
Intervention in California's Underperforming Schools

Written testimony prepared for the Little Hoover Commission's public hearing on Educational Governance and Accountability by Mass Insight Education & Research Institute

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Introduction

On behalf of Mass Insight Education & Research Institute, we are honored to submit written testimony to the Little Hoover Commission's public hearing on educational governance and accountability.

The following testimony focuses primarily on the challenge of addressing California's most severely and chronically underperforming schools. It is also important to note that targeted intervention for chronically underperforming schools is only one element of a comprehensive school intervention and improvement continuum. Schools that are only missing AYP in one subgroup or by one performance indicator may not need dramatic intervention, but may in fact meet their goals following "light-touch" intervention strategies. The type of school that requires school turnaround misses AYP targets in aggregate school performance, by significant margins and over several consecutive years. These schools have failure rates of 50% or more, and likely have high dropout rates, along with low graduation and college attendance rates. The national research clearly indicates that schools in such straits require more than marginal interventions of the kind that has typified most state- (and district-) driven strategies. ***These schools require turnaround -- a dramatic and comprehensive intervention that produces significant gains in student achievement within two academic years, and that readies the school for the lengthier process of becoming a high-performing organization.***

The California Context

The California Department of Education oversees almost 10,000 public schools. According to a recent study by the General Accountability Office, 1,182 California schools were classified under Corrective Action, Planning for Restructuring, or Implementing Restructuring during the 2006-07 school year.¹ While this total includes schools not meeting AYP for various reasons (i.e., one or more subgroups, or in the aggregate), its scale masks a failing-school challenge that dwarfs that faced by virtually all other states. As AYP targets continue to rise, more schools will enter such categories. Current intervention strategies will help a few of these schools improve enough to exit NCLB's in-need-of-improvement status – but will leave most (and particularly those in the worst-performing categories) fairly untouched.

California has paid significant attention to its lowest performing schools over the last decade – more so than most other states. California was one of the few states that implemented a program to intervene in and assist its lowest performing schools prior to the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act. As far back as 1999, California implemented the Immediate Intervention/Under-performing Schools Program (II/USP). The II/USP provided both improvement planning and implementation funds to the state's lowest performing schools. II/USP provided increased financial

¹ GAO-07-1035. September 2007. *Education Should Clarify Guidance and Address Potential Compliance Issues for Schools in Corrective Action and Restructuring*. U.S. Government Accountability Office.

resources to each school in the program, additional funding for implementation (which included the ability to hire external partners), increased state monitoring, increased state involvement if targets were not met, and the program established a short timeframe in which to demonstrate adequate improvement (2 years), with the ability to extend assistance if needed.

II/USP was abandoned after the passage of No Child Left Behind. A program with similar funding elements, the High Priority School Grant Program (HPSGP), was subsequently implemented. This program was marked by a heightened focus on increased funding for the state's lowest performing schools and an increased role for the school district (and a decreased role for the state) in the reform of the lowest performing schools.

Despite the best of intentions, the effectiveness of II/USP and HPSGP has been questioned by research commissioned by the California Department of Education. With hundreds of schools now entering their sixth, seventh, and eighth years in restructuring,² it is readily apparent that current intervention practices are not working in the vast majority of the schools identified as requiring assistance.

Since the passage of No Child Left Behind, California has reduced the intensity of its focus on targeted interventions in the lowest performing schools in favor of the less intense baseline intervention approach mandated by NCLB. This "scaling back" of state programs in favor of the federal approach has been observed in many of the states that took active intervention approaches prior to NCLB. Those proactive states have all been forced to confront the new requirements and increasing scale concerns caused by the system of accountability mandated by the No Child Left Behind, and have reacted by watering down the intensity of their interventions.

While resources and scale are legitimate concerns in a state as large as California, the more incremental strategies that have resulted from these state policy changes will not produce the desired results. The state must seek ways, now, to catalyze more fundamental change in its poorest-performing schools or they will continue to send thousands upon thousands of severely ill-prepared, under-skilled students into the world, with all of the social costs that entails.

