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Sustaining School Turnaround

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It is only if leaders plan for sustainability from the start that the structures, data, and people needed to sustain and even accelerate student achievement gains will be in place for the long term.

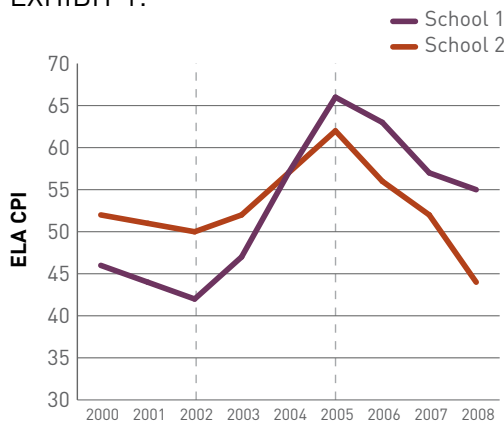
Sustaining School Turnaround

| Karla Baehr and Danielle Glazer

By rewriting the requirements districts and schools must meet to access three-year Title I School Improvement Grants (SIG), the federal government has focused every state's attention on its lowest-performing 5% of schools. Yet, history tells us that few low-performing schools have actually been successfully "turned around," and fewer still have been able to sustain turnaround once the initial attention and funding have disappeared.

For example, the graph below shows the rise and fall of two schools in Massachusetts that were designated "underperforming" more than a decade ago. While student achievement rose dramatically in the three years of turnaround, achievement started to decline immediately after the schools were deemed to have been turned around. Five years later, School #2 was again identified as one of the state's lowest-performing 5% of schools, and School #1 was on its way there as well (Exhibit 1).

EXHIBIT 1:



Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Why is it so difficult to sustain turnaround? Generally, the turnaround phase is launched with an infusion of new funds, new initiatives, and often new leadership. If the turnaround is deemed successful as evidenced by rapidly improving student performance within three years, the additional funding is discontinued and the strong leader or leadership team, who were recruited or assigned for the turnaround phase, often leaves. Having focused the turnaround strategy on initiatives made possible by the new funding and new leaders, the "turned-around" school is typically left without a strategy for maintaining those initiatives and without the leadership practices that led to the dramatically improved results.

How, then, can a district write a different ending? We pose a deceptively simple solution: start planning for sustainability the moment the school is designated for turnaround. But why is such a seemingly simple solution so often overlooked? Effecting a turnaround is such a tremendous challenge and the ramifications for students so critical that the focus is on bringing about immediate and dramatic change; sustaining the turnaround is thought to come later. Indeed, it is counterintuitive to think about sustaining something that has yet to be achieved. Planning for sustainability



from the start requires the bold assumption that the turnaround will actually be successful. While this assumption is perhaps a leap of faith, it is only if leaders plan for sustainability from the start that the structures, data, and people needed to sustain and even accelerate student achievement gains will be in place for the longer term.

While this article focuses on sustaining school turnaround, most of the strategies described apply equally well to any school where the challenge is to sustain improvement in the face of diminishing resources. Planning for sustainability requires several essentials. First, spending new funding must be done cautiously and strategically. High-impact initiatives are needed, but if they come at a high cost that cannot be sustained when these new funds dry up, other alternatives must be considered. Also, a careful diagnosis of the problems specific to the school is critical. The lowest-performing schools typically have multiple issues to address; diagnosing the problems carefully and then putting in place a method to measure the effectiveness of each new and existing initiative will help determine how resources can be used most wisely to raise student achievement. And, because teacher capacity and leadership capacity are always critical to school success, structures and practices must be embedded during the turnaround phase to ensure the ongoing development of effective teaching and leadership skills. Finally, the urgency created during the turnaround phase must be continued. Having systems to collect, analyze, and share data to create accountability is essential to maintaining the focus on results and keeping student achievement at the forefront. →

Planning Ahead to Sustain Turnaround

- 1 Spend** new funding cautiously and strategically, resisting pressure to use temporary funding on high-cost initiatives that will be too expensive to continue.
- 2 Identify** which practices must be continued and which can be abandoned by developing data systems to pinpoint what is contributing most to raising student achievement and what isn't.
- 3 Plan** ways to gradually reallocate resources from less critical administrative, operational, and instructional practices to those that are essential to raising student achievement.
- 4 Invest** in structures, practices, and processes that will continually build teacher capacity and prepare new leadership.
- 5 Implement** a rigorous system of monitoring results and accountability at the school and district levels in order to maintain the sense of urgency that helped produce the turnaround.

