

**THE BEST MODELS AND STRATEGIES FOR A SUCCESSFUL TURNAROUND OF  
THE UNDERPERFORMING SCHOOLS**

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**Abstract:** For years, school principals, teachers and policy makers on the field of education have been trying to cope with the challenge presented by chronically inefficient schools. These schools are typically characterized by low achievements of their students, high levels of poverty, often dropping out of the school system, disciplinary problems, graduate's low life success, and so on. These schools constantly failing to prepare their students for higher levels of education. They threaten opportunities for high school, postgraduate education and professional success. The need to improve lower performance schools is essential and urgent. However, approaches to drastically improving poorly performing schools have so far led to mixed results, and the research base for effective turnaround is limited. Indeed, most evidence of school reform highlights the complex interaction of conditions and suggests that the process of slow and steady improvement can lead to growth that is more sustainable over time. The question of how to improve schools so that they become more effective and their pupils perform better is one of the most important issues that respond to the public education system in Bulgaria, Europe, the United States or elsewhere. Decades of efforts to improve schools with chronic low scores have given relatively limited success. Too often, the changes that are being undertaken are gradual or affect only a few aspects of the functioning of the school and as such are insufficient to meet the challenges faced by schools in chronic dysfunction for years. Recently, research and policy have focused on efforts to fundamentally change the culture and practices of low-performance schools to drastically improve performance in a short period of time. Although this concept is relatively new to education, it has considerable experience in other sectors – as business for instance. Research and experience show that no single solution is best when it comes to chronically inadequate conversion of schools into effective - no strategy is effective at all times, and in some cases closing schools may be the best option. At the same time, research and experience have begun to shed light on some of the conditions, models and strategies that increase the chances of success. This article focuses precisely on the process of transforming these lagging schools into those with higher scores and successful students in terms of studying the best models and strategies for a successful turnaround. It also make an overview of effective models and strategies, and outlines some political and practical implications. Attention is also drawn to the need and the study of effective strategies to support children who have previously been enrolled in low-efficiency schools and which help them reach higher standards.

**Keywords:** underperforming schools, turnaround, school effectiveness, models and strategies.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The schools that chronically do not perform satisfactory their main and most important role as educators present one of the biggest challenges in front of the educational system not only in Bulgaria but in Europe and worldwide. Environments that consistently fail to prepare students for higher levels of education result in threaten opportunities for high school graduation, postsecondary education, successful career, consequential poverty and low life satisfaction as a whole. Unfortunately, the changes undertaken are sporadic or address only a few aspects of the school's operation, and as such are insufficient to match the magnitude of challenges facing schools which are in years in chronic dysfunction. One of the explanations for this ineffectiveness is that the concept of school turnaround is relatively new to education. More recently, the focus on school turnaround has increased. There is a necessity for research on effective models and strategies for supporting the schools in the process of turnaround. This report focuses precisely on the process of transformation of those lagging schools into ones with higher performance and successful students – not only in terms of academic achievements, but in regard to well-developed social skills, high personal and professional goals and significant contribution to the society in the future. Based on the results and conclusions of a number of empirical researches the report provides an overview of best practices in this area. On that basis, different models and strategies that make this process possible and successful are representing. In conclusion we make an effort to summarize the lessons learned and transform them into practical policy implications for future actions for improvement the status of the underperforming schools.

### **MODELS FOR SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL TURNAROUND**

The existing researches offer empirical lessons about what methods are most effective when turning around low-performing schools. In the literature there are four well known and empirically tested models of school turnaround efforts: *the Turnaround Model, the Transformation Model, the Restart Model, and the Closure Model* [1]. All models have certain criteria required of participating schools; however, districts are given some freedom to choose which activities best fit the needs of the schools, the students, and the community [2]. The main characteristics of those models are as follows:

#### ***Turnaround Model:***

The Turnaround Model requires a school to replace the principal as well as 50 percent, or more, of the schools' teachers and staff. The school then recruits and hires new staff and installs a new governance structure. This model requires schools to provide subject-specific professional development and support as well as community-oriented services and supports. Schools' instructional programs must focus specifically on student needs, and schools must increase learning time for staff and students [3]. Turnaround schools are also required to build up to the achievement of Annual Yearly Progress within two to three years of program implementation. If a school fails to reach these goals, the changes and reforms implemented may increase in intensity, including direct intervention from the state. [2:2]

#### ***Transformation Model***

Similar to the Turnaround Model, the Transformation Model requires that schools replace the principal, establish support systems, and provide professional development opportunities. This model also requires participating schools to develop and establish a teacher and principal evaluation process that promotes transparency and accountability. Student data must also be taken into account to guide classroom management and inform instructional practices. The Transformation Model requires that schools institute comprehensive instructional reforms, increase learning time for teachers and students, and create community-oriented schools. Strategies and incentives, such as increased opportunities for promotion and career growth and greater flexibility in the work environment, are recommended [3].

