

Hope for a Turnaround?

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It is no secret that America's education system is severely deficient. Among the thirty most developed countries in the world, America ranks 25th in math and 21st in science. Although the most fortunate children have an opportunity to receive a quality education, such hope is virtually non-existent for the less fortunate, particularly for minorities. Only 50% of African American, Hispanic, and other low-income students graduate from high school on time, and only 25% end up graduating from college.ⁱ Statistics relating to teachers are also staggering. In Singapore, teaching academies accept only one out of eight applicants they receive. The United States, on the other hand, gives teaching academies financial incentive to accept all prospective applicants.ⁱⁱ Furthermore, in Illinois, where 1 in 57 doctors loses their medical license, and 1 in 97 lawyers lose their law license, only 1 in 2,500 teachers loses their teaching license.¹ With so many children having so little hope of receiving a quality education, and with so few teachers being held accountable, recent reforms have attempted to impose such accountability.

Many reform experts consider increasing the number quality teachers to be the most important factor in education reform. No matter the school's budget, the class size, or the curriculum, only a quality teacher can lead to a quality education. In order to ensure schools have high quality teachers, many experts advocate for improvement in recruiting teachers. Today, just 23% of new teachers rank in the top third of their academic class. That percentage is significantly smaller when you look at persistently failing schools. Raising teacher salaries might help correct this trend, but budgetary constraints make such a solution difficult.² As such, new and creative solutions to improving the quality of teachers have become increasingly necessary.

This paper will examine one such creative reform known as “turnaround.” Turnaround programs attempt to fix our nation’s worst schools. Generally, these programs identify a community's worst schools, close them, and re-open them after implementing various improvements. Such improvements typically involve replacing teachers and principals. This paper will analyze the different forms of turnaround throughout the nation and measure their results.

Recently, there has been an unprecedented national push to turnaround America’s worst schools. Reducing the number of persistently failing schools has become one of the Obama administration’s top education related priorities. The Department of Education has initiated several federal programs all of which attempt to address persistently failing schools. These programs include the Race to the Top, the Teacher Incentive Fund, and Promise Neighborhoods. In addition, Title I School Improvement Grants (SIG) provide \$3.5 billion to encourage states to implement fundamental changes in how they improve persistently failing schools. Such a large sum of money has never been used solely for turnaround efforts. SIG awards money to schools that fulfill certain criteria, including replacing principals and teachers.ⁱⁱⁱ However, principal replacement requirements recently were relaxed due to a shortage of qualified principals. Many schools attempted to qualify for SIG, but because they could not find a qualified principal, they became ineligible. Instead of giving out less money, the Department of Education allowed schools to keep principals, and remain eligible for SIG, if the principal had been at the school for less than two years. In total, 44% of the persistently failing schools receiving federal money did not replace their principal. Some argue that the Department of Education’s relaxing of its SIG criteria represents the departments recognition that turning around a persistently failing school is more complicated than mere rhetoric.^{iv}

Arizona has not had much success in turning around its worst schools. In October 2004, Arizona categorized eleven of its schools as “failing.” In response, Arizona replaced five of the eleven principals at the failing schools and sent mentors to consult with the teachers and remaining principals for two years. By 2008, six of the eleven schools were still classified as “failing,” and only two of the replacement principals showed significant improvement. The other three were still “underperforming.” Principals complained that they were having trouble recruiting and keeping quality teachers, and they needed the teaching mentors to stay longer than two years.^v

In response to the national push for turnaround, Arizona applied for SIG funds. In April 2010, SIG awarded Arizona with about \$70 million for its turnaround efforts. As proscribed by SIG, Arizona can allot portions of that \$70 million to individual schools if those schools implement one of four models: the turnaround model, the restart model, school closure, or the transformation model. The turnaround model involves replacing the school’s principal, screening existing staff, rehiring no more than half of the school’s teachers, adopting a new governance structure, and implementing reforms such as curriculum reform, professional development, extending learning time, and other strategies. The restart model consists of either converting or closing a school, and then re-opening that school as either a charter or under a private education management organization. School closures involve closing a school and sending the students to a higher-achieving school within the same district. The transformation model consists of replacing the school’s principal and implementing reforms such as comprehensive curriculum reform, professional development, extending learning time, and other strategies.^{vi} In predicting whether Arizona’s, or any other state’s, turnaround effort will be successful, we must examine these different forms of turnaround and their respective results.

