School Turnaround as National Policy in the United States: Considerations from Three Studies Conducted in the Midwest

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Abstract: *School turnaround policy has become prominent in American education discourse. Some federal initiatives specifically target the lowest achieving five percent of schools in the nation, with the goal of bringing schools out of improvement status rapidly. This paper considers and extends the work of three recent studies of school turnaround. Collectively, the studies demonstrate how a strong federal initiative can impact public education on multiple levels, including the state, district, school, and individual levels. School turnaround demonstrates the power of federal initiatives in the United States to impact the public school system at all levels. State departments of education have responded in ways to obtain federal funding. Districts and schools generally with the least capacity to enact change have been challenged with an opportunity to win substantial dollars, but many elected not to compete. Increases in student achievement through such reform appear to be possible, but the human and social costs have yet to be adequately considered.*

Keywords: *turnaround, school reform, low-performing, school improvement, policy*

Introduction

The topic of "turning around" chronically low-performing schools has become prominent in American education discourse. The U.S. Department of Education (2009), independent researchers (e.g., Meyers and Murphy, 2008; Duke, 2012), and practitioners (e.g., Wolk, 1998) have called for drastic improvement in the academic performance of the lowest-performing schools. A key part of the call for school turnaround has emphasized a need for identifying schools that chronically underperform, most typically on state assessments. Such processes of identification are under way, but no consistent method for identifying schools in need of turnaround has been established, although standardized assessments could make this possibility a reality (Murphy & Meyers, 2008).

Herman et al. (2008) draw on several case studies of failing schools that have successfully turned around. The authors acknowledge that their recommendations are based on weak evidence. The evidence is weak for a number of reasons—the primary reason being a lack of experimental or quasi-experimental research. Their review also highlights another substantial limitation: The case studies referenced provide readers with no procedures for identifying chronically low-performing schools or measures for determining successful turnaround. In other words, there is no consistent measure to determine when schools have turned around or even when schools are in need of turnaround.

Despite unsettled statistical analyses for school turnaround identification and the limitations of current research on school turnaround in general, a national emphasis on implementing recently developed federal models of turnaround has emerged as a central component of drastically improving school performance. Competitions at the state and local levels for federal funding in the form of School Improvement Grants (SIGs) are relatively recent developments, and although clear processes around eligibility and funding have been designed and implemented, little has been reported regarding performance indicators of schools that are eligible for SIG funds, schools that are part of district applications for SIG funds, schools that are awarded SIG funds, or schools that competed for but did not receive SIG funds.

This paper[1] draws on three recently completed or forthcoming publications that are tied directly to the growing phenomenon of school turnaround and in which the author has been a contributor.

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After setting the stage by reviewing information and literature relevant to providing a definition or explanation of school turnaround and School Improvement Grants, the paper provides an overview of a study of Chicago public schools that underwent turnaround-like school reforms in the previous 15 years. It should be noted that Chicago turnaround reform models are the basis for the Obama administration's current federal policies. Then, the paper shifts to demonstrate how an independent organization in conjunction with a state education agency developed a statistical model to identify turnaround schools (and explain how that model was nullified soon after when SIG competition rules were established). Next, the paper highlights performance indicators of those schools competing for SIG funding in seven Midwestern states. The paper ends with a considerations section that draws on the three studies to point out some of the intersections between national, state, and local levels with regards to the current movement to turn struggling schools around.

Setting the Stage

The emergence of school turnaround, at least in concept, should not be surprising given the direction of American public education over the last twenty years. A movement across states in the 1990s to develop accountability systems evolved into No Child Left Behind (NCLB), a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. NCLB supports standards-based reform, emphasizing measurable goals for schools with substantial consequences for their inability to meet federal expectations, including eventually demonstrating proficiency for all students. Despite some successful countries' (for example, Finland) movement away from top-down policies of standardization, accountability, and competition, little consideration of international perspectives appeared to be given during the initial surge for federal American standards and accountability. The consequences attached to consecutive years of failure in meeting targeted levels of achievement were severe enough (including the loss of students and resources to eventual state takeover) to begin labelling schools as low-performing or even failing, while warranting an expectation that schools unable to meet standards would make every effort to change behaviour. After nearly a decade of federal standards, those schools that were unable to demonstrate any meaningful improvement were obvious. Years of state test data – the primary basis of labelling schools as low-performing in the United States – confirmed their position as persistently low performing. And given the NCLB structure with the expectation of incremental but rapid growth, the worst schools seemed entrenched. For example, Balfanz and Legters (2004) point out that a relatively small percent of schools drive the dropout crisis and achievement gap.

