



CHANGING THE METRICS OF TURNAROUND TO ENCOURAGE EARLY LEARNING STRATEGIES

Elliot Regenstein, *Ounce of Prevention Fund*
Rio Romero-Jurado, *Ounce of Prevention Fund*
Justin Cohen, *Mass Insight Education*
Alison Segal¹, *Mass Insight Education*





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the release of *The Turnaround Challenge* in 2007, the federal government and states have invested considerable time and money trying to improve the nation's lowest-performing schools. In many of the lowest-performing elementary schools, one major problem is that children are entering kindergarten already behind. Yet the metrics used to evaluate turnaround success all but guarantee that turnarounds will focus resources on later years. *Changing the Metrics of Turnaround to Encourage Early Learning Strategies* argues that the federal government and states should rethink their metrics for turnaround success in order to encourage earlier investment.

The achievement gap starts early—indeed, it can be measured even in the first year of life. High-quality early learning can make a significant difference in a child's ability to learn, particularly if it starts before a child turns 3. Moreover, successful early learning programs can build community and family ties that benefit children throughout their school careers.

Current turnaround funding supports different school-level strategies, but the primary metric of success—improved test scores—is the same across all available strategies. In elementary schools, English language arts and math test scores in 3rd grade and up are generally the key determinant of a turnaround's success. As long as these metrics are used, however, turnaround leaders will have a major disincentive to invest in early learning. Even if the period for measuring turnaround success is expanded from three years to five, waiting until 3rd grade to measure turnaround success discourages investment in early learning. If a school launched preschool for 4-year-olds in the first year of a turnaround, the first cohort couldn't even start impacting the school's key metrics until year five of the turnaround. Simply put, that time lag between investment and payoff is too long for most turnaround leaders to bear, particularly given the sense of urgency for immediate results that turnarounds are designed to bring.

To change this dynamic requires changing the metrics of turnaround success and adopting metrics that can be used prior to 3rd grade. Shifting the focus of measurement from standardized test scores to professional practice allows the success of turnaround to be measured starting in kindergarten or earlier. This in turn allows schools to reap the benefit of early learning investment almost immediately. Those professional practice metrics should be used in combination with child outcome metrics—but the range of available child outcome metrics should be expanded beyond standardized test scores, which leading researchers have said should not be used for program accountability with children younger than 3rd grade.

The goal of turnaround funding is to put schools on a trajectory to long-term success, but the metrics used to measure short-term success in turnarounds effectively eliminate the viability of a potentially important long-term improvement strategy. Accountability metrics that address early learning and the K–2 years will not only give turnaround schools a much more precise understanding of what is occurring before 3rd grade, they will encourage schools to address any challenges immediately. While early learning may not be the right solution in every turnaround elementary school, changing the metrics of turnaround to make it a viable option would have beneficial short- and long-term impacts in some of the nation's lowest-performing schools.



I. INTRODUCTION

School turnaround is meant to provide a rapid change in trajectory for the lowest-performing schools.* Turnaround schools† have had low achievement or significant achievement gaps, so they are given additional resources to make dramatic changes—typically focused on improving the quality of instruction and professional practice. But in many turnaround schools, a major challenge is that children entering kindergarten are already months or years behind. For these schools, efforts to improve professional practice will not change the fact that the school is in perpetual catch-up mode. To address that issue, they need to start much earlier with high-quality early learning.‡ Early learning can improve children’s kindergarten readiness and set the stage for longer-term success.

To date, early learning has not been a major strategy for turnaround schools, in large part because of the metrics of success used to evaluate the turnaround. Currently, the primary metric of success for turnaround schools is generally the improvement shown in scores on accountability tests administered in 3rd grade and up. Those test scores are expected to show significant improvement within the first two to three years of the turnaround. As long as that is the primary metric of success, however, turnaround leaders will have a major incentive to not focus resources on early learning. The children served by early learning in the first year of a turnaround will not take accountability tests until at least the fifth year of the turnaround, and by then the turnaround’s success or failure will have already been determined. As long as that remains the case, turnaround leaders will have a strong incentive to focus resources on serving children who will take accountability tests in the first two or three years of the turnaround— even if the long-term best interests of the school would be better served by greater investment in early learning.

