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Emerging state turnaround strategies

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Efforts to improve outcomes for students in low-performing schools have been under way for decades, yet limited broad-scale improvements continue to frustrate families, school leaders and policymakers. The passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 ushered in a new era of accountability, requiring states to publicly identify low-performing schools and take action to improve them. This requirement highlighted inequities in education systems and spurred state initiatives to improve student learning, raise graduation rates and reduce drop-out rates.

However, state leaders continue to find that these piecemeal reforms are taking years to show results, if at all. Therefore, state leaders are eager to identify intensive and innovative interventions that produce more immediate improvements in the academic growth and achievement of students.

This brief provides information and available outcomes data for three school turnaround strategies that are gaining attention and momentum: innovation zones, recovery districts and receiverships. The report concludes with policy considerations that should be integral to a strategic approach to turnaround efforts. A strategic approach requires that states first conduct an internal assessment of the political landscape and structural supports/barriers that exist in the state before implementing a turnaround strategy.

Federal attempts to enhance turnaround efforts through school improvement grants (SIGs) have been costly (totaling more than \$5.7 billion) and, aside from some outliers, have produced meager gains in student proficiency. One in every three schools actually performed worse after receiving these funds.¹

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Frustrated by limited results from typical school restructuring initiatives, states are looking for turnaround strategies that produce immediate, dramatic and transformative changes.

States may want to conduct an initial assessment of their political landscape and the structural supports/barriers that exist in order to determine the most effective approach to implementing a statewide turnaround strategy.

Innovation zones differ from takeover districts and receiverships in that they do not require states to remove authority from the district.

Turnaround strategies

Innovation zones

Often, attempts at improving low-performing schools are limited by the schools' inability to work outside the confines of district and state policies. To address these limitations and inspire reform, some states have created innovation zones where struggling schools or districts are given the autonomy to experiment with new staffing, scheduling, budget and curriculum arrangements.³ The model itself, featuring autonomy from many district and state policies, is similar to that of charter schools, but innovation zones remain under the control of the local district.

Innovation zones have sprouted up in numerous districts and in various forms across the country. In some states, innovation zones are being used to not only help turn around low-performing schools, but also to grant already successful schools with flexibility to pursue personnel, budgeting and innovative learning strategies that might serve their students more effectively. For the purposes of this report, only zones focused on turnaround are discussed.

State examples

Indiana's Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation

Indiana's Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation (EVSC) has become a leader in utilizing innovation zone strategies. In 2009, the school district and union leadership worked together to develop the EQUITY Framework, which gives participating schools greater autonomy over things such as scheduling, school calendars and professional development. The framework was originally piloted at three district schools with positive results.⁴

After one of EVSC's underperforming schools received its sixth consecutive "F" letter grade, the district responded by expanding on the framework in the pilot schools and creating a Transformation Zone. The State Board of Education voted in May 2014 to waive mandatory state interventions, which can include state takeover, while the district imposed its own interventions on the school by including it in the Transformation Zone.⁵ The Transformation Zone's success helped lead to the passage of HB 1638 in the 2015 legislative session. The legislation makes a Transformation Zone a permissible State Board intervention for turning around chronically underperforming schools.

Tennessee's Shelby County School District and Metro Nashville Public Schools

State law requires that priority schools, representing the bottom 5 percent of schools in overall achievement, be subject to one of three intervention strategies, one of which is inclusion in a district innovation zone.⁶ There are two major innovation zones in **Tennessee**. The Shelby County School District (SCS), home to 50 of the state's lowest-performing schools, created an innovation zone in the 2012-13 school year that currently consists of 16 schools.⁷ Innovation zone schools in Shelby County have received funding through the federal SIGs and autonomies are focused particularly on variations in staffing to raise student achievement. Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) created an innovation zone in 2011 that currently consists of 10 schools. In three of those schools, the district is piloting a unique approach to teaching that emphasizes multi-classroom leadership that expands the reach of excellent teachers through a teacher leader model.⁸

Massachusetts Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership

A signature component of former Gov. Deval Patrick's Achievement Gap Act of 2010 allowed **Massachusetts** to create innovation zones.⁹ The initiative, which began its first year of operation in fall 2015, is already catching the attention of state leaders because of its unique school membership, large scale, and state and district partnership. The first innovation zone, known as the Empowerment Zone, consists of eight low-achieving middle schools serving more than 4,400 students and is governed by a board of state and local appointees. It represents a unique partnership between Springfield Public Schools, the Springfield Education Association and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.¹⁰

A turnaround strategy is an umbrella term that includes takeovers.

