GREAT LAKES CENTER
FOR EDUCATION RESEARCH & PRACTICE

Summary of Review

Seeking to turn around the five percent of U.S. schools that have proven chronically underachieving, a new report from Mass Insight, *The Turnaround Challenge*, puts forth a proposal aimed at getting these schools and their students on track toward genuine academic achievement. To do so, the authors propose a comprehensive strategy that includes three main elements: conditions, capacity and clustering. Regarding conditions, the report advocates creating a "turnaround zone" within which schools are accorded greater autonomy and given incentives to act. Regarding capacity, the report suggests state-developed programs and policies to bring quality educators into the reform process at all levels while more leadership roles are created at the school site. Regarding clustering, it recommends a

network of districts or schools that work in concert to facilitate change. There are many promising aspects to this report and its ideas deserve serious consideration, but this review identifies several concerns. The underlying research base is limited, the proposed timeline for enacting "significant change" in schools (two years) seems unrealistic, the approach is overly punitive, and the report says little about what role students will play in the reform process.

I. INTRODUCTION

For more than 20 years I have worked in urban schools, mainly secondary.[1] What I consistently observe is very discouraging. The facilities typically pale in comparison to suburban and private schools I am familiar with. Trash often litters the grounds and hallways. In the classroom, students appear minimally engaged. Although most teachers work hard to educate their students, often in rich and authentic ways, the challenges are enormous and are not helped by the resistance offered by many students. Other teachers are less praiseworthy, sometimes doing little in their classrooms and speaking of students in disparaging ways. Ultimately, many students treat their education as a necessary evil at best, and over time many teachers grow increasingly demoralized.

With such experience in mind, I review this new proposal aimed at improving the condition of our nation's worst performing schools, much like those I've experienced. The authors of *The Turnaround Challenge: Why America's Best Opportunity to Dramatically Improve Student Achievement Lies in Our Worst-Performing Schools*, Andrew Calkins, William Guenther, Grace Belfiore, and Dave Lash, wrote the report for the Mass Insight Education & Research Institute, a non-profit based in Boston that has worked for the past 10 years in the arenas of educational policy and school reform.

In assessing this new report, the stated purpose of which is to "help educators, school reformers, and policy leaders across the country develop a new generation of turnaround strategies that carry, at the very least, the possibility of success,"[2] I put the following questions front and center: Will the proposal address the challenges faced by low-achieving urban schools I know? Would it generate greater financial equity? Will it lead to rich and fulfilling classroom experiences for students and teachers alike? Can it disrupt the status quo?

Though I critique aspects of the report, I commend the authors for taking on this challenge. They are making a major contribution to a conversation about schools and children that needs to occur. As they note, "Turnaround schools have no natural constituency" (p. 13) To their credit, the authors have nonetheless offered meaningful advocacy and ideas on behalf of the people served by those schools.

II. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS OF THE REPORT

Highlighting the need for serious reform, the report observes that by 2009-10 more than 5,000 schools, 5% of the 100,000 public schools in the U.S., will likely be assigned to the most extreme category of No Child Left Behind underperformance, "Restructuring." Thus far, "marginal change has led to marginal (or no) improvement" (p. 5) in low-performing schools. Indeed, at scale, no state or district has successfully transformed high-poverty, low-achieving schools. The report therefore embraces the "turnaround change" approach—a "different and far more difficult undertaking than school improvement. . . . [that] requires specialized experience, training and support" (p. 4)

The process begins with states or districts creating zones for failing schools that allow for "high-impact reforms such as control over hiring/placement, scheduling, and budgeting, and incentive pay to draw expe-

rienced teachers" (p. 4). In these zones, schools, districts, or both would have freedom to act and motivation for doing so. Specifically, turnarounds would employ a "Three 'C' Strategy." The first C, "changing *conditions*," entails creating a structured context within which incentives exist for educators that challenge and motivate them to do their best. Schools, for instance, would have "authority to adapt and implement research-based strategies shown to be effective with high-poverty, high-challenge students" (p. 73). The report suggests, for instance, differentiated roles and merit compensation for teachers. Principals would exert considerable influence, but could be replaced if they proved ineffective. Collectively, schools might extend the day or year as well as create time for professional development and common planning.