What’s needed to change that dynamic is an entirely new way of measuring success in school turnaround. The new metrics of success should include two kinds of metrics:

- Metrics that address professional practice, including the quality of instruction and leadership
- Child outcome metrics other than scores on accountability tests

Unlike high-stakes accountability tests, these metrics are suitable for use in kindergarten through grade 2. If these metrics are used, then schools that use turnaround resources to support early learning can actually see that early learning investment impacts the determination of the turnaround’s success. New spending on early learning will not always be the greatest need at turnaround schools, and in many

* Mass Insight defines school turnaround as a “dramatic and comprehensive intervention in a low-performing school that 1) produces significant gains in achievement within two years; and 2) readies the school for the longer process of transformation into a high-performance organization.” Calkins, A.; Guenther, W.; Belfiore, G.; and Lash, D. (2007). *The Turnaround Challenge: Why America’s best opportunity to dramatically improve student achievement lies in our worst-performing schools*. Boston, MA: Mass Insight.

† “Turnaround schools” are schools that have been identified by the state for a “school turnaround” process based on low performance or significant achievement gaps. This includes, but is not limited to, schools that are identified for school turnaround based on federal requirements as discussed below. In this paper the term “turnaround schools” refers exclusively to elementary or kindergarten to 2nd grade (K–2) schools.

‡ The term “early learning” means school-based or center-based programs for children from birth through kindergarten entry that provide standards-based education, which includes, but is not limited to, Head Start and state-funded preschool programs.



turnaround schools better data is needed to help them determine whether early learning is the best use of resources. But at some turnaround schools early learning will be a smart long-term investment, and turnaround metrics should not discourage those schools from making that investment.

This paper first examines how low-performing schools can greatly benefit from high-quality early learning. It then argues that the next generation of turnaround metrics must include a different mix of short- and long-term metrics that create the right incentives for early learning, including metrics that address performance prior to 3rd grade accountability testing. The paper argues that when the federal government and states fund turnaround efforts, they should ensure that the metrics they use to judge their success do not discourage schools from using early learning as a long-term improvement strategy.

II. WHY EARLY LEARNING IS CRITICAL IN THE TURNAROUND CONTEXT

Turnaround schools are by definition low-performing schools. In turnaround elementary schools, children are often entering kindergarten already behind, meaning that high-quality early learning should be an essential part of any long-term systemic solution. High-quality early learning has long-term impacts on student achievement, can help strengthen parent and community engagement, and addresses a significant issue that to date no other turnaround strategy has tackled: the gaps turnaround schools aim to address emerge well before kindergarten entry.

A. The Achievement Gap Opens Before Kindergarten

Turnaround schools are starting out behind and playing catch-up from the first day children walk into kindergarten. Before entering kindergarten, the average cognitive scores of affluent preschool-aged children are 60% above children in the lowest-income bracket.² Maryland is one of the states that has been systematic about collecting school readiness data, and its data reflects this disparity. Maryland has made significant strides in the overall readiness of children entering kindergarten by expanding access to half- and full-day public pre-kindergarten for families at or below 300% of poverty, investing in innovative initiatives serving children birth to age 5, and making comprehensive improvements in curricula, assessments, and accountability systems through the state's Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant.³ Still, at-risk groups—including English language learners and low-income children—continue to lag behind their peers.⁴

Other studies further indicate that the achievement gap surfaces during the earliest years and changes relatively little after elementary school.⁵ Children's academic successes at ages 9 and 10 are set up by the amount of talk they hear from birth to age 3. Findings from a groundbreaking study showed that children from poor households enter kindergarten with a listening vocabulary of 3,000 words vs. 20,000 words from children in middle-income households.⁶ The early achievement gap between low-income children and their wealthier counterparts also has impact beyond the school age years into



high school.⁷ These findings signify how pivotal early experiences can be especially for disadvantaged children but also, importantly, how the learning gap manifests even prior to formal schooling.