Recommendations

Drawing from recommendations in *The Turnaround Challenge* (see Appendix D), we suggest the following five steps for California to improve school intervention strategies:

1. **Create protected space for turnaround schools and an attractive choice for fundamental change through school turnaround zones and special collective bargaining agreements.** Reform efforts fail for many reasons, but chief among

² Scott, Caitlin. February 2007. *Beyond the Mountains: An Early Look at Restructuring Results in California*. Center for Education Policy. Washington, DC.

them are operating conditions that make it difficult for even the most dedicated educators to bring about significant change. Massachusetts, Florida, and Arizona are all experimenting with some form of operating conditions change in “zones” of turnaround schools, and districts such as Chicago, Miami-Dade, New York, and Philadelphia are experimenting as well, with agreement from their unions. This need not be a contentious enterprise; indeed, in order for it to succeed it must involve collaboration from all parties, which is why chronically underperforming schools (where there is literally no argument about the need for fundamental change) represent a singular opportunity. It *is* about providing districts, partners, principals, and school leadership teams the flexibilities that any reasonable person would say are important for turnaround leaders in any context to have – e.g., the ability to shape the staff that works in a school, and to align personnel, budgets and schedules according to the turnaround plan. The point is to re-engineer these zones so that they become “clubs” that schools actively want to join, in order to gain access to the conditions changes and resources available to them. Massachusetts is experimenting with ways to motivate failing schools to opt into dramatic-change strategies – its Commonwealth Pilot model – as a way of heading off more intrusive state involvement. (See Appendices A & B for examples of the conditions changes schools should have if their leaders are being asked to undertake genuine school turnaround.)

2. **Focus resources on cohorts to produce success.** As leaders in California already know, it is unrealistic (and probably undesirable) to implement full-scale turnaround work in the hundreds of schools on various improvement watch-lists. California is better off re-focusing its efforts on smaller clusters of targeted schools that can best utilize limited resources and a lack of capacity across the educational system, while also building exemplars of turnaround success. California’s current system of regional centers (RSDSS) could be used to oversee the turnaround clusters, while working with local districts and the CDE. States have powerful incentives to spread their resources thinly across as many constituents as possible. California would do better to focus its resources so that they actually have some effect.
3. **Build *internal* capacity in schools and districts for turnaround.** Most districts, all except the largest ones, do not have the capacity or the outside support required to mount extensive skill-building and recruitment efforts themselves for their turnaround schools. There is an important state role to play here, in recruiting mission-directed educators to a cutting-edge turnaround cohort, lining up private support for the state’s turnaround initiative, and establishing solid training programs for turnaround leadership teams.

California’s initial development of intervention teams could be useful in assisting schools. But the traditional coaching model (employed by a good number of states) of one-day-per-week school leader mentoring is not sufficient. Our research for *The Turnaround Challenge* showed scant signs of significant,

enduring impact nationally from this sort of intervention. We are convinced that the answer lies in a) investing in recruiting and training to build capacity in key positions (particularly school principals and lead teachers) that is specifically focused on implementing turnaround, which in every other sector is a distinct discipline; b) supporting the development of a highly-skilled resource base of embedded turnaround partner organizations (see #4, below); and c) changing operating conditions to allow educators and turnaround partners to do their best work.

4. **Build external capacity to help lead the process of school turnaround.** Schools in NCLB's most extreme classifications have show that they cannot turn themselves around. Most state education agencies understand that providing direct services to schools is not what they do best. It is vital that turnaround schools be supported by high-capacity partner organizations. The structure of outside support must also change to address the fragmentation and disconnectedness that characterizes the ways schools currently work with external providers. The state can engineer this change by stipulating that districts and schools work with partners to produce turnaround plans that meet rigorous state criteria; issuing RFPs that help consolidate California's numerous education consultants into more comprehensive, coherently organized groups that can act as lead turnaround partners (integrating the work of all sub-providers); and working directly with those groups to ensure that they and their school partners are pursuing strategies that fulfill the state's turnaround criteria. Like every state, the provider resource base in California is woefully under-prepared to take on this work. But it represents the clearest and speediest opportunity for rapid scaling-up. The state should work with its numerous foundations and corporate grantmakers to help spur the development of this resource. A solid RFP process, supported by policies providing for conditions change and by adequate state funding, will do the rest.