Planning Ahead to Sustain Turnaround

In order to sustain turnaround, planning should not be deferred until after the turnaround period has ended but, instead, should be considered from the outset. Several steps can be taken to ensure that the turnaround is sustained.

1 **Spend new funding cautiously and strategically, resisting pressure to use temporary funding on high-cost initiatives that will be too expensive to continue.**

Because turnaround often begins with an infusion of one-time money, schools can be tempted to spend this money on initiatives that will show quick results, but which cannot be sustained when these additional funds are no longer available. In Massachusetts' underperforming schools, for example, as much as 50% of the SIG funding was used to pay staff stipends for expanding the school day and/or year, often at the teacher's per diem rate, a cost that becomes difficult to sustain when the grants end. Those districts that planned ahead by negotiating less costly ways to expand learning time, such as staggered schedules for staff and/or lower hourly rates of pay, have a much greater chance of sustaining expanded learning time once the turnaround funding ends.

Many turnaround schools use one-time funds to hire additional staff, only to find that they can no longer afford the staff once the turnaround has been effected. However, those that hire staff who can perform multiple functions within the school will have a smaller funding gap to fill once these temporary grants end. For example, by hiring special education teachers who are also reading specialists, a school can repurpose a single staff member's role to fulfill two important functions. Developing systems to support part-time volunteers or paying modest stipends to existing staff to carry out some administrative duties is another low-cost option that will not be affected by the end of grant funding. One-time funds can also be used effectively for short-term capacity-building initiatives such as intensive summer professional development for staff or student activities designed to signal and support culture transformation.

It is only if leaders plan for sustainability from the start that the structures, data, and people needed to sustain and even accelerate student achievement gains will be in place for the longer term.

2 **Identify which practices must be continued and which can be abandoned by developing systems to pinpoint what is contributing most to raising student achievement and what isn't.**

Often schools use new funding to help them address many problems at the same time. A careful diagnosis of problems particular to each struggling school is critical. Without a thoughtful diagnosis, it is not possible to identify and prioritize the interventions that are most likely to address the school-specific problems effectively. Without a careful initial diagnosis, school leaders are unlikely to be able to knit the interventions and other school practices together into a systemic effort in which the whole impact of the turnaround work is greater

than the sum of the impact of each separate intervention. Beyond thoughtful initial diagnosis, sustainable turnaround requires the school to have a way of assessing the impact that each of its practices has on accelerating student achievement. Without tying achievement and growth data to individual students and specific practices, it is not possible to know which practices must be preserved or expanded, and which can be abandoned to free up time or money for the former.

To identify the impact of the interventions on student achievement, schools typically turn to rigorous interim assessments; grade-level and/or course-specific professional learning time; and strong coaching in using assessment results to inform flexible student grouping, adjust instructional practices, and develop each teacher's instructional repertoire. The teacher- and student-specific data they use for these purposes can be the foundation for a system of data collection that will enable them—over time—to assess the impact of a wide range of school practices. Schools can then assess the impact of these practices and identify the most effective—and least effective—through a method called “academic return on investment” (AROI). AROI calls for schools to identify who is impacted by each program or practice, and rate the impact of each practice on those students' achievement. By comparing impact against cost (in time and dollars), it is possible to identify high-impact/low-cost practices that should be continued, low-impact/high-cost practices that can be abandoned, and the high-impact/high-cost practices that might be good candidates for restructuring to reduce their cost (see Exhibit 2).

By using AROI, one school identified a low-impact practice to abandon. The students in its spring vacation enrichment program were only 10% more likely to pass a spring unit test than non-participants were. As a result, the school abandoned the program. Another school restructured its low-impact/high-cost dropout prevention program upon learning that the program had a positive impact only for students who could already read on grade level. As a result, the school decided to scale back the program to enroll only students who could

read on grade level. Resources could then be redirected to higher-impact programs.

Planning ahead by analyzing student- and program-specific data using the AROI framework can thus give schools the information they need to make nuanced decisions about how to sustain turnaround.

Because turnaround often begins with an infusion of one-time money, schools can be tempted to spend this money on initiatives that will show quick results, but which cannot be sustained when these additional funds are no longer available.

3

Plan ways to reallocate resources from less critical practices to those that are essential.