B. The Impact of High-Quality Education in the Birth to 8 Years

1. Early Learning

In response to research showing the extent of the learning gap evident prior to kindergarten, there have been increased efforts to provide high-quality early learning to help close the gap. Studies on the impact of high-quality early learning programs have continued to demonstrate a wide range of benefits for children and families, especially those living in poverty.⁸ Key hallmarks of high-quality early learning programs include ensuring strong program leadership, evidence-based practice and integrated curriculum across child developmental domains, low staff-child ratio and small class sizes, strong engagement with families, high staff qualifications and intensive professional development, and a safe and healthy child-friendly classroom environment.⁹ These types of robust early learning programs have been shown to produce positive effects on children's cognitive skills, behavior, and social and emotional outcomes.¹⁰ A growing number of studies on early learning impacts have also found effects on children's readiness to learn, which lays the foundation for successful transition into kindergarten.¹¹

Longitudinal findings from model early childhood programs further point to long-term academic and social benefits consisting of higher educational attainment and increased earnings, improved health, more positive family relationships, and reductions in remedial education, crime, and receipt of public assistance.¹² The strong gains produced from high-quality early learning thus signals its significance in the education continuum and the valuable role it can have in developing strategies around school turnaround.



HIGH-QUALITY EARLY LEARNING THAT IS SAFE, HEALTHY, STIMULATING, AND ORGANIZED, HELPS CHILDREN ENTER SCHOOL READY AND PROVIDES THE FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESS IN SCHOOL AND LIFE. THE FOLLOWING ARE SOME KEY FEATURES OF A QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM:¹³

Educated, attentive, and engaged teachers and staff

- Teachers with four-year degrees and specific training in early childhood education
- Teachers who crouch to eye-level to speak to children, and who hold, cuddle, show affection, and speak directly to infants and toddlers
- Families and teachers exchanging information about the child's development and learning progress

A safe, healthy, and child-friendly environment

- A room well-equipped with sufficient materials and toys
- Classrooms in which materials and activities are placed at eye level for the children
- Materials and toys accessible to children in an orderly display
- Centers that encourage safe, outdoor playtime
- Frequent hand-washing by children and adults
- Visitors welcomed with appropriate parental consent

Stimulating activities and appropriately structured routines

- Children who are engaged in their activities
- Children offered breakfast and lunch and a time to nap
- Children participating with teachers and each other in individual, small-group, and large-group activities
- Children receiving a variety of stimuli in their daily routine using indoor and outdoor spaces and age-appropriate language, literacy, math, science, art, music, movement, and dramatic play experiences
- Preschoolers who are allowed to play independently

To create this environment requires limiting class sizes and teacher-to-child ratios, generally with no more than eight infants and toddlers and no more than 20 preschoolers in a classroom as well as a teacher-to-child ratio of 1:3 for infants and 1:10 for preschoolers.



2. Creating a Continuum with the Early Elementary Years

It is clear there is growing recognition that the early years up to age 8 (a child's typical age by 3rd grade) are critical to children's educational development and achievement, as children are acquiring the foundational skills essential to their future success.¹⁴ To sustain benefits attained from quality early childhood experiences, gains made must be reinforced in the early elementary grades. Research evidence indicates that reading proficiency in the 3rd grade is a strong predictor of high school graduation and career outcomes.¹⁵ Over $\frac{3}{4}$ of children in poverty are at increased risk of not graduating on time because they are not reading proficiently by the end of 3rd grade.¹⁶

A comprehensive learning continuum that builds on quality early childhood experiences and connects birth through 3rd grade provides another opportunity to reduce the achievement gap while connecting systems to nurture children's learning and development.¹⁷ Initiatives to align early learning to 3rd grade focus on improving coordination across the learning continuum in areas such as standards, curricula, assessment, instruction, teacher preparation, professional development, and engagement among schools and early childhood community providers and families.¹⁸