Arizona is far from the only state to have failed in turnaround attempts. For instance, California attempted to turnaround its lowest-performing schools. After three years, only 11% of the elementary schools targeted for turnaround were able to make “exemplary progress.” Only 1 of the 394 middle and high schools targeted reached the “exemplary progress” target. Furthermore, just 25% of all the schools targeted for turnaround reached the lesser goal of “meeting growth targets” every year. In 2008, Ohio targeted 52 schools for turnaround, and after several years and millions of tax dollars, only 33% reached academic goals and less than half showed any student performance gains. Moreover, a 2008 study by the Center of Education Policy showed that the turnaround efforts by California, Maryland, and Ohio led to only 14%, 12%, and 9% of the schools in their respective states making adequate yearly progress.^{vii}

Some cities have abandoned the traditional “turnaround model” and opted for “closure models.” In 2004, Chicago launched a closure program called “Chicago Renaissance 2010.” Instead of making reforms within the existing schools, the program consisted of closing down the cities worst schools, temporarily placing the students in new schools, and eventually replacing the failed schools with new ones. The program’s goal was to create 100 new high-performing schools by 2010. The Renaissance schools being created fell into one of three categories: 1) charter schools, 2) contract schools, which were managed by independent non-profits, and 3) performance schools, which were still run by Chicago Public Schools (CPS) but were given greater flexibility in management.^{viii} Chicago Renaissance 2010 is mostly considered a failure. Following initial closings, displaced students were often sent to schools with similar or worse track records than their closed schools. Furthermore, a January 2010 study by The Chicago Tribune showed that state test scores from Renaissance 2010 elementary schools were

no different than schools that were not part of Renaissance 2010. Furthermore, the passing rates of Renaissance 2010 high schools were even lower than the district average.^{ix}

In 2010, Philadelphia launched a similar closure initiative, called “Renaissance Schools,” modeled after Chicago’s Renaissance program. The goals of Philadelphia’s Renaissance initiative are to: 1) identify chronically low-performing schools that are not likely to achieve dramatic improvements without substantial change, 2) identify individuals and organizations that have a proven track record in demonstrating student achievement, and 3) empower school communities to play an active role in the turnaround. The schools selected as “Renaissance Schools” will have greater autonomy in school management while also having a higher degree of accountability to show results.^x Although, Chicago’s Renaissance has been considered a failure, it is too early to determine whether Philadelphia will have better results.

Despite the failure of Chicago Renaissance, the “closure model” is still favored over the “turnaround model” by many. Advocates of “closure” point to the private sector as a model for improvement. When a company in the private sector fails, the company goes out of business. A company with a more successful business plan then replaces the failed company. A “closure model” would have schools function in a similar manner. According to “closure” advocates, the benefits of such a system come in 1) not subjecting children to schools with long track records of failure and high probabilities of continued failure, 2) generating possible motivation for improvement in these school through the fear of closure, and 3) making room for replacement schools that will have a far better chance of success than persistently failing schools. Mike Feingberg, co-founder of KIPP, believes, “The best way we can look a child in the eye and say with confidence what kind of school and environment we will provide is by starting that school

and environment from scratch.”⁷ Despite some valid criticisms directed at turnaround efforts, the “closure model” has yet to realize any widespread success.