5. **Create an entrepreneurial agency at the state level and provide it with the leverage and resources required to lead the turnaround effort.** California is in a class by itself in terms of the scale of its turnaround challenge. That challenge merits leadership at the highest level: a deputy superintendent position at the CDE to oversee the turnaround process, or, better, a CEO to lead a quasi-independent agency charged with managing the turnaround initiative. The state's management of turnaround requires exactly the same kind of operating flexibility that school managers need at the ground level – to establish the conditions changes and turnaround design criteria, foster district/union collaboration, support the development of lead turnaround partners, assist with the organization of turnaround schools into clusters, facilitate the RFP/MOU process for turnaround partnerships, and evaluate the progress of each partnership. That kind of entrepreneurial approach likely requires a different kind of agency than simply a new office within the Department of Education.

California had the right idea in 1999 with II/USP, but was unable to maintain that program due to increasing scale, insufficient resources, and insufficient political will. We strongly recommend that the state revisit a high-intensity and targeted strategy to meet the needs of these chronically underperforming schools. In the absence of a coordinated, proactive state initiative, the future of those schools and of the students they serve is a dim one. California has an opportunity to become a national model, as it has done in so many other respects. The road to fulfilling that opportunity begins with the honesty of acknowledging the inadequacy of current intervention efforts, and the courage to use the urgency of these failing schools to generate real change.

Appendix A

“Can Turnaround Be Successful at Our School?”

A Ten-Point Self-Audit (and Manifesto) for Principals

This set of questions can serve as a short set of indicators for use by policymakers and turnaround advocates: Are the operating conditions and supports in place that would allow principals and leadership teams to successfully turn around a failing school? It could (and should) also be used by principals being asked to undertake school turnaround: Do I have what I need – and what any turnaround manager would need – to be successful?

1. Have you and key members of your staff had a leadership role in shaping your school turnaround plan? Has the planning team benefited significantly from knowledgeable outside support? Has the process moved swiftly in order to meet an external deadline, and has it been driven in part by clear guidelines and criteria set by the state?
2. Is your work supported by a lead turnaround partner that, in your judgment, will help put your school in the best possible position to meet your student achievement goals? Does your district or state provide you with a choice of support services tailored to high-poverty settings and to your school’s priorities?
3. Do you as principal and turnaround leader have the authority to shape your school staff to so that you are best positioned to implement the plan? In the following HR areas, can you use these practices drawn from research in high-performance, high-poverty schools?
 - a. Recruiting: hiring and placement; freedom from seniority rules, bumping and force-placing; ability to adjust positions to suit student needs
 - b. Removal: discretion to excess teachers who are not performing or are unwilling to participate fully in the turnaround plan for the school
 - c. Compensation: ability to differentiate compensation, providing bonus incentives to attract high quality teachers and/or performance- or responsibility-related pay
4. Do you, your partner, and your leadership team have the authority (and resources) to adjust your school’s schedule to suit the needs of your students and instructional approach?
5. Do you and your turnaround leadership team have discretion over budget allocation to support your mission? Is your turnaround plan sufficiently supported by extra funding and outside resources? Are those resources sufficient to provide for substantial planning, collaboration, and training time for staff?

6. Do you have the authority to adjust curriculum and programming to suit your school's priorities and support the turnaround plan, within a larger framework of program-related decisions made by your district or cluster/network? Are you free to make choices and respond to crises with a minimum of compliance-driven oversight?
7. Do you have the authority to shape the way your school works by creating teacher leadership positions and differentiating responsibilities? Will you and your leadership team be provided, as part of the turnaround plan, with professional development to increase your expertise in turnaround management?
8. Do you currently have the technology, systems, and analysis expertise necessary to implement the frequent formative assessment and feedback that is central to increasing performance in high-risk populations?
9. Will you be provided, as part of your turnaround status, with the support of a network of schools involved in similar turnaround initiatives, along with higher-performing schools that can serve as colleagues and models?
10. Do you feel that you have been provided with unambiguous expectations and clear measures of accountability to help you bring urgency to the work of turning around student performance at your school?

Appendix B

Massachusetts' Ten Essential Conditions

These ten requirements form the basis of Massachusetts' new turnaround policy, passed in October 2006. Schools entering "Priority" status in the state (following four years of failure to make AYP) must submit restructuring plans that incorporate these ten elements. With sufficient state allocation for the initiative in FY2008 in doubt, the state has some hesitation about fully implementing the plan. However, four schools that have come before the board of education for chronic underperformance since the policy was passed were required to produce turnaround plans that fulfilled all of these criteria. There is evidence from the field, also, that change-oriented superintendents are using the so-called "ten commandments" as levers to reshape budgets more strategically and in negotiations with their local union leaders.