What became increasingly clear is that intractably low-performing schools could not be motivated by rewards or consequences alone into becoming good schools. The problems inherent in those schools and their surrounding communities required a more drastic but focused initiative to improve student achievement, and based on prior failings, that initiative would necessarily impose fast and substantial change in outcomes. The idea of turning around a low-achieving school quickly began to crystalize, but the way to accomplish the process quickly bifurcated. The first strategy focused on the rapid improvement of student achievement through an infusion of research-based practices, with the distinction on past efforts such as whole school reform being twofold: Put all reasonable strategies in place simultaneously and expect near-immediate results. The second strategy, however, was to operationalize a top-down practice that demonstrated some initial success in Chicago by disrupting the school with substantial administrative and faculty turnover. Both continue to be used and, to varying degrees, considered as viable ways to initiate school success. This paper demonstrates how the federal conceptualization of school turnaround has become the more politically feasible one for state departments.

Dual Conceptualizations of the Term School Turnaround

School Turnaround Conceptualization #1: Rapid Improvement in Student Achievement

Turnaround in education is a relatively new concept (Murphy and Meyers, 2008), but much of the initial scholarship on the topic has focused on the idea of rapidly improving student achievement

in schools that have been persistently low-performing (Herman et al, 2008; Murphy and Meyers, 2008). A U.S. Department of Education report published in 2001 (p. 6) suggested that little is known regarding the "process of transforming low-performing schools". According to Brady (2003), school turnaround centres on the transformation of struggling schools into successful ones. Hassel and Steiner (2003, p.2) also suggest that the idea of rapid improvement in underachieving schools rests on "the heroic assumption that the fundamentals of a school's culture and practice can be changed via external pressure, professional development or new leadership". More specifically, Kowal and Hassel (2005, p.5) state that "a successful turnaround produces a dramatic increase in student achievement in a limited amount of time". This two-pronged expectation – dramatic increases in student performances in a short timeframe – with regards to school turnaround has been increasingly emphasized by researchers (Simmons, 2006; Meyers and Murphy, 2008) and external providers (see Calkins et al., 2007). Indeed, the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) practice guide *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools* (Herman et al., 2008) seemed to, at least in part, institutionalize school turnaround as an effort to improve student achievement significantly and rapidly.

As an extension of the call for the identification of persistently low-performing schools and turnaround schools, some significant research to identify both sets of schools statistically has been undertaken recently. Hochbein (2011) has operationally defined and statistically identified schools that are persistently low-performing. Researchers involved in the evaluation of Comprehensive School Reform grantees conducted an exploratory study of changes in school-level achievement among the grantee schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2010b). They found that certain broad categories of reform that have been identified within the school reform literature (e.g., new leadership styles and instructional strategies) were indeed associated with positive outcomes. However, the authors stress that the details of these reforms varied widely across schools and that consequently, it is difficult to draw conclusions about the "one best system" for turning schools around.

Stuit (2010) investigated the success rates of charter and traditional public schools in eliminating chronically underperforming schools "via dramatic turnarounds in performance and/or shutdowns" (p. 10). Over 250 charter schools and 1,700 traditional public elementary and middle schools across ten states were identified as failing schools, or schools within the lowest ten percent of state proficiency rates. The researcher concludes that turnaround work is currently a "dismal state of affairs" (p. 10), as only one percent of schools across sectors demonstrated turnaround (defined as increasing school proficiency rates to at least the 50th percentile within a state) within a five-year period.

School Turnaround Conceptualization #2: Federal Models for Organizational Change

In 2009, the U.S. Secretary of Education and former superintendent of Chicago Public Schools announced that the U.S. Department of Education would be awarding $3.5 billion in Title I[2] School Improvement Grants (SIG) (Kutash et al., 2010). The new program was created with the intention of turning around the nation's lowest-achieving five percent of schools, a goal similar to that of conceptualization one of school turnaround discussed above. In addition to this goal, however, was the coinciding expectation that states, districts, and, most importantly, schools would make drastic organizational changes, as some had undergone previously in Chicago. For a district (and subsequently a low-performing school) to receive federal financial awards, the identified school was required to implement one of four federal models of turnaround, shifting the conceptualization of turnaround away from results and onto processes. In other words, national leaders recently amplified the attention given to school turnaround by defining and promoting four models that involve "dramatic change, including fundamental, comprehensive changes in leadership, staffing, and governance" (State Fiscal Stabilization Fund Program: Final Rule, 2009, p. 58462). A brief explanation of the four federal models of turnaround follows:

Turnaround Model. In the turnaround model, the local education agency (LEA) replaces the principal, reviews the current staff but rehires no more than 50 percent of it, creates a new governance structure, and offers operating flexibility to school leaders. The model stresses the use

of data to inform differentiated instruction, and provides job-embedded professional development to build staff capacity. It also calls for increased learning time and the use of a specific instructional model based on school need. The turnaround model implements social-emotional and community oriented services for students.