Schools need to assess more programs than only those funded with turnaround dollars. Once a school has identified its most critical programs, the school must reallocate resources to support these services. They must look at ways to change schedules, target class-size increases, modify staffing patterns for remediation, and restructure →

Sustainability Planning in Action: Deploying the Academic Return on Investment Framework

DMC worked with district and school leaders from the 34 underperforming schools in Massachusetts that were nearing the end of their designation as “underperforming.” To plan for sustainability, programs were examined using a framework built on the concept of “academic return on investment” (AROI). AROI helps schools determine practices to retain and practices to abandon by assessing and comparing their relative cost and impact on student achievement. In collaboration with district staff, school leaders followed this five-step process to plan for sustainability:

1. Identify total funds that will no longer be available beyond the life of the turnaround period.

This may include federal School Improvement Grant funds and other local, state, or private funding sources.

2. Identify the school’s strategies for turnaround.

Strategies may include such practices as expanded learning time, formative assessments, and common planning time for grade-level teams to plan Tier 2 and 3 interventions.

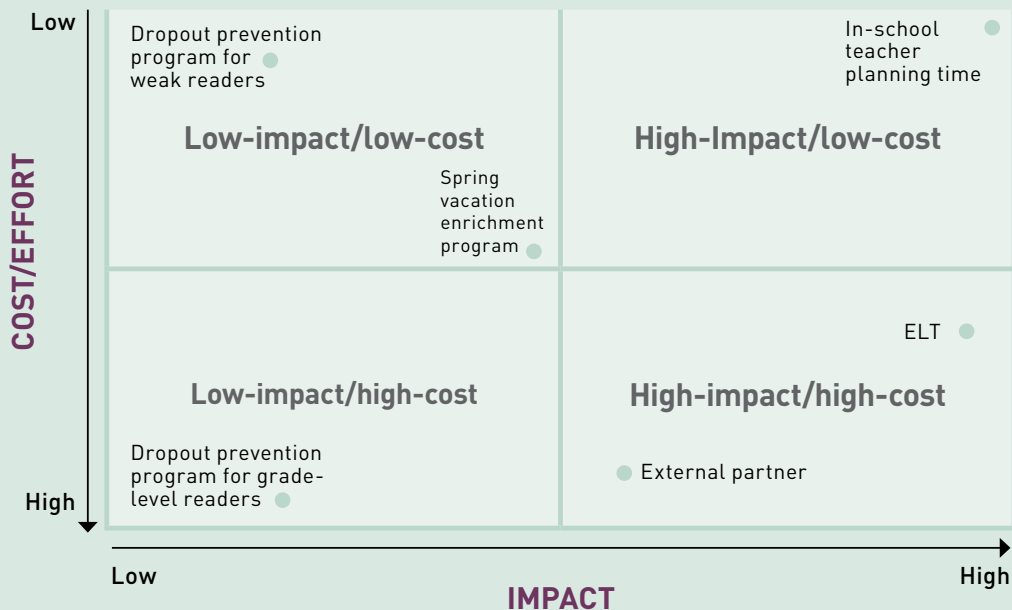
3. Assemble data to calculate academic return on investment. Data is needed on the total cost of each program, the number of students involved in each program, and the quantifiable impact each program has on the achievement of those students.

Having this kind of data requires the school to have planned ahead to collect student data on the success of each program during the course of the turnaround. If data on student achievement is not available, using a proxy for perfect data can still provide a sense of the program’s impact, albeit a less clear one. For example, if data on a program’s impact on student achievement is unavailable, but the program has been shown to raise student attendance and the school has evidence that higher attendance is generally associated with higher performance, attendance numbers may be used to gauge the program’s impact.

4. Assess each program. Assign each program a relative position on a matrix that compares cost with impact. See Exhibit 2 for an example illustrating one district’s analysis.

AROI helps schools determine practices to retain and practices to abandon by assessing and comparing their relative cost and impact on student achievement.

EXHIBIT 2:



5. Develop a sustainability plan. High-impact/low-cost programs are the best candidates for continuation, while low-impact/high-cost ones are the best candidates for abandonment. High-impact/high-cost programs merit further examination to see if there are opportunities to restructure so that the same services can be delivered more cost-effectively. Low-impact/low-cost programs should be considered for abandonment unless their impact approaches moderate levels.

For example, one Massachusetts school used this matrix to compare the impact and cost of each of

the 20 non-profits and agencies with which it was partnering to provide expanded learning time. After analyzing each program using the AROI framework, they found that there was a large variance in terms of cost per student and impact on student achievement. The school ended partnerships with the low-impact agencies to save nearly \$150,000, which was repurposed to support those organizations that were having a greater impact. Reducing the number of organizations with which the school worked had the added benefit of reducing the amount of administrative work required, which freed up administrator time for more critical instructional leadership roles.