A turnaround strategy is any approach that emphasizes "dramatic and comprehensive intervention in low-performing schools that produces significant gains in achievement within two years and readies the school for the longer process of transformation into a high-performance organization."² These interventions can be implemented by a broad array of stakeholders who, importantly, can include those currently overseeing or teaching in a low-performing school.

A takeover strategy is any approach where the state removes control of a district or school(s) from the local education agency (LEA) and turns it over to the state education agency (SEA) or receiver. Takeovers are the most aggressive form of turnaround. The most important distinction is the state's role in removing control of a school or district from an LEA.

Recovery districts

In recovery districts, SEAs gain legal authority to take over their lowest-performing schools and assume the LEA functions for those schools. Schools in these districts are united not by geographic proximity, but rather by their status as underperformers. The belief is that by grouping schools in this way, states can more seamlessly implement comprehensive and aggressive reform strategies in schools facing similar challenges. Recovery districts tend to have a governance system in which “high-quality” operators function in a charter-prevalent model. Schools that are not run by charter operators are run instead by the state board or recovery district authority. Schools in these districts are granted various autonomies but are held to high expectations for student growth and achievement.

Although in the 2014-15 school year, only **Louisiana**, **Tennessee** and **Michigan** had fully functioning recovery districts, the approach is catching the attention of state leaders across the country and at least 11 additional states have considered or are in the process of making way for a recovery district.¹¹ Of these, **Nevada**, **Wisconsin** and **Georgia** have made the most headway. Nevada and Wisconsin’s versions were signed into law in the 2015 legislative session, and Georgia voters in 2016 will consider a constitutional amendment to allow the state to intervene in chronically failing schools to improve student achievement. If approved, Georgia residents will pave the way for a state recovery district.

Brief summaries of the recovery districts currently in place are provided below and an in-depth analysis of each is provided in Nelson Smith’s *Redefining the School District in America*, released in June 2015 by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

State examples

Louisiana’s Recovery School District

Louisiana was the first state to pave the path for a recovery district. The Recovery School District (RSD) was established in 2003 to more effectively address the needs of the state’s low-performing schools but came into full swing in the latter part of 2005 after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Orleans Parish School District (OPSD). The RSD has evolved significantly in the decade since Hurricane Katrina. Although initially many of the schools were “direct-run schools” operated by the RSD, today all of the 57 schools in the district are charters.¹² Through the citywide enrollment system One-App, parents in the RSD have unprecedented options for making choices about their children’s education, regardless of their ZIP code or tax bracket. The RSD closes charter schools that fail to meet scheduled growth and achievement benchmarks.

Tennessee’s Achievement School District

Tennessee’s Achievement School District (ASD) was established by the state legislature in 2010 in response to the federal Race to the Top (RTT) competition. Bolstered by RTT funds, the ASD has grown from six schools in 2012 to 29 schools in 2015. The ASD has evolved since its initial inception. Although half of the district’s first six schools were managed by the ASD, today less than 20 percent are directly run by the ASD.¹³ The five ASD-operated schools are granted charter-like autonomy and are led by state-appointed school leaders and teacher teams.¹⁴ The remaining 24 schools are operated by one of 14 charter operators that have been vetted by the ASD and a community-based advisory council.¹⁵ Although neighborhood assignments remain unchanged when a charter operator takes over a school, students are permitted to opt out and enroll elsewhere, and outside students are permitted to fill vacant seats.¹⁶ The district’s mission is to move the bottom 5 percent of schools in the state to the top 25 percent in five years.¹⁷