Restart Model. In the restart model, the LEA converts a school and/or closes and reopens a school under a charter school operator, charter management organization (CMO), or an education management organization (EMO). The partner is chosen through a rigorous review process that is also reviewed by the state. The new school must enrol former students that are interested in attending.

Closure Model. The closure model requires the LEA to close a failing school and enrol the students in another school within the LEA that is high achieving. Students reserve the right to attend charter or new schools for which student achievement data are not yet available.

Transformation Model. The transformation model replaces the principal and implements a new evaluation system for teachers that specifically uses some measure of student growth as a significant indicator of success. Teachers who are identified as increasing student outcomes are rewarded, while those who are not are removed. Much like the turnaround model, job embedded professional development is provided, a specific instructional model based on need is implemented, learning time is increased, and social-emotional and community-oriented services are provided. Transformation also calls for ongoing technical assistance to be provided.

School Improvement Grant (SIG)

Federal guidelines for school turnaround emphasize the use of one of the school turnaround models: turnaround, restart, closure, or transformation. The U.S. Department of Education recently expanded funding for the SIG initiative, with the stated goal of rapidly improving the nation's 5,000 lowest performing schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). SIG funding is provided for under section 1003(g) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and supplemented by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009. State education agencies (SEAs) are eligible to receive a SIG, with 95 percent of the funds to be allocated directly to LEAs. SIG funds specifically target the lowest achieving five percent of schools in the nation, with the goal of bringing schools out of improvement status and meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) (U.S. Department of Education, 2010a). Awarded schools were given US $500,000 to $2 million to enact a turnaround model. All 50 states and the District of Columbia applied for and received SIG grants.

Only LEAs that receive Title I funding designated for schools with high numbers or high percentages of students from low-income families and that have one or more Tier I, Tier II, or Tier III schools may apply to receive state SIG funds. School tier status is determined by U.S. Department of Education criteria. Table 1 highlights details of federal expectations for the tiers presented above. The LEA is the only entity that may apply for SIG funds from the SEA. The LEA's application to the state must list the Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III schools that theLEA commits to serve along with the appropriate intervention model slated to be used with each identified school.

For each of the schools the LEA commits to serving, a needs analysis must be conducted and the LEA must illustrate its capacity to implement the intervention. If the LEA chooses not to serve all eligible Tier I schools, it must explain its lack of capacity to do so. The LEA must describe its implementation of the specific intervention, its process regarding the recruitment and approval of external providers, its processes and policies that enable implementation, and its ability to sustain reform beyond the granting period. The LEA must include a timeline of intervention implementation and an outline of annual student achievement goals for Tier I and Tier II schools. Regarding Tier III schools, the LEA must identify the services it will supply and define goals of accountability for the schools. LEAs also must supply an extensive budget and must work with stakeholders of Tier I and Tier II schools regarding the SIG application and implementation of the intervention.

Table 1. Federal Definition of Tier Status

Tier	Schools That an SEA *Must* Identify in Each Tier	Newly Eligible (as of 2010) Schools That an SEA *May* Identify in Each Tier
Tier I	Any Title I school in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring that: Is among the lowest achieving 5 percent of Title I schools in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring, or the lowest achieving five Title I schools in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring in the state, whichever number of schools is greater.	An elementary school eligible for Title I, Part A funds AND that: Has not made AYP for two consecutive years OR Is in the state's lowest quintile of performance based on reading/language arts and mathematic proficiency rates AND Is not achieving greater than the highest achieving school identified by the SEA as a persistently lowest achieving school in Tier I.
Tier II	Any Title I school in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring that: Is a high school that has had a graduation rate that is less than 60 percent over a number of years.	A secondary school eligible for Title I, Part A funds AND that: Has not made AYP for two consecutive years OR Is in the state's lowest quintile of performance based on reading/language arts and mathematics proficiency rates AND Is not achieving greater than the highest achieving school identified by the SEA as a persistently lowest achieving school in Tier II OR is a high school that has had less than a 60 percent graduation rate for a number of years.
Tier III	Title I schools in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring that are not in Tier I.	A school eligible for Title I, Part A funds AND that: Has not made AYP for two consecutive years OR Is in the state's lowest quintile of performance based on reading/language arts and mathematics proficiency rates AND Does not meet the requirements to be a Tier I or Tier II school.