#### ***Restart Model***

Schools implementing the Restart Model will close and reopen under a charter school operator, a charter management organization, or an education management organization. Local education agencies are responsible for vetting and hiring potential service providers through a rigorous review process which will be reviewed and evaluated by the state. Once hired, it is the local education agencies' responsibility to hold the providers accountable for complying with the model's requirements. This model allows a state or district to break the cycle of low achievement by making fundamental changes to the way a school operates. Once reopened, the Restart Model allows schools to make the same changes that occur with the Turnaround and the Transformation Models. The Restart Model is specifically intended to give operators freedom to implement their own reform plans and strategies [2:3].

#### ***Closure Model***

The Closure Model involves a local education agency closing a school and enrolling that school's students in other, higher performing schools in the district. The Closure Model takes place when a school's capacity for academic performance, teacher performance, facilities, school culture and other qualities are deemed so low that they preclude the possibility of dramatic improvement. It is then decided that the best strategy to improve academic outcomes is to transition students. When a school is closed, the local education agency may use School Improvement Grant funds to cover the necessary costs associated with closing the school such as community outreach, announcements, or meetings regarding the school closure. Funds may also be used to provide services to help parents and students transition to the new school and orientation activities [2:4].

#### ***Magnet school model***

Other way to perform school turnaround is so called "magnet school model". The most promising turnaround model is one that seeks to turn high-poverty schools into magnet schools that change not only the faculty but also the student and parent mix in the school. Failing schools can be shuttered, reinvented, and reopened with new themes and pedagogical approaches that attract new teachers and a mix of middle-class and low-income students. Some low-income students from the old school would be given the opportunity to fill the spots in more-affluent schools vacated by middle-income children who were transferring to the magnet school [9].

A number of studies over the past quarter-century have found that magnet schools have higher levels of achievement than do other schools, and produce faster achievement gains in most subjects. Several of these studies

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account for self-selection bias by examining gains in over-subscribed magnet schools and regular public schools, comparing lottery winners and losers, and continue to find advantages to attending magnet schools [4:7]. Moreover, the magnet school turnaround model - in which schools seek to improve the performance of low-income students by drawing into a high-poverty school a contingent of middle class students - is backed up by four decades of research finding that the socioeconomic composition of a school profoundly affects the achievement of any given student in the school. A growing number of studies have linked a school's socioeconomic status with student achievement, after controlling for the individual socioeconomic status of a student's family.

***Readiness model***

Efforts to turn around low-performing, high-poverty schools begin with the recognition that these schools, and the students they serve, face complex and interrelated challenges associated with poverty that make successful education of their students difficult [5]. Rather than ignoring these challenges – or accepting them as an excuse for school failure - effective turnaround strategies tackle them head-on. Research on high-performing, high-poverty schools has identified a set of practices and characteristics that differentiate them from other schools, and enable them to achieve success. In a highly influential 2007 report, “The Turnaround Challenge,” Mass Insight distilled these findings into a three-pronged “readiness model” [6]:

**First**, high-performing, high-poverty schools ensure students’ **readiness to learn**, by creating a school environment and culture characterized by safety, discipline, and engagement; identifying barriers to student learning and taking action to address them; and developing close relationships between students and adults. This often means that these schools reach beyond the traditional, limited notion of what a school does and is responsible for, and deploy teams of adults to comprehensively address the needs of the whole child in order to facilitate learning. [5:6]

**Second**, high-performing, high-poverty schools ensure educators’ **readiness to teach**, by creating a culture of shared responsibility for achievement among all teachers, other adults in the school, students, and parents; delivering personalized instruction through use of data, differentiated instruction, and additional time for students who need it; and establishing a professional teaching culture characterized by collaboration, use of data, and continuous improvement. Whereas teachers in many schools believe they have taught a lesson or concept if they present the material to their students, teachers in high-performing, high-poverty schools do not believe they have taught a concept until their students have mastered it. [5:7]

**Finally**, high-performing, high-poverty schools are characterized by a **readiness to act**, including authority over the key resources of people, time, program, and budget; ingenuity in identifying and leveraging new and external resources; and flexibility and agility in the face of turbulence in their students’ lives and communities. [5:9]

**STRATEGIES FOR A SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL TURNAROUND**

The school turnaround is possible in the presence of a concerted strategy that incorporates evidenced-based best practices [7:10]:

- **Aggressive action on the part of school districts:** The most compelling finding from this research review is that school turnaround is possible and that it occurs when districts take aggressive steps.
- **Resources and requirements:** Because aggressive turnaround efforts are by nature disruptive, they are often contentious within a community. Sometimes they engender political opposition. The institutions that require better outcomes for students in these schools can give local leaders the freedom to take aggressive action, while additional targeted resources help make the transition smoother. When districts and schools are given targeted funding—either from philanthropic organizations or the government—they are better positioned to achieve significant change.
- **Governance and staffing changes:** Schools that replaced ineffective leaders showed the greatest gains in student learning. There are no documented instances of school turnaround without an effective principal—leadership is second only to effective classroom instruction as the most important school-level factor affecting student achievement. Simply replacing the principal, however, is not enough to drive significant change. Principals need the skills and vision necessary to turn around low-performing schools.
- **Data-driven decision making:** Research supports the use of data-based decision making to improve student achievement.
- **Focus on school culture and non-academic supports for disadvantaged students:** While turnaround efforts are ultimately judged by improvements in academic proficiency and graduation rates, schools that most successfully turn around tend to focus their efforts more broadly. They work purposefully and deliberately to create collaborative, positive, and enriching school cultures with high expectations for all

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students. They create fortified environments to enhance the social, emotional, and behavioral development of all students, particularly of those who are growing up in poverty and facing challenging circumstances that affect every aspect of their development. Schools that successfully turn around offer wrap-around services to help support all the needs of their students and, where possible, their families and communities.

*The three C strategies*

In order to dramatically improve student achievement in low-performing schools, successful turnaround efforts must replicate these practices and characteristics. Doing so requires state and district policymakers to put in place what Mass Insight calls “the three C strategies” of turnaround [6:8]:

- **Genuinely change conditions** to give leaders in turnaround schools the authority to act. Many district and state policies and practices limit school-level leaders’ control over people, time, programming, and budgets for their schools - but effective turnaround leaders need the ability to make decisions about these resources and align them with student needs. Conditions for change must also create the right incentives for local and school-level leaders to take actions that are likely to boost student performance, both by protecting them from external pressures not aligned with student performance, and by creating pressure to boost student achievement. [5]
- **Build capacity for dramatic improvement.** Traditional capacity-building and school-improvement efforts emphasize new programs while leaving the same people in place. Not surprisingly, many of these efforts have delivered disappointing results. In contrast, effective turnaround strategies focus on getting the right people in the school - especially at the leadership level. Researchers have not found a single example of a successful turnaround school without an effective principal [8]. Policymakers must also recognize that turnaround leadership is a unique discipline requiring specific skills - not all effective principals will be good turnaround leaders - and they must invest in building a pipeline of leaders with turnaround expertise. But the task of transforming a school’s culture is too great to entrust to a lone individual - effective leaders need the support of a leadership team that can work with them to redefine culture, support effective instruction, and address barriers to learning. Similarly, given research evidence that the quality of a student’s teacher in the most important in-school factor influencing student learning, turnaround strategies also prioritize teacher effectiveness [9], [10], [11]. Leaders need the authority to recruit and select teachers who are not only highly effective, but also buy into the culture the leader is seeking to create; to allocate resources to support and develop their staff; and to dismiss teachers who are ineffective or do not fit the school’s culture. State and district policies and human resource systems must also support capacity for effective teaching and leadership. In addition to building staff capacity within turnaround schools, states and districts must build networks of strong external partners that can supplement schools’ capacity by providing a range of supports, including meeting students’ comprehensive and nonacademic needs, supporting effective instruction, developing human capital, and, in some cases, taking over operation of turnaround schools. [5]
- **Cluster turnaround schools and turnaround activities.** Because turning around low-performing schools is such complex work, leaders and staff in these schools need to be part of a broader network of schools facing similar challenges, allowing them to support and learn from one another. One strategy for doing this is by creating “Turnaround Zones,” composed of schools undergoing turnaround that receive added support and flexibility. A growing number of states and districts are creating such Turnaround Zones. [5]

In contrast with past efforts to improve low-performing schools, which tended to focus on incremental changes or to address only one or two factors within a school, this approach to school turnaround focuses on driving fundamental change in the culture, capacity, and conditions in which a school operates. Given the many challenges facing the lowest-performing schools, nothing short of fundamental change will produce the necessary improvement for students.

