made significant gains in student achievement, results overall are decidedly mixed.<sup>1</sup>

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## Why is this the case?

One of the overarching reasons for the uneven results is that districts generally have failed to recognize that persistently low-performing schools face unique challenges that require aggressive, customized, and sustained interventions. Instead, districts create one-size-fits-all intervention programs providing each target school with the same dollars, instructional coaches, or other support, regardless of differences in individual school needs. These resources are often layered on top of existing policies, programs, staffing, and schedules, without addressing underlying flaws in those structures. The result is often a standalone, add-on approach that neither addresses the needs of each individual school nor fixes the district-level conditions that allowed the school to fail in the first place.

For more than a decade, Education Resource Strategies, Inc., or ERS, has worked with urban districts to transform the use of people, time, money, and technology so that all students receive the support they need to succeed. Based on this work ERS believes that successful school turnaround also requires district turnaround—fundamental changes in the way that districts think about and provide support for schools. ERS has identified five steps that districts can take in designing and implementing their school improvement programs that will increase the probability that their efforts will achieve lasting improvement:

- 1. Understand what each school needs.** Districts must develop a comprehensive, systematic, and ongoing approach to identify the needs of schools, students, and teachers. Districts must evaluate the needs of current and incoming students, examine whether the principal and the teachers in the school have the skills required to address student needs, and assess school practices.
- 2. Quantify what each school gets and how it is used.** Districts must identify all resources currently available to each school and understand how effectively schools are using those resources to improve instructional quality and meet individual student needs, through such strategies as teacher assignment and support, student grouping, and daily scheduling.
- 3. Invest in the most important changes first.** Districts must aggressively target those challenges that make persistently low-performing schools different from other schools and provide the additional resources and support that each school needs to overcome the challenges. Key priorities, in order of importance, are to ensure each school has a strong school leader and teachers who collectively have the skills to meet student needs; to make sure that at-risk students receive basic health, social, and emotional support; to implement school designs that organize teaching expertise, time, and attention to match student needs; and to provide each school with the necessary central office support.
- 4. Customize the strategy to the school.** Each school faces its own unique challenges--the needs of its particular students, the quality and skills of its leader and teachers, and the resources it currently receives. Districts must be thoughtful in tailoring the intervention strategy to each school's most pressing and critical needs.
- 5. Change the district, not just the schools.** Strategies that focus only on changes at individual schools, without addressing the underlying systemwide structures that allowed these schools to fail in the first place, will not achieve lasting improvement. Districts must ensure these schools have the resources and support they need to succeed even after intervention efforts are over, and leverage the lessons learned from turnaround schools to implement broader reforms that support the ongoing improvement of other low-performing schools in the district.

There is no silver bullet—no single solution for how to turn a failing school around. But by taking these five steps district leaders can improve their probability for sustainable and scalable success.

Let's examine those steps in more detail.

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