Three School Turnaround Studies

Study 1: Impacts of Chicago School Reform Efforts

Researchers from the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago and American Institutes for Research (AIR) recently examined reform initiatives in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) that target persistently low-achieving schools (de la Torre et al., 2013). The five reforms in the study occurred between 1997 and 2010. Each of the reforms required actions similar to the current federal model of turnaround, including the replacement of the school principal at all schools in addition to other locally determined organizational changes (e.g., significant staff replacement, longer school days, altered governance structure).[3] The report details the changes in student populations, teacher workforce, and student outcomes that occurred in 31 targeted Chicago schools. Descriptive analyses were conducted to highlight any post-reform shifts in teacher and student populations in these schools. A difference-in-differences approach was employed to compare pre-/post-reform trends in reading and mathematics achievement for elementary schools and absences and on-track-to-graduate rates for high schools. Student outcomes were compared with a group of matched schools that did not experience the intervention.

First, descriptive analyses comparing students enrolled in the school the fall before intervention to students enrolled in the fall right after intervention in the same grades were conducted. Seventy four percent (23 of 31) of schools enrolled fewer students after the reform, with five schools enrolling at least a quarter fewer students. With the exception of schools in the Closure and Restart model, the schools re-enrolled between 55 and 89 percent of students who could re-enrol, which

were similar to re-enrolment rates in the years prior to intervention. Although tracking students who exited turnaround schools were beyond the scope of the study, the composition of students by demographics was largely similar before and after the reform. Still, our inability to track exiting students is a clear limitation in the study because student turnover after intervention could be for reasons that are unobservable.

Descriptive analyses comparing the teacher workforce the year before reform to the teacher workforce the first year after reform were also conducted. The extent of teacher rehiring varied widely with the model of intervention. Post-reform teacher workforces across reform models were more likely to be white, younger, and less experienced than those teachers who were at the school prior to the intervention. In addition, post-reform teachers were more likely to hold provisional certification.

Then, reading and mathematics achievement for students in Grades 3 through 8 in reform schools were compared before and after the intervention and with similar schools that were not selected for reform. In the first year after reform, both reading and mathematics scores increased. However, these increases were not significantly different from the gains made in comparison schools. In the subsequent three years, reading and mathematics scores in elementary schools in reform improved gradually while scores in comparison schools did not. Controlling for student background characteristics and prior achievement, these differences were statistically significant.

Finally, the researchers examined trends in absences and on-track-to-graduate rates in high schools before and after the intervention and compared them with similar schools not selected for reform intervention. The on-track-to-graduate indicator used for this study was developed by the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, where the number of "F's" or failing grades a student receives in their first year of high school and the number of credits that a student accumulates in that first year of high school predict whether or not the student will graduate on time (see Allensworth and Easton, 2005, for details). No significant differences in improved rates of absences or on-track-to-graduate rates after reform were evident in comparison.

As noted in the report, the study has several limitations. As with any quasi-experimental study, estimating causal effects and eliminating selection bias is always an issue. Schools were carefully matched in three different ways (e.g., nearest neighbour, calliper, and propensity score analysis: please see the de la Torre et al., 2013 study for complete details) on observable variables,[4] but even schools that have similar observable characteristics could differ in ways not accounted for in the matching. Similarly, changes in student enrolment and teacher demographics could be interpreted as confounds for the positive findings. On observable characteristics, student turnover seems consistent with previous mobility studies in Chicago (de la Torre and Gwynne, 2009), but it is possible that student mobility occurred in different ways or for different reasons when happening in turnaround schools. If so, we would find this antithetical to increasing student achievement by potentially displacing low-achieving students from the schools. But there is nothing in the descriptive data to suggest that this is the case. Differences in teacher demographics and experience, however, appear to be influenced by the reform. Although these changes can have lasting impacts beyond the scope of this study, the purpose of the turnaround model is to disrupt the norms of schools that persistently demonstrate low levels of student achievement. The social and political implications of such turnover are outside of the scope of this study. Further, it is plausible that the comparison schools might have been affected indirectly by the reform efforts in that they were selected from a pool of schools already identified for probation status.

Study 2: Turnaround Identification Process in Minnesota

At the request of some Minnesota state education agency leaders, researchers from American Institutes for Research assisted in the development of a statistical procedure that can be applied to school-level data to identify schools that have "turned around" or made substantial improvements in school-wide academic performance in a short amount of time (Meyers et al., 2012). Publicly available school-level data were obtained from the Minnesota Department of Education's website.