Michigan’s Education Achievement Authority

The Education Achievement Authority (EAA) of Michigan was also created in response to the RTT competition. Although the state did not end up receiving the federal grant, state leadership and substantial private funds helped prevent the effort from stalling, and in 2012 the district took over 15 of Detroit’s lowest-performing schools. Though the district has and continues to seek quality charter operators for its schools, today 12 of the district’s 15 schools are managed by the EAA, and only three are charter schools.¹⁸

The EAA has established clear expectations for potential operators. The 2014 request for proposals set a target that “within three years of operating a school, the EAA will challenge its turnaround and new school start-up partners to achieve results in the top 50 percent of schools in Michigan.”¹⁹ To date, internal setbacks have prevented the district from expanding inside Detroit, and legislative efforts to expand the district outside of Detroit have failed.²⁰ Gov. Rick Snyder’s recent executive order, which moved the State School Reform Office to an office that reports to him instead of the State Board of Education, may allow for the creation of a redefined statewide turnaround district.²¹

Receiverships

In receiverships, states gain legal authority to appoint a “receiver” for low-performing or financially distressed schools or districts. Receivership strategies differ from recovery district strategies because they do not require the creation of a new district. Authority over existing districts or, in some cases, individual schools is vested in an individual who has been appointed as the receiver. The receiver is granted all of the powers of a district superintendent and school board, although likely excluding ones to levy and raise taxes. The receiver determines what entities to partner with to run schools, which may include charter-management organizations and teachers unions.

State examples

The success of a receivership is highly dependent on the turnaround strategy the receiver implements. Four years ago, Michigan turned two districts over to receivership due to financial instability. Because Public Act 4 of 2011 (recalled in late 2012) expanded the role of the receiver, the receiver was granted authority not just over finances but also over the academic and educational plan for the school district. In these two cases, the operations of the districts were turned over to for-profit education management organizations and few, if any, academic improvements were cited. In 2014, former **Pennsylvania** Gov. Tom Corbett placed the York County School District under receivership, yet the receiver’s intention to turn the district into an all-charter school system under the management of a single education management organization led to a five-month legal battle ultimately overturning the takeover. Just this year, **New York** Gov. Andrew Cuomo successfully pushed for a receivership law reflective of Massachusetts’ law.²²

Massachusetts’ Lawrence Public School District

A 2010 Massachusetts law requires that districts declared chronically underperforming by the State Board of Education be placed under receivership. The law requires the receiver to be a non-profit entity or an individual with a demonstrated record of success in improving low-performing schools or the academic performance of disadvantaged students.²³ In 2011, the Lawrence Public School District in Massachusetts was placed into state receivership following years of poor academic achievement. Massachusetts’ Education Commissioner Mitchell Chester turned the failing district over to Jeffrey Riley, a former principal and chief innovation officer for Boston Public Schools. The turnaround effort has been lauded for effectively maintaining a strong union-district relationship and creating a combination of charter-run and district-led schools that meet the unique needs of the students.²⁴

Results and their limitations

Some states have had strategies under way for long enough that student outcomes data have been produced, while other state strategies are still too new to be evaluated. Available outcomes data for each strategy are provided in Appendix A. Generally, early evidence seems to indicate that innovation zones, recovery districts and receiverships are leading or beginning to lead to student growth and achievement in tested subjects. In some cases the strategies are also leading to improved student and/or parent satisfaction and high school graduation and college attendance rates.

However, there are limitations to and critiques of these widely broadcasted results that should be considered prior to any attempts at replication. For example, critics have argued that the outcomes data in Louisiana’s Recovery School District are skewed because of flawed and potentially biased data analysis, and critics also point to low state standards and still meager ACT scores as deflating the “New Orleans miracle.”²⁵ Groups such as the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools argue that because state takeovers often occur in districts with high percentages of minorities, the strategy is reinforcing segregation, stripping African American and Latino voters of the right to control their schools and placing this power in the hands of a fragmented governing system.²⁶ They also argue that state takeovers erode the connection between public schools and neighborhoods and dismantle community-based institutions.²⁷ To these critics, “the impacts of takeovers go beyond academic results,” and potentially negative effects on the community should be fully considered.²⁸

For these and other reasons, plans for state takeover are often met with heavy public resistance.

Policy considerations

Implementing a successful school or district turnaround strategy brings many challenges — financial, political and logistical. The following list includes policy considerations that leaders may want to explore before implementing any one turnaround strategy.