1. The school's principal has authority to select and assign staff to positions in the school without regard to seniority;
2. The school's principal has control over financial resources necessary to successfully implement the school improvement plan;
3. The school is implementing curricula that are aligned to state frameworks in core academic subjects;
4. The school implements systematically a program of interim assessments (4-6 times per year) in English language arts and mathematics that are aligned to school curriculum and state frameworks;
5. The school has a system to provide detailed tracking and analysis of assessment results and uses those results to inform curriculum, instruction and individual interventions;
6. The school schedule for student learning provides adequate time on a daily and weekly basis for the delivery of instruction and provision of individualized support as needed in English language arts and math, which for students not yet proficient is presumed to be at least 90 minutes per day in each subject;
7. The school provides daily after-school tutoring and homework help for students who need supplemental instruction and focused work on skill development;
8. The school has a least two full-time subject-area coaches, one each for English language arts/reading and for mathematics, who are responsible to provide faculty at the school with consistent classroom observation and feedback on the quality and effectiveness of curriculum delivery, instructional practice, and data use;

9. School administrators periodically evaluate faculty, including direct evaluation of applicable content knowledge and annual evaluation of overall performance tied in part to solid growth in student learning and commitment to the school's culture, educational model, and improvement strategy;
10. The weekly and annual work schedule for teachers provides adequate time for regular, frequent, department and/or grade-level faculty meetings to discuss individual student progress, curriculum issues, instructional practice, and school-wide improvement efforts. As a general rule no less than one hour per week shall be dedicated to leadership-directed, collaborative work, and no fewer than 5 days per year, or hours equivalent thereto, when teachers are not responsible for supervising or teaching students, shall be dedicated to professional development and planning activities directed by school leaders.

Source: Massachusetts Department of Education

Appendix C

Biographies

Andrew Calkins, Senior Vice President

Andrew Calkins co-authored *The Turnaround Challenge: Why America's Best Opportunity to Dramatically Improve Student Achievement Lies in Our Worst-Performing Schools* (2007), Mass Insight's pioneering national study of school turnaround. The Gates Foundation-funded report, the result of two years of research, is part of a much larger initiative by Mass Insight to help states, districts, partner organizations, and foundations redesign school intervention strategies in chronically underperforming schools – and to use those strategies as models for broader reform, particularly in the nation's urban school districts. Mr. Calkins leads Mass Insight's involvement in school turnaround design with William Guenther, the organization's president and founder.

Mr. Calkins is a graduate of Harvard College and has worked in education, educational publishing and related fields for more than 25 years. He lives in South Hamilton, MA, with his wife and three daughters, and served for six years as an elected member of the Hamilton-Wenham Regional School Committee. He is the recipient of several awards for excellence in educational publishing, including for work produced at Scholastic Inc., where he served as Editor of *Electronic Learning* magazine, and at the non-profit group Recruiting New Teachers, Inc., where he served as executive director and co-authored *The Careers in Teaching Handbook*.

Julie Corbett, Program Associate

Julie Corbett manages the rollout and distribution of *The Turnaround Challenge*, assists in strategic planning for the next phase of research and development, and focuses on the state and district policy implications and changes necessary for school turnaround. Corbett most recently worked as a Research Assistant with The Rodel Foundation of Delaware, with a focus on the Vision 2015 state reform. She was also the lead staff at the Delaware Mentoring Council in the creation and signing of Governor Ruth Ann Minner's Executive Order #75.

Corbett has presented research at research conferences, including the Caribbean Studies Association Conference and the Hawaii International Conference on Education. She has been a mentor through Big Brothers Big Sisters with the same child for three years, and was a board member for a shelter for the animal victims of domestic violence in Delaware. In her free time, she is an Event Leader with the Young Alumni Volunteer Association in Boston.

She has an M.P.A from the University of Delaware where she specialized in state and local government and education policy. She earned her B.A. from Denison University. She has traveled extensively and lived abroad in Belgium, Cuba, the Netherlands, and Nicaragua.