The data used for these analyses consist of school-level results on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment, Series II (MCA-II), Minnesota's standards-based high-stakes test administered to school children in reading (Grades 3–8 and Grade 10) and mathematics (Grades 3–8 and Grade 11). A pool of 1,381 public open-enrolment schools in Minnesota that had school-level data available between 2004 and 2009 were analysed.

Because no clearly defined statistical model for such an analysis existed at the time of this request, a statistical model was developed based on inclusion criteria cited in Herman et al.'s (2008) practice guide *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools.* Some refinements were made to this model to accommodate Ho's (2008) cautions regarding reliance on percent proficient and several questionable data patterns that may arise, all of which are discussed below.

The ongoing use of MCA-II as the state assessment over the years 2006–2009 made it possible for analysts to (1) create school composites using average MCA-II scores for students in each grade level and subject for each year; (2) determine which schools were "low performing" in the years 2004, 2005, and 2006; (3) identify which chronically low-performing schools (for years 2004–2006) made average gains equivalent to 0.25 standard deviations across the subsequent three years; and (4) to verify that these schools had been making constant nonnegative progressions from year to year. The analytic process used to identify these "substantial-improvement schools" involved the following steps (see Meyers et al., 2012):

1. The categorization of all schools by grade levels served, with nine categories or school types (e.g., K-2, 6-8, 9-12, etc.) total.
2. For each category of school, 2006 MCA-II averages for grades and subjects were factor analysed from principal component analysis. The primary factor represented schools' overall "performance." The schools in each category having the factor scores in the lowest 25th percentile were considered "*low performing*" in 2006. Lacking a clear definition of *poor performing*, the analysis team chose a cut-off point of 25th percentile as the benchmark for the poor-performing schools. Arbitrary and relative as this definition may be, it is clear that academic performance of students in these schools is substantially less than standards set by the state.
3. Similar factor scores were calculated for schools' MCA scores separately for 2004 and 2005. Schools within each category that were consistently in the lowest 25 percent based on their factor scores for 2004–2006 were considered "*chronically* low performing." Note that 2004 and 2005 data for schools are based on scores from a different test (MCA). However, the same grades and subject areas were tested in the same schools. The process of factor analysing school means by grade and subject for each school adjusts for differences in scaling.
4. For the chronically low-performing schools in each category, the differences in mean scores for each grade and subject area between 2009 and 2006 were calculated and scaled into an index known as Cohen's *d* (or standardized mean difference) by dividing by the pooled standard deviations, which were devised using each grade and subject area. Schools showing positive effect sizes for each grade level and subject area were considered "*improved.*"
5. The MCA-II averages for these improved schools for each grade/subject combination were plotted across years. Those schools showing nonnegative trends in school-level MCA-II averages by grade/subject in 75 percent of the years were considered "*steadily* improving."
6. Among those schools that were steadily improving, the net increase between 2006 and 2009 had to be large enough to signify clear improvement. The benchmark of average *d* values over 0.25 was established, and these schools were *initially* considered "substantial-improvement schools." A *d* of 0.25 was adopted based on the benchmark suggested in Herman et al. (2008).
7. Four schools were removed from the pool of initially identified substantial-improvement schools. One school had demonstrated a major change in school population when it merged with another neighbouring school. Three other schools demonstrated significant improvements since 2006, but these schools remained in the bottom 25th percentile of schools for their category.

After ruling out schools experiencing substantial demographic shifts, the research team identified the number of low-performing schools for each of the nine school categories. When also ensuring low performance for the two previous testing years (2004 and 2005), depending on school category, 11 percent to 48 percent of schools were no longer considered chronically low performing. Of these remaining schools, few (0 to 30 percent, depending on category) were able to demonstrate achievement gains in all grades and subjects from 2006 to 2009. More schools fell out of the running as substantially improving when the 75 percent year/grade/subject combinations and other considerations were taken into account. Ultimately, seven schools met all criteria: two K–4 schools, two K–5 schools, one K–6 school, one 5–8 school, and one 7–12 school. No traditional high school was determined to be substantially improved. This rigorous process for identifying turnaround schools was endorsed by state department personnel originally, as a related event occurred in the state capital at which principals of turnaround schools presented their success stories to peers. At approximately the same time, the federal government announced its parameters to be a school in need of turnaround in its School Improvement Grant competition. Although notably different and arguably less rigorous than the identification work developed on behalf of the state department of education, turnaround school identification and subsequent research and development were based on the new federal competition.