Funding. Making meaningful strides toward school improvement comes at a significant cost. Some states have successfully initiated turnaround efforts utilizing multiple funding streams that heavily rely on federal grants — RTT, SIGs and Investing in Innovation Grants (I3) — and philanthropic donations. As these funding streams dry up, states and districts are struggling to come up with the additional funds required to maintain turnaround efforts. Federal SIG funding for the Shelby County Innovation Zone in Tennessee, for example, is drying up and the cash-strapped district has invested \$7 million of its own scarce funds to keep the project moving. Although academic results have been promising, the availability of funding for ongoing maintenance and expansion has been a source of major concern for the district until recently, when it received a \$10 million philanthropic grant.²⁹

Governance and oversight authority. Successful turnaround efforts depend on a governance structure that is prepared to drive, support or sustain meaningful change. It is critical that a state conduct an evaluation to determine whether the SEA, LEA and boards of education have the capacity to lead turnaround efforts. If the capacity does not exist within those traditional governance structures, policymakers must determine who should fill that role.

Political landscape. State leaders must acknowledge the current political climate across the state and within each district. Policymakers should consider whether there is a strong culture of local control, whether education clauses in their state's constitution might impact the state's authority to implement takeovers, the role of teachers' unions and whether the political climate is supportive of school choice.

Community engagement. Related to but separate from political climate, the ultimate success of a turnaround initiative in any given community is highly dependent on buy-in from local residents. A school is often the bedrock of a community and those being most affected by the change should be included in decision-making throughout the process. Leaders must also be aware of any cultural sensitivities that may be present in the area. An **Arkansas** bill that would have created an achievement school district, for example, was pulled following opposition from critics who asserted that the district would be a hit on hard-won civil rights in the state.³⁰

Data collection and evaluation. One of the most common questions state leaders ask about a policy issue is “what's working?” States need to be able to evaluate the success or failures of their own initiatives and share that information with policymakers in others states. Monitoring and data are the critical building blocks of any effective school turnaround.³¹

Condition, capacity, clustering. These three state responsibilities, identified by Mass Insight's School Turnaround Group, are considered essential for school turnaround success.³² The group argues that effective turnaround that will produce dramatic and transformative changes requires special conditions that provide school leaders flexibility to act outside of state and districts policies, opportunities for school leaders to build and maximize leadership and staff capacity, and clustering of schools to encourage efficient use of resources, ease in replication of successful models and the establishment of effective K-12 pathways through school-level feeder patterns.

APPENDIX A

Some state strategies have been under way for enough years that outcomes data have been produced while other state strategies are still too new to be evaluated. Information and available outcomes data for each strategy are provided below.

Innovation Zones

Indicators	Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation’s (EVSC) Transformation Zone (Indiana) 2012-13 ³³	Shelby County Schools’ Innovation Zone (Tennessee) 2013-14 ³⁴
Student Growth/Achievement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ After its first year, the district rose one full point on a four-point scale — from a D to a C — the largest gain of any district in the state. ◆ After the 2012-13 school year, EVSC made the largest gains in student growth and was one of the state’s highest-performing urban districts. ◆ On assessments predictive of Indiana’s state accountability measure, Zone schools made larger gains than other similar schools in the district. ◆ In March 2014, the Indiana State Board of Education ruled that the interventions were “effective” and should be allowed to continue. This marked the first time the Indiana State Board of Education declined either to take over a chronically underperforming school or to mandate the district take some other action. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Though most iZone schools remain in “priority” status for overall student achievement, since becoming part of iZone, 11 of the now 16 schools have shown double-digit gains in success rates. Over a two-year period, math proficiency rates more than doubled and reading proficiency rates increased 6.8%, while science proficiency rates showed a dramatic 27.5% increase. ◆ On average, students in iZone schools are making superior achievement gains than students in ASD schools. However, critics argue this is because the ASD takes in new schools each year, and that schools in the ASD for longer periods have stronger results.