AROI provides a structured process for assessing the programs a school must keep to sustain turnaround and for identifying those it might restructure or abandon. The framework can also be applied beyond only those initiatives launched for turnaround. Schools can use it to analyze traditional practices across all areas of the school—administrative, operational, and instructional—as a first step in identifying ways to reallocate resources from less critical practices to those that are more essential to improving student achievement.

administrative functions and operations—all in order to free up resources to continue the critical interventions and practices that they have determined must be sustained. Applying an AROI analysis to traditional practices is one way to identify those that can be abandoned or delivered in new ways at lower cost.

We pose a deceptively simple solution: start planning for sustainability the moment the school is designated for turnaround.

Schools can free up funds by implementing scheduling changes, for example. In one school, the principal placed special education and general education students in the same art, music, and physical education classes; by eliminating special classes for students in pullout programs, a full-time-equivalent specialist teacher was no longer required, and paraprofessionals from the pullout program provided support. The principal was then able to retain a full-time reading teacher instead. In another school, a principal made plans to hold weekly grade-level meetings during the school day instead of paying stipends for afterschool meetings. The principal and the dean of students co-led an assembly for each grade level of students each week; meanwhile, the grade-level teams and the school's instructional coach met during their students' assembly.

4 Invest in structures, practices, and processes that will continually build teacher capacity and cultivate new leadership.

Schools must plan ahead to ensure that teachers and school and district leaders have the capacity to sustain school improvement once turnaround is declared successful. Sustaining turnaround requires increasing teacher capacity and planning for leadership succession at the school level. At the district level, the central office must have the capacity to support these efforts.

Almost all turnaround schools experience significant staffing changes at some point during the turnaround effort, ranging from 35% to over 50% in teacher turnover in any given year. Instead of investing in one-on-one capacity-building activities for teachers, schools with high teacher turnover should establish processes that institutionalize capacity-building. For instance, they can create resources for new teachers such as training videos and curriculum material. On the other hand, schools expecting low turnover may prefer to contract with external organizations to provide ongoing professional development. One school with low teacher turnover identified a group of teachers to receive intensive coaching and development from an outside organization; these teachers were then charged with training their colleagues. After a few years, the school ended its partnership with the outside organization, and the teacher leaders were able to continue the professional development efforts without outside support.

In terms of school and district leadership, new leaders have to be groomed well before leadership turns over. Schools and districts can begin identifying potential new leaders during turnaround. Schools can build strong leaders by conducting effective evaluations, providing job-embedded professional development, and creating transition plans for preparing and orienting new leaders. To help build district capacity, Massachusetts has vetted two organizations that partner with districts in ways that are intentionally designed to improve district leadership capacity. Rather than taking

over school operations directly, these organizations partner with specific point people at the central office to ensure they have experience developing and sustaining turnaround and can continue the work once the schools exit turnaround. These organizations also support districts by creating guidelines and criteria for retaining and hiring teachers which the district can continue to use in years to come.

5 Implement a rigorous system of monitoring results and accountability at the school and district levels to maintain the sense of urgency that helped produce the turnaround in the first place.

During turnaround, schools are often very publicly held accountable for student performance, but this high level of internal and external monitoring often declines once turnaround ends. However, ongoing district monitoring of individual school results and strong, public mechanisms for holding school leaders accountable are essential. In one Massachusetts district with multiple underperforming schools, central-office leaders conduct regular walkthroughs using a detailed protocol that identifies specific “look-fors” in the classroom to help create accountability for implementing the specific instructional practices that have been linked with accelerated student achievement. Many of DMC’s member districts publish virtual “dashboards” that track performance metrics and drill down to the school level; these websites are accessible to the public and thereby create public mechanisms for holding all schools accountable, regardless of whether they have been designated for turnaround. By planning ahead and establishing these systems early during turnaround, schools will already be comfortable with them once turnaround ends.

Planning ahead by analyzing student- and program-specific data using the AROI framework can thus give schools the information they need to make nuanced decisions about how to sustain turnaround.

A Concluding Thought

Turnaround is rare; sustaining turnaround is even rarer. To successfully continue accelerating student achievement, a school undergoing turnaround must plan ahead to sustain its successes. Making strategic choices upfront, analyzing academic return on investment to optimize resource allocation, ensuring that programs are in place to cultivate teacher and leadership capacity for the long term, and creating the monitoring and accountability that maintain focus on results are critical to develop from the start. These strategies are applicable to any school seeking to sustain improvements in student performance, even outside of turnaround. As districts and schools begin to exit turnaround and focus on sustaining their successes, these strategies can help them build upon the improvement in students’ lives that they have worked so hard to achieve. ♦