Study 3: School Improvement Grants in Midwestern States

Previous studies of School Improvement Grants examined schools in terms of eligibility status for SIG funds, school award status, and district applications for school funding (Klein, 2010) and analysed schools in terms of state identification of school tier level (a way to distinguish the lowest achieving schools), state prioritizing of funding awards, state determination of local education agency (LEA) capacity, and state monitoring and support of SIG implementation (Hurlburt et al., 2011). These analyses, however, are limited to schools eligible for and awarded SIG funding and have not considered differences between school achievement characteristics. Moreover, the analyses do not currently include indicators of school achievement.

This study focused on 2010 SIG funding in the Midwest and examined the academic performance of four sets of schools in each state: schools that were eligible for SIG funding, school that were included in district SIG applications, schools that were awarded SIG funding, and schools that were included in district SIG applications but were not awarded the funding (Meyers and Wan, 2012). This study addresses the following research question and sub-questions:

1. What are the school performance characteristics of Midwestern schools involved in the 2010 SIG process?
    a. What are the school performance characteristics of schools eligible for SIG funding?
    b. What are the school performance characteristics of eligible schools that were included in district proposals?
    c. What are the school performance characteristics of schools that were awarded funding?
    d. What are the school performance characteristics of schools included in district applications but not awarded funding?

To address these questions, we obtained publicly available data on school demographic, performance, accountability, and SIG application and award status from state education agency (SEA) websites and National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) website. Descriptive summaries of the four sets of schools in each state were recorded for four key performance indicators: AYP designations, school improvement status under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), percentage of students' proficient on statewide reading and mathematics tests, and high school graduation rates.

Key findings for each question may be summarized as follows.

AYP Designation. The percentages of schools that did not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) overall in 2008–09 ranged from 76 percent to 100 percent among the four sets of schools in the seven Midwestern states. In general, higher percentages of proposed schools as compared to eligible schools failed AYP mathematics or reading proficiency requirements for the "all students" group and most student subgroups in five of the seven states (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, and Minnesota). In Ohio, higher proportions of eligible schools than proposed schools failed mathematics or reading proficiency requirements for the "all students" group and for most student subgroups.

In Illinois, Indiana, and Iowa, none of the funded schools or unfunded schools made overall AYP. In Michigan and Minnesota, larger percentages of unfunded schools failed overall AYP as well as most of the subgroup AYP requirements than funded schools did. In Ohio, higher percentages of funded schools failed overall AYP as well as subgroup mathematics or reading proficiency requirements than unfunded schools did.

Federal School Improvement Status. In all states but Indiana, the majority of the four sets of schools (ranging from 63 percent to 100 percent) were identified as in need of improvement under federal ESEA. In Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, and Ohio, the majority of funded schools had been in improvement status for multiple years and hence concentrated in the more severe sanction categories. In Minnesota, funded schools scattered across improvement categories, and, in Wisconsin, half of the funded schools were in their first year of improvement.

In all states but Iowa, the four sets of schools contained schools that were not identified for improvement under federal accountability. Most of these schools in the four states (Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio) that operate a state accountability system alongside the federal ESEA system were either identified as in need of improvement under ESEA or did not receive satisfactory ratings from states' own accountability systems. The percentages of schools not in improvement among funded schools ranged from five percent in Ohio to 50 percent in Indiana.

Performance on Statewide Tests: Grades 3–8 Tests. Proposed schools had lower average proficiency rates on statewide reading and mathematics tests for Grades 3–8 than did eligible schools in Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, and Ohio. In Indiana and Ohio, compared with unfunded schools, funded schools have lower average proficiency rates in both reading and mathematics. In Minnesota, however, funded schools had higher average proficiency rate in both reading and mathematics. In Michigan, funded schools had lower average proficiency rate in mathematics than unfunded schools, but the two sets of schools had approximately the same average proficiency rate in reading.

Performance on Statewide Tests: High School Grades Tests. In Illinois, Michigan, and Ohio, eligible schools had higher average percent proficient rates in both mathematics and reading than did proposed schools. In Indiana and Minnesota, proposed schools had higher average proficient rates in mathematics than eligible schools did. Compared with unfunded schools, funded schools in Illinois and Michigan had higher average performance rates on state tests than unfunded schools in both mathematics and reading. In Ohio, funded schools had lower average proficiency rates in both subjects than unfunded schools. In Indiana and Minnesota, funded schools had higher average proficiency rates in reading but lower rates in mathematics than unfunded schools.

High School Graduation Rate. In five of the states (Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, and Ohio), proposed high schools had higher school graduation rates than eligible schools. Funded schools in Indiana and Iowa had lower average graduation rates than unfunded schools. Funded schools in Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, and Ohio, however, had higher average graduation rates than unfunded schools.