A challenge in the early elementary grades is that there is in effect no real accountability for kindergarten through grade 2.¹⁹ Research has shown that compared to teachers in the upper elementary grades, K-2 teachers may have lower teacher quality measures with regard to credentials that include years of experience, higher licensure scores, and National Board Certification. In fact, in the schools with the most disadvantaged students, accountability pressures that give incentive to assign stronger teachers to the upper grades are driving that distribution of teachers.²⁰ An accountability system that focused more on professional practice and less on student test scores would make it less likely that weak teachers would be reassigned to the early elementary grades. At this time, however, no state has implemented such a system.

C. Early Learning As the Bedrock of Parent and Community Engagement

Turnaround schools are far less likely to succeed if their turnaround strategies focus solely on "in-school" changes, and far more likely to succeed if they engage parents and the community. High-quality early learning can help provide a strong foundation for long-term parental and community engagement. Accordingly, early learning is a potentially critical piece of creating the kind of parent and community buy-in needed for a school turnaround to succeed in the long term.

1. Parent and Community Engagement is Critical to School Turnaround

Engaging parents and communities is a critical part of school success.²¹ A robust support system that involves engaged families has meaningful impact on children's cognitive, social, and emotional development and learning success—and can be especially important for disadvantaged children.²² A growing body of research has found that strong social support fosters student motivation in



school, encourages confidence, and increases the likelihood of academic achievement and successful post-secondary transition.²³ Students who attend turnaround schools are largely low-income²⁴ and experience a range of obstacles that make positive relationships with parents and other adults paramount to their success in education and life.²⁵ Students with high needs perform better in school when their families become involved in school activities, further supporting the value of family engagement in schools as a means for enhancing the academic achievement of low-income students.²⁶ This is a key element of “readiness to learn” on the Mass Insight Readiness Triangle (seen on page 9), which recognizes that turnaround schools must be sensitive to the context students face outside of school.²⁷

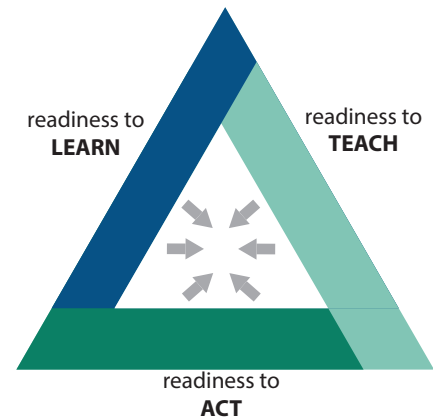
As turnaround schools and schools with similar challenges interact with students’ environments, they must continue to foster relationships with key adult figures—including parents and families—as well as extend their reach into students’ broader community settings. The community school model is becoming more prevalent in school improvement. Community schools leverage the school’s physical space to provide nontraditional supports to students and families within its setting, including health care, parent education, social services, and community engagement activities.²⁸ Partnering with community resources and using the school to build stronger connections among students, families, and community members supports the students’ development and readiness to learn. Additionally it bolsters the school environment and its network of community relationships.²⁹

On the macro level, creating stronger ties and communication channels with communities has far-reaching implications for poor-performing schools that can pave the path for school improvement. Recent initiatives by states and school districts to incorporate family and community engagement in school improvement show that strategies that prioritize engagement efforts and create opportunities for parents and community members to genuinely participate in schools and decision-making processes can make a difference in building community-school connections.³⁰ Schools that have connected with local community groups to generate increased engagement, for instance, have experienced enriched school-community networks, school climate, teacher-parent ties, teacher instruction and professional capacity, and increased student academic achievement.³¹ Additionally, research findings indicate that school-community collaborations have helped to shape education policy decisions and innovations that have boosted school and district-level resources and capacity.³²

