

Why Community Collaboration Can Do Better than Turnaround Approaches to School Reform

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School reform is a cause with widespread support – and since taking office the Obama administration has championed effective leadership and managerial efficiency to turnaround underperforming public schools. Turnaround models advancing these internal school reforms are also favored by advocacy groups such as Students First and Stand for Children. The Department of Education has given School Improvement Grants (SIGs) to support variants of this turnaround approach, all of which embrace principles of school autonomy and competition, and attempt to quickly improve individual schools by installing new leaders and teachers. But empirical evidence raises serious questions about this overall approach to improving schools and suggests that a more community-based, collaborative approach might do better.

Four Versions of the Turnaround Approach

All versions of the managerial approach stress the effects of schools themselves on students and treat individual school leaders as the key lever. But none of the four variants encouraged since 2009 were based on research evidence, and little evidence of effectiveness has since appeared.

- A simple **turnaround model** introduces a new principal and many new teachers into a school where students are struggling. Yet even though replacing the staff at a failing school makes intuitive sense, underlying causes of failure may not be addressed – and negative consequences can flow from upending schools' arrangements in already unstable poor communities.
- The **restart model** transfers school management to charter school operators. While federal policy specifies a rigorous selection process in hiring an effective school leader, overall evidence on the performance of charter schools shows that they do no better than public schools with comparable students.
- Another model identifies poor performers as targets for abrupt **school closure**, with the presumption that the affected students will then attend higher quality schools. However, studies of widespread school closures in Chicago indicate that only 60% of the students subsequently attended the better schools designated to welcome them.
- A final **transformational model**, to some degree a catchall, is the only approach that stresses instructional improvements. Still, it also calls for replacing the school leadership.

Anecdotes Instead of Evidence

The background to the 2009 launch of School Improvement Grants for projects conceived along these lines suggests that Obama administration officials relied on hope and anecdotes more than solid data. For instance, the Department of Education highlighted Locke High School in Los Angeles, which had been turned over to a charter manager called Green Dot Schools. Despite substantial reorganization and replacement of most of the teaching staff, student attrition remained significant and often indistinguishable from neighboring public schools. Although gains in math proficiency were apparent, scores were still low, and reading scores remained essentially similar to those in comparable public schools. Nonetheless, managerial principles from Locke High were touted by federal administrators looking to spur turnaround efforts. Research on school restructuring that preceded expanded federal improvement grants did not provide much support for this approach. Management by charter operators is a key feature of several turnaround models, yet by 2009, when School Improvement Grants were scaled up, a number of national studies had shown that charter schools were, on average, no better than, and often less effective than demographically comparable public schools. The evidence is essentially unchanged since 2009.

From Isolated Turnarounds to Community Collaboration

All turnaround approaches presume that greater operational autonomy for individual schools and their managers will lead to improved academic outcomes. But this fundamental assumption flies in the face of substantial research in two ways. First, the social and political realities surrounding individual schools have been shown to temper the effects of in-school interventions. For decades, researchers have found that social characteristics and environments of schoolchildren and their families have powerful effects barely influenced by particular school reforms and restructurings. Secondly, even though enhancing managerial autonomy appeals to anyone who aims to change what happens inside school walls, recent research suggests that more autonomous schools often perform less effectively than demographically comparable schools run according to general professional standards. If managerially focused school turnaround efforts are not as effective as hoped, what might work better? Missing from most school turnaround projects are steps to strengthen community engagement with local schools. Yet school reforms often get better results when principals, teachers, and parents cooperate with nonprofit organizations and neighborhood groups.

- Such cooperation can help create a more stable and nonviolent environment for children, not just in school but as they walk to school and go home afterwards. Simply closing a lot of schools, as Chicago recently did, can actually put children at greater risk – for example, if they have to cross rival gang boundaries to get to new schools.
- More fundamentally, collaborations with supportive community groups and nonprofits offering social services can marshal a broader array of resources to help children be healthy and ready to learn. A community collaboration model – such as the one used in the Harlem Children’s Zone – lets community groups and nonprofits work hand in hand with school leaders to address out-of-school factors known to strongly influence academic outcomes. Reductions in crime, alleviations of poverty, improvements in access to physical and mental health care, stable housing, and more support for parents, especially single mothers – all are factors known to reinforce efforts inside schools to help children succeed and flourish.

Reforming America’s schools remains a pressing cause to which many can contribute. But we need to be smart and practical about what works and doesn’t – especially in less advantaged communities. Trying to change schools in isolation from surrounding families and neighborhoods does not work. We need community-wide efforts to secure the improvements our children need.