The School Improvement Grant competition was created to offer the nation's lowest-achieving schools with a financial incentive to enact a model of school turnaround. Although the bottom five percent of schools by state were targeted federally, data presented indicate that only two of the seven Midwestern states actualized the federal goal. Three states had at least 15 percent of their schools identified as eligible for SIG funding. In four of the states, few schools eligible to compete for SIG dollars were actually part of a proposal submission for funding. And of those eligible schools that were part of an application, fewer than half were reward funding in five of the states.

As evidenced by overall AYP, schools with among the lowest levels of student achievement appear to have been selected by states to compete for SIG funding. None of the proposed schools (or subsequently funded schools) in Illinois, Indiana, or Iowa met overall AYP, suggesting that all of the schools in those states that were competing for the SIG funding were low achieving. In the remaining states, at a minimum, 84 percent of proposed schools failed to meet overall AYP. Similarly, at least 75 percent of funded schools failed to meet overall AYP in each state, although it is worth noting that a greater percentage of unfunded schools failed to meet overall AYP in Michigan and Minnesota.

However, a consideration of schools by federal improvement status suggests that schools with among the lowest levels of student achievement were not selected by some Midwestern states for SIG funding as frequently as overall AYP status might indicate. Illinois, Indiana, and Minnesota had noticeably higher percentages of proposed schools failing to meet AYP (100, 100, and 92 percent, respectively) than they did percentages of proposed schools in federal improvement status (68, 31, and 72 percent, respectively). A similar AYP-federal improvement status discrepancy exists in those states regarding schools awarded SIG funding: Illinois (100 versus 70 percent), Indiana (100 versus 43 percent), and Minnesota (90 versus 63 percent). Although the majority of funded schools across the seven states had been in improvement status for multiple years, it appears as though some consistently low-performing schools were not provided SIG funding.

The findings of this study are in no way conclusive, but they do provide an initial consideration of the extent to which the lowest-performing schools in the Midwest were targeted for and received SIG funding. These findings contribute to a baseline level of information for examining potential changes in indicators of school performance for eligible, proposed, and funded schools. This study also suggests that further consideration of the SIG process, including an examination of why states targeted certain eligible schools for SIG proposals and how decisions were made to award funding among proposed schools, is warranted. Finally, a substantial number of schools in each state did not compete for SIG funding although they were eligible, raising questions about district- and school-level decision-making processes on pursuit of federal funding. This has broad implications about policy mechanisms developed to incentivise district or school action for monetary gain. Most notably, it suggests that not all schools can actually compete, and therefore are probably not motivated in the intended ways. In addition, top down federal policy that does not fully consider tipping points might not induce the intended reactions: Schools with fewer resources often did not even enter the competition. Thus any type of policy such as the SIG one should be both substantial enough and attainable enough to warrant the resources that districts or schools would need to spend to compete.

Discussion

The three studies highlighted in this paper illustrate the complexities of both bottom-up and top-down interplay in school turnaround work. In brief, the lack of common definitions or clear criteria appears to hamper efforts at increasing knowledge about how chronically low performing schools can improve and how to know whether they have succeeded in this endeavour. The Chicago paper suggests that some of the "turnaround" processes can work, and SIG funds seem to be a federal attempt to scale up the Chicago approach. However states are taking inconsistent approaches to identify schools worthy of SIG funding. Finally, just as state and federal education agencies should provide some clarity in defining schools needing funds to implement turnaround processes, so, too, should states clarify the indicators for success.

More specifically, the study on students, teachers, and student achievement in Chicago measures the impact of school reform efforts that are similar to the federal models of turnaround, including reconstitution (the precursor for the American turnaround model), closure and restart, and other initiatives that require change in school leadership and other organizational and operational aspects. The primary focus of the study is impact on student achievement. Thus, the study includes and/or addresses both conceptualizations of school turnaround. On one hand, school turnaround is being measured as rapid improvement of student achievement (conceptualization one). On the

other hand, the reforms studied must be similar to the federally defined models of school turnaround (conceptualization two).

Some studies in the vein of the Chicago reform study – where reform initiatives focus on substantial change in administration and faculty – that are similar to the current federal models of turnaround appear to demonstrate increased student achievement. This is an important win for federal policymakers, clearly. At the same time, the study does little to clear up the conceptual disparity that exists when considering the term turnaround. Ultimately turnaround was both implemented and achieved, which begs the question, "which is more important?" If a school successfully increases student achievement in a very short period of time, does the process really matter? The process should be secondary to the primary goal of improving student performance.