Chicago has not given up on its turnaround ambitions. CPS has increasingly turned to outside entities to run their turnaround efforts. One such entity is the Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL). AUSL functions as an independent non-profit organization.^{xi} In practice, CPS designates certain schools in its district as “failing.” After being designated as a “failing” school for a certain number of consecutive years, CPS may decide to close that school and fire the school’s administrators and teachers. At that point, instead of replacing the failing school, CPS may decide to offer the school to AUSL. If AUSL accepts, then AUSL officially manages that school’s turnaround effort.^{xii}

After taking over the school, AUSL must replace all of the fired teachers and administrators before re-opening the school.¹¹ About 30% of the replacement teachers come from AUSL’s private academies.¹² These academies provide its teachers with incredibly intensive training. In the span of one year, a teacher will earn a master’s degree in teaching and spend nearly everyday in CPS through a teaching residency program in which the teacher will be under the tutelage of a “master teacher.” To avoid losing teachers who were only interested in a temporary job, as often happens in programs such as Teach for America, AUSL teachers are required to sign a four-year contract.¹¹ The remaining 70% of teachers are either recruited by AUSL or come from other similar teaching academies. Those that are recruited are only recruited if they buy in to AUSL’s education model.¹²

AUSL’s model for turnaround goes beyond cosmetic changes. According to Tim Cawley, the managing director of AUSL, “breaking the cycle of failure in a school that has become a drop-out factory requires an extreme reset.” Cawley’s “extreme reset” requires new

principals, new teachers, and an entirely new mindset regarding education. According to AUSL, money on its own will not lead to a true turnaround. Real improvement can only be seen after a school's leadership has been replaced. This model has led to impressive results.^{xiii}

Harvard Elementary in Chicago is one such school that has had impressive results. Since being taken over by AUSL in 2007, the number of Harvard students meeting or exceeding Illinois state requirements has increased from 32% to 58%. These staggering numbers are a result of having more qualified teachers and administrators at the school, as well as changing the school's general learning environment. Harvard's new principal, Andre Cowling, like a number of the new teachers at Harvard, attended an AUSL teaching academy where he earned his master's degree in teaching. Prior to taking over as principal, Mr. Cowling would sit in the parking lot of the school to observe how the students started their day. What Mr. Cowling saw "broke his heart." No one greeted the students as they walked into school, fights were common, and drug transactions occurred right outside the school. Mr. Cowling, drawing on his experience at an AUSL teaching academy, was able to turn Harvard's learning environment around. One of his first acts as principal was to require students to lineup outside the school to start the day. If anyone misbehaved while lining up, Mr. Cowling would visit that student's parents at home.^{xiv} This combination of improved teachers and learning environment led to Harvard realizing the benefits of a complete turnaround.

Harvard Elementary has not been AUSL's only success story. The number of students meeting or exceeding Illinois state standards has increased in virtually every AUSL school. Dodge Elementary has been an AUSL school for seven years and has increased the number of students meeting or exceeding expectations by 60 percentage points. Sherman Elementary has been an AUSL school for 4 years and has increased the number of students meeting or exceeding

expectations by 27 percentage points. After two years, Morton Elementary has increased by 8 percentage points. After one year, Johnson Elementary increased by 10 percentage points. Bethune Elementary, after only one year, increased by 8 percentage points. The only school to see a dip in scores was Dulles Elementary, which has only been with AUSL for one year and saw a drop in 6 percentage points.¹²

According to AUSL, there are three phases in a long-term turnaround. During the first phase (the first and second years of turnaround), the attendance gap will close by 50% and the achievement gap (standardized testing) will close by 33%. During the second phase (the third, fourth, and fifth years of turnaround), the attendance gap will close by 75% and the achievement gap will close by 66%. Finally, during the third phase (the sixth, seventh, and eighth years of turnaround), both the attendance and achievement gaps will be 100% closed.¹² This positive outlook on the possible success of a turnaround stands in stark contrast to how many experts across the country view turnarounds.