The second C, "increasing *capacity*," has multiple dimensions. At one level, turnaround schools would control the "recruiting, hiring, placement, development, responsibilities, supervision, evaluation, and removal for chronic underperformance" (p. 73) of teachers. Schools would also be encouraged to create more leadership roles—coaches, lead teachers, and performance-assessment specialists—that would be supported externally through a "strong marketplace of local providers with experience and ability to serve as lead turnaround partners" (p. 5). These external "partners-in-reform" would coordinate multiple services schools rely upon to function daily, including both academic and administrative concerns. At the state level, enhancing capacity would entail creating programs and policies to "ensure a high-quality pipeline of educators at all levels" while "investing in continuous skill-building in high-impact areas of reform and high-need positions in the schools" (p. 76).

The final C, *clustering*, entails creating a network of districts or schools to facilitate change. They might be organized by region, school type (e.g., elementary or middle schools), or need. Drawing on common interests and insights, networked schools would share best practices, identify common concerns, and organize by scale for mutual benefit. To oversee this undertaking, states need an influential agency "free from normal bureaucratic constraints . . . [with] a flexible set of operating rules that allow it to carry out its mission" (p. 5). Since this new structure, as well as the many related reforms, would require substantial financial support, policymakers would need to draw together a supportive coalition that might include the "governor, state board of education, state superintendent, leaders from the legislature, business, the nonprofit/foundation community, and the media" (p. 5).

To provide a sense for what turnarounds should accomplish, the report presents some "high-performing, high-poverty" (HPHP) schools from Massachusetts as theoretical and practical exemplars. Drawing on insights derived from research with these and other HPHP schools, the report offers a "Readiness Model" for chronically low-achieving schools to emulate. The first dimension, *readiness to learn*, involves extending the school day, year, or both, promoting close student-adult relationships, or embracing proven teaching and curricular programs. Turning to school faculty, the report outlines the *readiness to teach* dimension—creating a sense of shared responsibility for student achievement, utilizing personalized instruction, and engendering a teaching culture based on collaboration and continuous improvement. At the institutional level, the report focuses on *readiness to act*, allowing schools authority over such matters as their finances, program structure, hiring

decisions, and use of time.

III. RATIONALES SUPPORTING FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS OF THE REPORT

So why do the authors think this reform strategy would be effective? To begin, they propose creating a new context for reform. Low-achieving schools would operate in turnaround zones that accord district personnel, schools, and teachers greater autonomy. New participants and additional structures dedicated to facilitating change would be integrated at the school site and district or state level.

In order to help key personnel act on their autonomy and use the new resources, the proposal balances incentives for change with substantive consequences for failing to do so. The incentives are described as "a sufficiently attractive set of services and policies . . . [so educational personnel] want to gain access to required new operating conditions, streamlined regulations, and resources" (p. 3). The consequences include being assigned a chronically under-performing status or facing a mandated change in school governance.

In essence, the report reasons that, to improve student achievement in chronically low-performing schools, the educational system itself must be transformed. To do so the authors propose creating new structures, integrating new participants into the change process, and refining the incentives and sanctions that motivate school, state, and district personnel.

IV. THE REPORT'S USE OF RESEARCH LITERATURE

The use of research literature in this proposal is a bit tricky. The report effectively sur-veys and summarizes much of the existing literature on school interventions, HPHP schools, successful urban school districts, and educational reform policy. In doing so, it attends to both promising and less-than-positive findings. To date, however, little research exists on state interventions in low-performing schools, the issue that is at the heart of this entire proposal.[3] So notwithstanding the quality of the report's literature review, state-directed interventions remain relatively understudied and the report necessarily relies on a limited research base.