While substantial evidence points to the important benefits of involved families and community partners in schools, schools serving largely underserved minority populations have generally struggled in this arena.³³ Regardless of the challenges that exist, a strong network of family and community support and resources throughout the educational pipeline plays a significant role in the success of each and every student, especially those whose development is influenced by the effects of poverty.³⁴

2. Early Learning Can Provide a Foundation for Long-Term Parent and Community Engagement

High-quality early learning is designed to build partnerships to ensure that responsibility for a child’s education is shared among the teacher and school, the family, and the community. Head Start, for example, funds dedicated family and community engagement initiatives focused on mobilizing school staff, parents, and community leaders together to promote children’s healthy development and learning.³⁵ The federal Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge has pushed states to include family engagement practices in the development of early learning systems.³⁶ High-quality early childhood programs such as Educare Schools have also incorporated intensive family engagement as part of their comprehensive model. These programs provide tailored support for individual families and promote practices that help to foster the parent-child relationship along with the parent’s role as an effective advocate on behalf of their child’s development and education.³⁷ Programs have also sought to utilize new parent and community engagement models in the transition to kindergarten.³⁸



In *The Turnaround Challenge*, Mass Insight Education identified three key dynamics for how high-performing, high-poverty schools attain high student achievement.

Early learning systems also seek to connect educational services with health and human services providers, which can help strengthen community ties. Developing relationships and alliances with community partners and social service providers can help to address health and human service needs that have significant impact on young students’ daily functioning in and out of the classroom.³⁹ These varying needs range from access to adequate meals to health care check-ups and immunizations to safe and secure housing, which individually as well as collectively, play a role in advancing student learning and success in school and later life.⁴⁰

Studies indicate that in these connections in the early childhood years, families feel welcomed to the schooling enterprise, but this sense changes in elementary school when school contact becomes more formalized.⁴¹ Thoughtful integration of early learning in school turnaround efforts thus provides an opportunity to bridge gaps in family and community engagement at the on-set and builds upon the effort to have parents, families, and communities as genuine partners throughout a child’s education. These partnerships lay the groundwork for a child’s learning trajectory and a school’s long-term success by helping families prepare to connect with their child’s elementary school and providing schools with early opportunities to form collaborative relationships with the young children and families they serve. Further, during times of transition, links between school and home are especially important to a child’s learning experiences. Families and communities are thus key to helping ensure a smooth transition from early childhood into kindergarten and the elementary years⁴² and promoting a child’s school readiness, which is strongly associated with 3rd grade test scores and later



achievement.⁴³ Involvement in such early transitions can shape future school engagement as families and communities participate in processes that foster confidence, skill, knowledge, and connection that can be essential to engagement in education.⁴⁴

III. CURRENT TURNAROUND FUNDING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Federal investments to support school improvement efforts have largely focused on turning around the lowest-performing schools quickly enough to show measurable improvement within three years, with “success” measured by indicators chosen by the state. Generally states have chosen student achievement scores on required accountability tests (which begin in 3rd grade) as a primary metric—which is to be expected, given that those accountability tests are a key success metric for all schools. But by focusing the metrics of success on 3rd grade and later, these turnaround metrics present a significant disincentive to investment in early learning. This section examines the resources available to turnaround schools, describes the approaches currently used in states, and then explains how those approaches discourage the use of early learning in school turnaround.

A. Federal Resources for Turnaround Schools

The US Department of Education allocates a great deal of funding for incentive-based grants to turn around persistently low-performing schools, such as Title I, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), Race to the Top, and School Improvement Grants (SIG). Other than Title I, districts usually become eligible for such grants based on the performance of individual schools, which are identified based on testing in 3rd grade and beyond. These funding streams can be used for early learning, although they generally are not.⁴⁵ Upon receiving any of these grants, schools across the country are given various timeframes to show improvement—and they tend to focus most resources on the grades immediately reflected in those standardized tests to gain quick wins and demonstrate positive impacts from the increased funding.