Recovery Districts

Indicators	Louisiana’s Recovery School District (RSD) 2013-14 ³⁵	Tennessee’s Achievement School District (ASD) 2014-15 ³⁶	Michigan’s Education Achievement Authority (EAA) 2012-14 ³⁷
Student Growth/Achievement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Increase from 25% to 57% in the number of students in grades 3-8 scoring at “basic and above” on state tests since 2006, compared to an increase from 50% to 69% in the state. ◆ Increase from 3% to 12% in the number of students in grades 3-8 scoring at “mastery and above” on state tests since 2006, compared to an increase from 16% to 24%, in the state. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Since 2012 proficiency on state math assessments in grades 3-8 has increased from 16.3% to 27% compared to 8.4% in the state, and science proficiency has increased from 16.5% to 26.5% compared to 4% in the state. During the same period, reading proficiency decreased from 18.1% to 13.8% compared to 1.5% in the state. ◆ Students in the ASD’s high schools made proficiency gains on end of course exams in every subject. Proficiency gains for students in these schools exceeded those for their state peers in five out of six subjects. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Test results from spring 2013 showed early indications of success. ◆ 64% of all students in the EAA achieved a year or more of growth in reading, and 58% achieved growth of 1.5 years or more. ◆ 68% of students achieved a year or more of growth in math with 59% achieving growth of 1.5 years or more.

Indicators	Louisiana’s Recovery School District (RSD) 2013-14 ³⁵	Tennessee’s Achievement School District (ASD) 2014-15 ³⁶	Michigan’s Education Achievement Authority (EAA) 2012-14 ³⁷
Student Growth/Achievement (cont.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Increase from 13% to 47% in the number of high school students scoring “good” or “proficient” on end of course exams since 2008, compared to an increase from 43% to 62% in the state. ◆ Charter takeovers in this district appear to have generated substantial achievement gains for the district’s highly disadvantaged student population. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Every school in the ASD has a higher average proficiency rate across math, reading and science than it did prior to ASD interventions began. The average composite proficiency rate has grown from 14% in 2012 to 24% in 2015.³⁸ Still, the percentage of scoring proficient or advanced is far lower than in Shelby County and the state. ◆ ASD schools in their second and third years — the first two “cohorts” of schools to join the ASD — earned the state’s highest possible growth rating, averaging a Level 5 on the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System. ◆ The ASD is serving as a “catalyst for change” for other priority schools in the state. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ In more than 80% of the schools, special education students outperformed their district counterparts in both reading and math. ◆ Average ACT scores in 2013-14 were no better than average scores in 2012-13.
Student and/or Parent Satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Ranked first among more than 100 large school districts nationwide on Brookings’ 2014 Education Choice and Competition Index, which examines variation in district-level choice based on objective scoring of 13 categories of policy and practice. ◆ 80% of students got one of their top three school choices in 2014. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ School culture and safety continues to improve, with higher numbers of students feeling safe (81%) and more students reporting a positive school culture (83%). ◆ Most parents continue to grade their schools an A or B. The parent satisfaction rate is 83%. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ The percentage of students feeling mostly or very safe in their classrooms increased from 56% to 64% between 2012-13 and 2013-14.
Graduation/College Attendance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Of the students who graduated from RSD schools in 2014, 47% immediately enrolled in college. Though lagging behind the citywide rate of 59%, it is a 4% increase from the year before. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Not yet available. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Though graduation rates across EAA’s six high schools declined significantly in their first year of takeover (from 64% to 54%), there was recovery in the EAA’s second year, reaching 62% in 2013-14.

Receiverships

Indicators	Lawrence Public Schools District (Massachusetts) 2014 ³⁹
Student Growth/ Achievement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Student growth percentiles on state assessments increased significantly in both English and mathematics since 2012, with district schools up 9% in English and 17% in math. ◆ Math proficiency levels have reached historic highs, increasing by 13% since 2012. English language arts proficiency levels are up 3 percentage points over that time. ◆ LPS has tripled the number of Level 1 schools in the district from two to six over two years. Level 1 is the state's highest accountability and assistance level and designates schools that are meeting performance targets.
Graduation/College Attendance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ The four-year cohort graduation rate increased to 61.3% in 2013 from 52.3% in 2011, and the dropout rate declined from 8.6% in 2011 to 5.8% in 2013.

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