In a similar vein, the report draws its school-based insights for change solely from high-performing schools. However, studies of failed reforms might have provided equally (or perhaps more) valuable insights. A critical exploration of the problems that have consistently prevented schools from enacting reform would provide a sense for how and whether the proposed reforms would be effective.

Moreover, the report says little about students in their role as active participants in reform.[4] Of the more than 200 pages in the report and its supplement, only 10 pages in the supplement are devoted to case studies of schools that include references to practices and policies students presumably embrace. Of the "12 Tough Questions" the report presents to assess the potential for a successful turnaround, no question mentions students as direct participants in reform. This oversight is hardly unique to this proposal—it is in fact common for school reform proposals to think of students in a passive and subordinate role—but it raises serious concerns about the reform's potential for success.[5] Since students are the intended beneficiaries of this change, the report might benefit from considering such questions as: How do students in HPHP schools view their schools and the education

they receive? When do chronically low-achieving students embrace reform? And ultimately, do the proposals put forth in *The Turnaround Challenge* seem likely to promote such engagement?

V. REVIEW OF THE REPORT'S METHODOLOGIES

The proposal draws on analyses of over 300 research studies, news articles, and varied resources on school intervention, related federal and state policymaking, effective schools, poverty impacts, and organizational turnaround. In addition, the authors had access to interviews with practitioners, researchers, leading policymakers, and reform experts as well as the directors of school intervention in six urban districts and with 50 school management and support organizations. In sum, the authors drew on a rich variety of data sources.

VI. REVIEW OF THE VALIDITY OF THE FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

As noted in previous sections, there is a clear logic to the report's turnaround strategies, but its proposals are not fully supported by the literature; they could not be, simply because of the limited research on HPHP schools and successful state interventions. Moreover, if one acknowledges that students, teachers, and their classrooms are the ultimate focus of reform, there are many unpredictable phenomena and untested assumptions between conception and enactment of turnaround change. Consider the following four assumptions (the report includes other implicit assumptions, of course, but these are the ones that most jumped out at me):

- At a time of economic uncertainty, states will be willing to appropriate millions of dollars for low-achieving schools and students.

- States can create a well-funded new department to coordinate a turnaround initiative and have it work closely with schools for mutual benefit, rather than for self-preservation.

- Given appropriate market incentives, a "strong marketplace of local providers with experience and ability to serve as lead turnaround partners" (p. 5) will emerge from the educational community to help direct turnaround efforts.

- If the state appropriately balances incentives and sanctions, reforms initiated at the state level will work in concert to promote substantive change for students and teachers alike in low-income, low-achieving schools and classrooms.

Given the relative novelty and lack of a research base in the area of state interventions in low-performing schools, the turnaround strategy inevitably rests on such tenuous assumptions.

VII. USEFULNESS OF THE REPORT FOR GUIDANCE OF POLICY AND PRACTICE

Earlier, I framed this analysis by asking whether the turnaround reforms would address concerns about the inequitable distribution of resources, student indifference, and low teacher morale—realities I have found in many urban schools.

With regard to the distribution of resources, the report is unequivocal: turning around low-achieving schools will require increased financial support, with estimates ranging between $250,000 and $1,000,000 each year per school, and then some for additional services. The need for such funding and resources seems beyond dispute. Although the report does not address the matter of

gross disparities in the physical plant, it is premised on the basic reality of inadequate and inequitable resources. Low-income urban schools cannot overcome the multiple challenges they face without additional funding.