When analyzing the disparity of turnaround efforts across the country, experts tend to fall into one of two camps. The first of which are “doubters.” Andrew Smarick, previously a think-tank analyst and now a senior official for the New Jersey Education Department, states, “The history of urban education tells us emphatically that turnarounds are not a reliable strategy for improving our very worst schools.”⁷ Although the doubters recognize that there have been some success stories, like the AUSL schools, they tend to classify such examples as rare exceptions to the general rule that turnarounds do not work. To doubters, at least on a national level, there is not much good news, and it is far easier to simply close down a failing school, and move the students to a more successful school, than to turn that failing school around.³ Experts such as Tom Torkelson, CEO of the IDEA network, echo such sentiments by stating that he does not

even attempt turnarounds, “because a turnaround usually means operating within a school system that couldn’t stomach the radical steps we’d take to get the school back on track. We fix what’s wrong with schools by changing the practices of the adults, and I believe there are few examples where this is currently possible without meddling from teacher unions, the school board, or the central office.”⁷

To “believers,” as evidenced by AUSL, turnarounds are indeed possible in the way described by Tom Torkelson. Believers tend to argue that the programs that have failed deserved to fail, and the programs that succeeded deserved to succeed. Many of the turnaround efforts that have failed have been piecemeal reforms, involving replacing some, as opposed to most, teachers. These failed turnaround efforts often leave the school’s principal in place, which to programs like AUSL is a non-starter. Many failed efforts also involved those who were unprepared for the hard work that goes into a successful turnaround program. With so much federal money available, it is possible that some of the failed programs simply feigned a turnaround effort in order to secure federal money. Jack Jennings, President of the Center on Education Policy, believes, “many of these (turnaround) companies clearly just smell the money.”¹³ Successful programs, such as AUSL, are well prepared to turnaround schools and do so by replacing virtually every adult within the building. By doing so, AUSL is able to complete a full turnaround and accomplish what piecemeal reforms cannot.

Even if one is a believer in the turnaround process, there are still reasons to doubt that any successes can be replicated throughout the country. One large obstacle in replicating AUSL’s results is money. AUSL has an annual budget of \$115.3 million. During the 2009-2010 school year, that \$115.3 million was used to turnaround 14 school. When considering the budget constraints across the country, that \$115.3 million may seem like a lot of money for only 14

schools. However, in order to maintain those schools, about 84% of that \$115.3 million had previously been allocated by CPS. Because AUSL took these schools over, all of the money that otherwise would have been allocated for those 14 schools was sent to AUSL. AUSL then used that money to pay the normal costs associated with running a school, such as salaries and teaching supplies. Thus, the only additional funding that AUSL needed to worry about was the remaining 16%. These additional costs were to cover the extra faculty, curriculum enhancements, the residency program for teachers, and all the other costs that go into an effective turnaround. Of that 16%, about 7% was additional money invested by CPS, and the rest was raised privately from foundations, corporations, government grants, and individuals.¹² The questions that remain are whether this privately raised money and AUSL's results can be replicated.

There should be little doubt that AUSL's money can be replicated. America is the most charitable nation in the world, and the more success non-profits like AUSL have, the more organizations and individuals will be willing to contribute. The harder issue is whether AUSL can replicate its success. AUSL has blended what other turnaround initiatives have done with what "closure" initiatives have done. Like other turnaround models, AUSL does not permanently close a school. However, many failed turnaround efforts can be classified as "turnaround light." They involve allowing schools to retain their principal and a majority of their teachers. They try to accomplish turnaround through educating existing faculty instead of replacing them. AUSL on the other hand, draws some influence from "closure models," which advocate for a complete restart. Like "closure models," AUSL replaces every teacher and administrator in a student's educational environment. Many of these teachers and administrators earn masters degrees from intensive privately run teaching academies. As a result, students are

not just moved around from school to school. Instead, they are allowed to return to their school now populated by highly qualified educators.

Because the AUSL model is relatively new, it is impossible to know for sure whether its success can be replicated in the long-term. It is entirely possible that every school will not be amenable to AUSL's model. If education research has shown anything, it is that there is no "magic bullet" for education reform. However, AUSL's turnaround model has certainly demonstrated sufficient success to warrant further exploration.

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^{xi} AUSL Website
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^{xii} Interview with AUSL employee Jim Blomberg

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