It seems, however, that the secondary goal of establishing a process of turnaround often takes precedence over the primary goal of improved student achievement. First, the identification of so many schools (approximately 5,000) nationwide necessitates the implementation of similar models of turnaround for purposes of oversight and management. Second, the amount of money that the federal government has awarded for SIGs and other competitions seems to demand a certain level of cohesion across participating schools. The financial package offered appears to have shifted the understanding of and focus on turnaround from the outcome to the process.

This shift in focus is notable in the Minnesota school identification study. Although similar work to statistically identify turnaround schools has emerged in the last two years, there were few such models postulated at the time that state education officers expressed interest in the development of one. Principals of schools identified by American Institutes for Research (AIR) as turnaround schools were notified at the state's request and an event was held in which some principals of identified schools presented on their individual and organizational efforts to rapidly increase student achievement. At approximately the same time, the U.S. Department of Education made explicit the rules for states to receive School Improvement Grant funding. Some schools that had just been identified as turning around were once again labelled as among the state's worst, as defined federally. In addition, the model developed by AIR has not been used by the state of Minnesota since the federal rules were disseminated. Instead, the state education agency has developed its own model that is in compliance with federal guidelines.

The examination of the SIG funding across seven states in the Midwest of the United States is also suggestive. As evidenced by overall AYP, schools with among the lowest levels of student achievement were most frequently selected by states to compete for SIG funding. A consideration of schools by federal improvement status, however, suggests that schools with among the lowest levels of student achievement were not selected by some Midwestern states for SIG funding as frequently as overall AYP status might indicate. Illinois, Indiana, and Minnesota had noticeably higher percentages of proposed schools failing to meet AYP (100, 100, and 92 percent, respectively) than they did percentages of proposed schools in federal improvement states (68, 31, and 72 percent, respectively). A similar AYP-federal improvement status discrepancy exists in those states regarding schools awarded SIG funding: Illinois (100 versus 70 percent), Indiana (100 versus 43 percent), and Minnesota (90 versus 63 percent). Although, as highlighted in the findings and summary, the majority of funded schools across the seven states had been in improvement status for multiple years, it appears as though some consistently low-performing schools were not provided SIG funding.

The findings of the SIG study are in no way conclusive, but they do provide an initial consideration of the extent to which the lowest-performing schools in the Midwest were targeted for and received SIG funding. These findings contribute to a baseline level of information for examining potential changes in indicators of school performance for eligible, proposed, and funded schools. This study also suggests that further consideration of the SIG process, including an examination of why states targeted certain eligible schools for SIG proposals and how decisions were made to award funding among proposed schools, is warranted. Finally, a substantial number of schools in each state did not compete for SIG funding although they were eligible, raising questions about district- and school-level decision-making processes on pursuit of federal funding.

School turnaround demonstrates the power of federal initiatives in the United States to impact the public school system at all levels. State departments of education have responded in ways to obtain federal funding. Districts and schools generally with the least capacity to enact change have been challenged with an opportunity to win substantial dollars, but many elected not to compete. Increases in student achievement through such reform appear to be possible, but the human and social costs have yet to be adequately considered. The momentum behind federally funded models that are relatively inflexible have necessitated predictable state and local responses – that adaptation of those models for funding. This reaction has shifted needs sensing efforts, teacher development, and community engagement to compliance with one of the models. Little evidence exists to suggest that the models are effective, and even less consideration has been given to how the dramatic changes introduced in schools by these models impact schools and communities.

Notes

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[2] Title 1 originated in 1965 as part of the original Elementary and Secondary Education Act, most recently renewed in 2002 as No Child Left Behind. The purpose of Title 1 is to ensure that all children have fair and equitable opportunities to obtain quality education. Billions of dollars (approximately $25 for fiscal year 2007) are allocated across local education agencies to purchase programs and/or services such as Reading First and Head Start for students from low-income families.

[3] Beginning in 2006, Chicago Public Schools identified schools undergoing certain reforms as turnaround schools. The reform processes undertaken in these schools are reflective of and precursors to the current federal models designated as turnaround, transformation, and closure and restart.

[4] The school characteristics included in the propensity score analysis were school racial composition, percentage of students with limited English proficiency, percentage of students receiving special education services, percentage of students receiving free or reduced-priced lunch, attendance, mobility, percentage of students who were truant, the average concentration of poverty (male unemployment and percentage of families living under the poverty line) and social status (years of education and employment as managers or executives) in the census blocks where students reside, and the size of the school. In addition, reading and math scores and probation status from the prior three academic years were included in the construction of propensity scores.

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