School Improvement Grants

SIG is perhaps the most widely known incentive fund within the Department of Education. The grant—announced in winter 2009 as a \$3.5 billion budget appropriation—requires state education agencies (SEAs) to identify the bottom 5% of all Title I schools. The Department of Education awards SIG funding to SEAs based on a formula that allocates SIG money in proportion to funds already received by the SEA under Parts A, C, and D of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The SEAs are then responsible for allocating the dollars through a formula (e.g., dividing the lump sum by the number of schools in the upcoming school improvement cohort) or competitive process (using proposals based off an SEA-issued RFP and awarding grants based on quality of plan and need) to local education agencies and schools.⁴⁶ SEAs are required to allocate at least 95% of the SIG funding they receive from the Department of Education to districts, and can use the rest for discretionary spending in Title I schools or districts. To be eligible for the SIG 1003(g) funding, schools



must be identified as persistently low-achieving and have had to implement one of four turnaround models: transformation, turnaround, closure, or restart.⁴⁷ On September 8, 2014, the Department of Education proposed to add new models, including a whole-school model and a model focused on implementing preschool and full-day kindergarten.⁴⁸

THE FOUR TURNAROUND MODELS

TURNAROUND MODEL: Replace the principal and rehire no more than 50% of the staff, and grant the principal sufficient operational flexibility (including in staffing, calendars/ time and budgeting) to fully implement a comprehensive approach to substantially improve student outcomes.

RESTART MODEL: Convert a school or close and reopen it under a charter school operator, a charter management organization, or an education management organization that has been selected through a rigorous review process.

SCHOOL CLOSURE: Close a school and enroll the students who attended that school in other schools in the district that are higher achieving.

TRANSFORMATION MODEL: Implement each of the following strategies: (1) replace the principal and take steps to increase teacher and school leader effectiveness; (2) institute comprehensive instructional reforms; (3) increase learning time and create community-oriented schools; and (4) provide operational flexibility and sustained support.⁴⁹

Current research does not point to any one model as being more effective than the others,⁵⁰ although early data suggests that the more dramatic interventions—namely restart and turnaround—lead to more rapid student achievement growth.⁵¹ Data shows that the transformation model is the most often applied of the four turnaround options. Researchers and practitioners agree it is the least controversial and least bold of the four models.

SIG grants typically run for three years, although the new proposed regulations would allow them to run for five years. For many schools, the 2012-2013 school year marked the end of the three-year cycle. In some states, schools' SIG grants may be rescinded before the three-year cycle is completed facing a lack of proof of improvement, or principals may be removed and replaced when data does not show progress toward predetermined gains.

More recently, Congress folded in language to the fiscal year 2014 budget that make significant changes to the SIG by paving the way for more state and district flexibility. Under the measure, states can develop their own intervention plans for school improvement and submit them to Department of Education for approval. Further, states would have the option to implement the "whole school



reform” model, which would allow schools to partner with organizations on interventions that show moderate evidence of success. States can also offer more implementation flexibility for rural schools. Additionally, the new language stretches the grants for states from three to five years.⁵² The Department’s September 2014 proposed rules would further codify these changes.

ESEA Waivers and Flexibility

In fall of 2011, President Obama’s administration announced that it would grant waivers to states for flexibility under the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act’s (NCLB) expectations.⁵³ The waiver process allows states to redefine their accountability systems to include a combination of proficiency and measures of student learning growth as well as expand accountability to other subjects beyond math and English; it also allowed states to add more indicators beyond test scores, although most did not.⁵⁴ To receive flexibility from the NCLB provisions, states must commit to implementing college-and-career-ready standards and assessments, using differentiated accountability, increasing support for effective instruction and leadership (including new evaluation systems), and working to reduce unnecessary burdens on SEAs and their schools. States are granted new flexibilities, including potential changes to how they identify and support their lowest-performing schools.