As for student indifference and teacher morale, the report takes a sensible approach but again demands a great deal from policy makers. To break the stranglehold of the status quo requires attacking the multiple and interrelated dimensions of the educational system, integrating top-down and bottom-up reform with lateral capacity building in a mutually supportive fashion.[6] *The Turnaround Challenge* attempts just that. At the state level, the proposal advocates creating a new office staffed by experienced school reformers charged with overseeing turnaround reforms, promoting policies aligned with such reform, and hiring staff to support schools in this work. At the school site, faculty and administrators would have autonomy to act and funds to spend. They would be encouraged to promote close student-adult relations and create a professional culture committed to collaboration, continuous improvement, and educating all students. As for lateral capacity building, the report offers a clustering strategy. By networking, a critical mass of schools and educators facing similar challenges could explore common concerns and interests. If all of this came to pass, these endeavors could disrupt the status quo and enrich the experience of teachers and other personnel at the school site. Moreover, even though the proposals might be criticized for remaining at a broad level of generalization, this seems appropriate given the report's commitment to local autonomy.

As for students, the previous discussion suggests that their experience *might* change. The report acknowledges that "reform only works if those most directly involved in it (teachers, school staff, school leaders, parents, and students) buy into it" (p. 67). It also endorses distributed school leadership. However, while there is little mention of students as active participants in reform, they will be—so why not acknowledge this fact and plan accordingly? Shouldn't the recipients of reform have some meaningful role, if only to let adults know how they feel about these endeavors? As presently designed, the student role in school turnarounds seems overlooked and underutilized.

Two additional concerns about this report merit brief mention. First, the proposed time frame seems overly optimistic. The report maintains that "significant achievement gains" should be registered in the first two years of reform (p. 5). That would be exceedingly difficult to accomplish in chronically low-performing schools.[7] Consider the following remarks by Brighton High School's headmaster, Toby Romer, upon hearing that, according to *The Turnaround Challenge*, his school had "revolutionized [its] teaching culture" (p. 35):

> I'm not sure there's been a revolution but the school has changed remarkably over the past 10-to-15 years, and our professional development and overall school culture look completely different than when I started teaching here in 1996. The change has been slow, and it's been a confluence of factors. For one, we've been able to make some good hires after people retire. There's also better preparation of BPS students in middle and elementary school. We've had consistent administrative leadership for some time and we've been able to hold high standards for faculty and staff. We have a partnership with BC that helps create a

strong learning environment for faculty and student teachers and supports a pipeline of potential new faculty as well. The state's provided increased funding, at least from 1996 to 2003. The professionalization of professional development has helped as well, in the sense of valuing faculty knowledge and input and not just having didactic or administrative presentations. I think this has encouraged good people to want to stay and take more ownership of what's happening at Brighton High. So I have new teachers from the late 90's who are still teaching 8-to-10 years later.[8]

Though Romer's view aligns with much of *The Turnaround Challenge*, especially in his attention to promoting change on multiple fronts, his time frame differs notably.

Another concern is that *The Turnaround Challenge* relies a bit too much on unproven negative sanctions. In summarizing some change strategies, for instance, the report notes that these reforms should be accompanied by "distinctly *un*appealing alternatives" (p. 4; emphasis in original) that might include school closures or state-driven restructuring. But state interventions have a very mixed record of effectiveness and few state departments of education can afford the

time or personnel to enact interventions effectively.[9] Further, unintended consequences arise when state policies discourage the educators who choose to work in low-income, low-achieving schools; policies that undermine morale can result in misgivings and resignation, with the most marketable of these educators choosing other workplaces. A threat may motivate a few administrators, but teachers and students are a whole other matter—and they certainly feel the stigma associated with state intervention.[10]

Ultimately, a strategy using too many sanctions may offer only an empty threat that could send schools, teachers, and students some very negative messages and undermine the overall goals of school turnarounds. Policy makers should indeed ensure that both incentives and disincentives are sensibly aligned, but an excess of threats can quickly become counter-productive. Along these lines, my colleague and I found morale to be quite low in "underperforming" schools in Massachusetts.[11] Current research has, in fact, repeatedly documented teachers' feelings of frustration and ambivalence around accountability regimes.[12] Many welcome oversight and accountability but bristle at perceived unevenness and unfairness in the system. I can easily imagine faculty (and students) in turnaround schools expressing similar concerns. To realize their ambitious goals, the report and its readers may want to keep this reaction in mind.

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