Many of the changes needed to transform chronically low-performing schools - such as replacing staff or reallocating resources - can be politically controversial or threaten established interests. Successful turnaround requires political support from policymakers and other leaders committed to creating the conditions and changing the rules to enable bold change. Strong third-party advocates can help buttress political will by building a base of support for turnaround, particularly among parents in affected communities; by tracking the progress of turnaround efforts; and by holding public officials accountable for results. Clear and effective communication to parents and communities about the need for turnaround and about the process are also imperative. In addition, policymakers must allocate sufficient resources for turnaround: Mass Insight estimates that successful turnaround of a low-

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performing school requires a commitment of \$250,000 to \$1 million a year (depending on school size and other factors) over at least three years. [6].

### CONCLUSION – POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

Research and experience indicate that no single proven solution is best when it comes to turning around chronically underperforming schools – no strategy is effective all the time, and in some cases school closure may be the best option. At the same time, research and experience have begun to shed light on some of the conditions and strategies that maximize the chances of success. And a handful of operators are beginning to develop a track record of success in turning around low-performing schools. This paper try to review the most common models and best practices of past efforts to turn around chronically low-performing schools in order to outline some implications for policy and practice. Efforts to turn around low-performing schools must begin with the recognition that these schools, and the students they serve, face complex and interrelated challenges associated with poverty that make successful education of their students difficult [12].

#### How to build upon and continue success [13]:

1. High-poverty schools need permanent, sustained and additional funding of resources to help students succeed, including extended student learning time, lower class sizes and wraparound services.
2. The elements of the School Improvement Grant that maximized student success are:
  - a. Extended, structured student learning time.
  - b. Reducing the adult-to-student ratio to provide academic intervention for struggling students.
  - c. Providing wraparound student and family services to deal with the social, emotional and behavioral issues of students and their families.
  - d. Providing sufficient time for school staff to participate in professional learning communities to analyze data, adjust instruction, make decisions and learn together with follow-up reflection, coaching and mentoring.
3. Every effort should be made to ensure that a long-term, high-quality principal is assigned to high-poverty schools to provide consistency. Leadership turnover caused some schools to lose traction with successful programs.
4. Professional development and training for staff providing wraparound services should be developed because these non-academic needs proved so important to achieving student success.
5. State data collection about schools should incorporate relevant information about the community surrounding the schools. Understanding more about factors outside the school that can affect student learning was useful in tailoring programs for individual schools.
6. Avoid overuse of consultants or consultants at the expense of teacher support in the classroom or professional learning community time for teachers to collaborate.
7. Educators in the school should be given the time and responsibility to assess and determine appropriate curriculum and materials. In some cases, schools were overwhelmed by vendors promising results, while the educators had little opportunity to make a thoughtful decision about what would work with their students.
8. Fund basic education for all high-poverty students. Don't use competitive grants. Competitive grants exclude some students, and many schools, particularly in smaller districts, do not have the expertise or staffing to complete comprehensive grant applications.
9. State and district attention and funding should be used to align the curriculum and behavioral expectations of feeder schools within a district. Struggling students need consistency, and educators need the time to work across schools and grade levels to align practices, implement and adjust.
10. Funded, quality, aligned, on-site preschool programs for high-poverty students are essential, allowing a consistent transition for students.
11. The on-time and extended graduation rates should be given equal credit in high-poverty, high school accountability calculations. Many high-poverty students need additional time to complete credits and graduation requirements and currently schools are penalized for not graduating students on time.

While there is no perfect solution for improving the performance of chronically low-achieving schools, existing evidence does point to some clear policies - as well as steps policymakers can take to increase the likelihood of success [5].

- There is a need for greater urgency in turning around low-performing schools. Policymakers must not wait too long to take action, nor should they wait too long for turnaround efforts to produce results. Turning around low-performing schools requires bold action, not just incremental change. Federal and state policies



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must force districts and authorizers to take action to drive dramatic change in chronically low-performing schools, or to close those schools. Left to themselves, most districts and schools will not take sufficiently aggressive steps to drive real improvement. External and advocacy groups can play a valuable role in creating and sustaining political will for change.

- State and district policies must create the conditions that enable turnaround efforts to succeed, by providing sufficient resources and giving school-level leaders' autonomy over people, budget, time, and program.
- States and districts must build capacity to support turnaround, by developing a pipeline of turnaround leaders, and identifying and forging relationships with external partners to support turnaround efforts.
- Turnaround efforts must be accompanied by support for individual children who have been ill-served by underperforming schools, including high-quality tutoring, comprehensive services that address other barriers to learning, and support in transitioning to better-performing public schools.
- Sustaining urgency for turnaround and changing policies and practices to enable success requires political will. State and local advocacy and civic groups can help to build and sustain political will by building public support for turnaround, informing parents and the public, tracking and publicly reporting on performance, and holding public officials accountable.

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