



# Turning Around Low-Performing Schools

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## Introduction

Across the country, states and districts are focusing on turning around the nation's lowest-performing schools. However, turnaround has proven difficult to do at scale. Districts introduce piecemeal reforms but too often neglect larger issues of human capital. State laws, policies, and lack of capacity prevent state education agencies from effectively managing district turnaround efforts. Systemic, sustained interventions are needed to break cycles of underperformance. Federal policy can help by supporting states and districts that commit to effective turnaround reforms.

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## Recommendation #1

Target funds to schools and districts ready to reform

Turnaround funds should be awarded based on need—poverty and degree of underperformance—but also capacity and willingness to implement reforms. That will ensure limited federal dollars are spent wisely. Congress should require states to award competitive grants to districts based on how districts address:

- **Human capital.** Districts should show that they have a sufficient pool of effective educators to staff low-performing schools and a comprehensive plan to recruit, retain, reward, and improve them using evaluation systems.
- **Support for reform.** Districts should demonstrate support between school management and stakeholders such as teachers unions or community partners, a history of implementing bold reforms, and a willingness to make difficult decisions.
- **Flexibility.** Districts should show that principals enjoy flexibility in staffing, scheduling, and budgeting to implement aggressive school turnaround plans.
- **Data systems.** Districts must be able to show that they are able to use student data systems to drive decision-making and target resources at the school level.

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## Recommendation #2

Ensure funds support bold, effective interventions

A turnaround program in ESEA should offer *flexibility* for schools to tailor interventions to their context and *incentives* that encourage bold reform. The decision about which strategy to use should be based upon a locally devised needs-assessment and should include one of the following:

- **Closing** the school and re-enrolling students in a higher-achieving school.
- **Restarting** the school under the management of a charter operator, charter management organization, or an education management organization.
- **Transforming** the school by, at least, screening staff for effectiveness using evaluation systems, replacing ineffective principals and teachers with effective ones, and developing reward systems for attracting and retaining successful educators.

- **Employing an existing strategy** that has demonstrated success at the school or a new strategy that has demonstrated success in similar contexts. Success is defined as making at least a 10 percent increase in student achievement in one year.

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### Recommendation #3

Collect and report data that informs turnaround

Data provides guidance when a school misses its goal so that problems are accurately diagnosed and addressed. Dramatic gains in *core* achievement data (e.g., test scores) may be elusive in the first two years of turnaround, but progress on *leading* indicators (e.g., attendance) should foreshadow later gains. Therefore, we recommend that districts and schools monitor and report data that includes:

- **Core indicators**, such as percentage of students reaching proficiency on state tests, progress toward accountability benchmarks, percentage of English language learners achieving language proficiency, graduation rates, and college enrollment rates. Data should be reported for all students and for each sub-group of students.
- **Leading indicators**, such as student and teacher attendance rates, student completion of advanced coursework, dropout and discipline rates, and distribution of teachers by performance level. Again, data should be reported for all students and for each sub-group of students.

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### Recommendation #4

Hold states, districts, and schools accountable

Accountability works best when it is shared by all parties who educate students. Therefore, we recommend schools, districts, and states be held accountable in the following ways:

- **School accountability.** If a turnaround school demonstrates improvement—based on core academic achievement—within three years, districts should reward the school with another two-year grant. If a school fails to demonstrate improvement in three years, states should require districts to select a new intervention model, re-tool the existing model based on a data-driven needs assessment, restart the school as a charter school, or close the school and transfer students to a higher-performing school.
- **District accountability.** States can hold districts accountable through monitoring and oversight of the turnaround plan and ensuring benchmarks are met in a timely fashion. Ultimately, a state should revoke a district's set-aside funds if a majority of its schools do not make adequate progress.
- **State accountability.** Congress should require states to articulate in advance what is expected of turnaround schools in terms of reporting, meeting benchmarks, and consequences for failing to make progress. States failing to do so should lose a portion of their set-aside funds under the turnaround program. Further, states with a majority of schools failing to improve after three years should lose an additional portion of their set-aside funds until substantial improvement occurs.

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What our recommendations are based on

- [Incentivizing School Turnaround: A Proposal for Reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act](#)
- [Turning Around the Nation's Lowest-Performing Schools](#)
- [Levers for Change: Pathways for State-to-District Assistance in Underperforming School Districts](#)



## CAP's Body of Work on ESEA Topics

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### Increasing Teacher and Principal Effectiveness

- [Advancing Teacher and Principal Effectiveness: Four Recommendations for Reforming the Elementary and Secondary Education Act](#)
- [Essential Elements of Teacher Policy in ESEA: Effectiveness, Fairness, and Evaluation](#)
- [Measuring What Matters: A Stronger Accountability Model for Teacher Education](#)
- [So Long Lake Wobegon?: Using Teacher Evaluation to Raise Teacher Quality](#)
- [Treating Different Teachers Differently: How State Policy Should Act on Differences in Teacher Performance to Improve Teacher Effectiveness and Equity](#)
- [Increasing Principal Effectiveness: A Strategic Investment for ESEA](#)
- [Principals' Approaches to Developing Teacher Quality](#)

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### Closing the Comparability Loophole

- [Walking the Talk: Closing the Comparability Requirement Loophole in Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act](#)
- [Comparable, Schmocomparable: Evidence of Inequity in the Allocation of Funds for Teacher Salary Within California's Public School Districts](#)
- [Pulling Back the Curtain: Promoting Fiscal Equity and Providing All Students with Access to Effective Teachers Will Not Require Forcible Re-assignment](#)

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### Simplifying the Title I Formula

- [Bitter Pill, Better Formula: Toward a Single, Fair, and Equitable Formula for ESEA Title I, Part A](#)
- [Spoonful of Sugar: An Equity Fund to Facilitate a Single, Fair, and Equitable Formula for ESEA Title I, Part A](#)
- [Secret Recipes Revealed: Demystifying the Title I, Part A Formulas](#)

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### Extending Learning Time

- [Transforming Schools to Meet the Needs of Students: Improving School Quality and Increasing Learning Time in ESEA](#)
- [Expanded Time, Enriching Experiences: Expanded Learning Time Schools and Community Organization Partnerships](#)
- [Union and District Partnerships to Expand Learning Time](#)

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### Innovation

- [Leaders and Laggards: A State-by-State Report Card on Educational Innovation](#)
  - [Advancing Teacher and Principal Effectiveness: Four Recommendations for Reforming the Elementary and Secondary Education Act](#)
  - [Walking the Talk: Closing the Comparability Requirement in Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act](#)
  - [Fast Track to College: Increasing Post-secondary Success for All Students](#)
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## Turning Around Low-Performing Schools

- [Incentivizing School Turnaround: A Proposal for Reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act](#)
- [Turning Around the Nation's Lowest-Performing Schools](#)
- [Levers for Change: Pathways for State-to-District Assistance in Underperforming School Districts](#)

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## Providing Wraparound Services

- [Maximizing the Promise of Community Schools: Streamlining Wraparound Services for ESEA](#)
- [Breaking the Mold: Combining Community Schools with Expanded Learning Time to Help Educationally Disadvantaged Students](#)
- [Promise Neighborhoods Shows Real Potential but Needs the Right Funding](#)
- [A Look at Community Schools](#)