

A Season for Turnaround

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PUBLISHED: February 24, 2011

Spring is less than a month away. If one looks carefully, the sights of spring abound—small buds are on the trees, grasses push through the soil, and tax appointments are increasingly hard to come by. The sounds of spring are also present in California schools—one can hear the flap of CST forms as they land at schools, the far off warble of the CAHSEE getting closer, and the sound of number 2 pencils filling in ovals. However, this spring concert also portends the "result drums" that provide the beat for the educational improvement dance.

When test scores from this upcoming spring administration are finally released, [a large number of schools in California will not have made their achievement targets](#). Additionally, some schools, most of them populated by students from low socio-economic and traditionally marginalized backgrounds, will remain on improvement lists, with increasing numbers of them labeled as "persistently underperforming." Schools that hold this title are subject to mandatory "turnaround." The federal government offers four 'turnaround' models:

Turnaround: [The Local Education Agency \(LEA\)](#) replaces the principal and rehires no more than 50% of the staff; gives the principal greater autonomy; and implements other prescribed and recommended strategies.

Restart: The LEA converts or closes and reopens a school under a charter school operator, charter management organization, or education management organization.

School closure: The LEA closes the school and enrolls the students in other schools in the LEA that are higher achieving.

Transformation: The LEA replaces the principal; implements rigorous staff evaluation and development; institutes comprehensive instructional reform; increases learning time; and provides greater operational flexibility and support of the school. In California the 'transformation' model is the one most frequently chosen.

Once a model is selected funding will be provided for three years. Given the choice of models, fiscal timelines, and dedicated resources one might reasonably expect that these models are grounded in a solid evidentiary base, which has been well vetted by scholars and practitioners. Further, one might assume a large number of successful cases in a variety of contexts that could be visited and documented in order to guide improvement efforts.

Although these are reasonable expectations they are not necessarily the case. The challenging reality is that while we do have growing evidence around instructional capacity, "effective" schools, and reform, there is a dearth of research around successful school/system "turnaround." How specifically does an LEA go about turning around persistently low performing schools?

Additionally, even if the LEA could turn around a school, sustaining that performance is still a critical area for continued dialog,

inquiry, and informed action. The Institute for Education Sciences is due to release a report on early progress toward turnaround in the next months, but it likely will reinforce what we already know: [turning around schools is challenging work](#)

One of the most popular refrains in the chorus of turnaround is the use of data. Significant resources both at the state and local levels have been expended in providing access to data and data systems. The assumption is that performance will be enhanced if only 'data' (and in most instances this refers to standardized test data) could be successfully placed into the hands of educators; then, as the reasoning goes, instruction would be significantly improved.

Access to data in and of itself may well be useful, but the mere provision of data without building educator capacity for data use seems unlikely to result in meaningful change. Recent work suggests that for improvement to occur systems must focus on data-literacy, create cultures of data use connected to improvement, support opportunities for educators to access and make sense of a wide variety of data, and provide the time to discuss and connect data to practice.

However, as it stands now that level of engagement with data is more the exception than the rule even in some turnaround settings. Raising the issue of turnaround schools is important now, as major education policies are being written and rewritten. Moreover, thoughtful engagement around this topic may be more likely while it's still spring, as opposed to the typical knee-jerk responses after achievement scores are released and improvement lists are publicized.

School turnaround is complex work and as such will require multiple stakeholders at the table setting aside traditional, well-worn positions in seeking transformative solutions. So in the spirit of continuing the dialogue around improvement I wonder how and in what ways in this budgetary winter of discontent (that may well lead to a spring of dread and fall of fear) do we leverage our vast intellectual, human, and social resources in making sure our lowest performing schools make progress and not let down another generation of students?

Suggested citationDaly, A. (2011, February) *A season for turnaround* [Commentary]. Policy Analysis for California Education,.

<https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/season-turnaround>



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