Appendix D

Mass Insight Education & Research Institute

Mass Insight conducts national and statewide research, advocates for informed policymaking, and provides extensive school-improvement services in pursuit of two primary education reform goals: excellence in math and science achievement and the successful turnaround of public schools that consistently fail more than half of the students they serve. MERI also manages the Building Blocks Initiative for Standards-Based Reform, an effort to identify effective organizational improvement practices in education and build systems to scale them up in other schools and school districts.

Meeting the Turnaround Challenge

Implementation Strategies and Tools for States, Districts, Schools, and Partners

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation awarded the Mass Insight Education & Research Institute a \$575,000 grant late in 2005 to produce a framework for states and districts seeking a flexible, systemic approach for swift, significant improvement in schools (particularly high schools) deemed chronically under-performing. The resulting report, titled *The Turnaround Challenge*, is being released and distributed nationally in November-December 2007.

A \$750,000 follow-up grant from the Gates Foundation is supporting a Mass Insight-led effort to inform national and state leader discussions and actions around the issue of school turnaround, and to carry out a research and development process, in conjunction with national collaborators, that will help states, districts, and others implement the report's turnaround framework at three levels:

- **State and District Strategies for Turnaround at Scale:** Developing work-plans and templates for the strategic approaches, organizational structures, and policy language states and districts need to undertake effective turnaround in the bottom five percent of under-performing schools – and to use failing-school turnaround as the entry point for fundamental change across a broader range of schools.
- **School Cluster/Partner Network:** Defining a new model for integrated school network partnerships – school clusters that amount to “mini-districts” supported by lead external partners – and building a new generation of lead turnaround partners as key implementers.
- **School:** Producing detailed strategy choices, work-plans, and practical tools for school leaders and their partners in implementing turnaround.

This research-and-development effort will also lay initial groundwork for three potential national initiatives to build out these strategies:

- **Pilot Cohort of Turnaround States and Districts:** Working closely with three to five states and as many large urban districts (along with other partners) to implement a full range of turnaround strategies, adapted for each site, emerging from this work.
- **Turnaround Partner Capacity-Building:** Creating intermediary organizations or other national resources that would provide investment and technical assistance to build a viable marketplace of lead turnaround partners. (Mass Insight does not intend to serve a lead turnaround role, but to act as a catalyst for the development of this resource base.)
- **National Center:** Develop a national center to conduct related research, advocate for comprehensive turnaround, produce additional tools and templates, and continue the work of defining and refining school turnaround as discipline.

All of the elements of this follow-up initiative will involve national collaborators, including individuals and organizations with particular expertise in communications (KSA-Plus), turnaround (practitioners and external providers), state policy (Holland & Knight), and strategic research (The Parthenon Group). The initiative builds on and directly supports related work that Mass Insight has performed for the Washington and Illinois state boards of education. The findings and recommendations expressed in all of this work represent Mass Insight's, alone.

***The Turnaround Challenge*³ National Research Highlights**

- Two-year national study of high-performing high-poverty schools and targeted intervention strategies
- 7 Project and Editorial Consultants, including: Bryan Hassel, Public Impact, Inc.; Irving Hamer, Millennium Group; and Adam Kernan-Schloss, KSA-Plus.
- National Project Partner: Achieve Inc.
- 29 National Project Advisors and focus group participants, including: Richard Elmore, Harvard University; Tim Knowles, University of Chicago; Kati Haycock, Education Trust; Andrew Rotherham, Education Sector; Ron Peiffer, Maryland Department of Education, and Julie Bell, National Conference of State Legislatures.
- 10 Massachusetts project advisors, including teachers, consultants, and administrators from individual schools to the Department of Education.

Methodology

- **Literature analysis** of more than 300 research reports, news articles, and other resources on school intervention, related federal and state policymaking, effective schools, poverty impacts, change management, and organizational turnaround.

³ The report and related materials are available at www.massinsight.org.

- **Individual and group interviews** with practitioners, researchers, leading policymakers, and reform experts in more than a dozen states.
- **Extensive interviews** with directors of school intervention in six major urban districts and with 50 school management and/or support organizations, through a related research project supported by the NewSchools Venture Fund.
- **Review of the report's major findings and recommendations** by more than two dozen national reform leaders and project partners.