Through waiver accountability, states are required to designate low-performing schools as “priority schools” and “focus schools” whose performance needs improving, and must also recognize high-performing or progressing “reward schools.”⁵⁵ A priority school is defined as a school meeting at least one of the following characteristics: It is among the lowest 5% of Title I schools within the state according to both achievement and “all student groups” progress data; it is a Title I-eligible or Title I-participating high school with a recurring graduation rate of less than 60%; or it is a Tier I or Tier II SIG school currently receiving SIG funding. The defining characteristics of a focus school are centered on achievement gaps, or subgroup performance. Focus schools either have the state’s largest achievement gaps between the highest- and lowest-achieving subgroups within the school (or graduation rates for high schools), or have any particular subgroup with especially low achievement or graduation rates.

Once those schools are identified, schools or state agencies are given the option to use one of the four turnaround models to make improvements—or they can design their own interventions and implement strategies and supports that meet the needs of priority and focus schools.⁵⁶ The US Department of Education requires the use of seven “Turnaround Principles,” which include actions such as placing an effective principal in the building and redesigning the school day to include time in the day for teachers and administrators to collaborate around use of data.⁵⁷ The principles include structural, leadership, and cultural changes that the state must ensure the schools implement as turnaround interventions. These school improvement efforts must be meaningful and aim to enhance student learning and close achievement gaps across student groups.



B. Current State Approaches to Turnaround Accountability

1. Measuring Performance

Within the federal framework for school turnaround, states are given discretion to set the metrics for what constitutes turnaround success. In some states, the metrics are standardized across the state, and local turnaround leaders must craft school improvement plans aligned to these metrics; Connecticut, New Jersey, and Virginia are examples of states that use this approach.⁵⁸ By contrast, in some states local turnaround leaders propose metrics that the state then considers for approval; Pennsylvania and Wyoming are two examples of states using this approach.⁵⁹

Under either of these two approaches, the metrics of turnaround success have heavily emphasized standardized assessment scores in their metrics for turnaround success—consistent with their overall approach to accountability.⁶⁰ State accountability systems are primarily driven by school performance on standardized tests, which are administered starting in 3rd grade.⁶¹ Because it is those accountability systems that initially identify schools for turnaround, it is only logical that those same accountability systems would also be used as a gauge of turnaround success. Moreover, in the waivers the Department of Education required criteria for exiting “priority and “focus” status that demonstrate an improvement in both graduation rates and test scores for all students and subgroups—specifically, meeting annual measurable objectives (AMOs) in reading and mathematics proficiency rates.⁶²

The overall success of a turnaround is measured primarily in terms of a state accountability system, but additional metrics are frequently used to gauge performance in a more comprehensive manner. Whether the state is determining the metrics itself or approving local proposals, the metrics generally include indicators reflecting school environment and student performance, capturing both qualitative and quantitative measures. Some states also include a focus on qualitative metrics, identifying positive changes in school climate and culture as a major step forward in turnaround. The 5Essentials Survey developed for Illinois by the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research has been used to identify changes in leadership styles, family involvement, and general school environment.⁶³

While the federal government gives states flexibility in which indicators it uses to measure turnaround success, the Department of Education does require the collection of certain key indicators. Beyond descriptive data required of all schools, schools receiving School Improvement Grants also collect 14 general indicators that include average scale scores on subject tests, student and teacher attendance rates, minutes in the school year, and teacher evaluation information.⁶⁴ States may also choose to collect data beyond what the Department of Education asks for; some states provide a list of indicators to schools and districts, and allow them to choose the metrics most pertinent to their growth. For example, a school struggling with high rates of disciplinary infractions (e.g., suspensions, expulsions) may want to specifically track office visits and classroom culture data.



The School Improvement Grant, which most states' turnaround schools receive, utilizes metrics that focus on indicators that are both leading and lagging indicators. Leading indicators are metrics that typically predict the outcome and show up quickly, such as the number of minutes in a school day, student dropout rate, student attendance rate, and the number of students participating on state assessments. Lagging indicators are metrics that take longer to show up, including student achievement on state assessments, college enrollment rates, and graduation rates. These indicators have been used in different combinations to identify schools for turnaround, measure the progress of turnarounds, and determine whether schools can exit turnaround status (with assessment scores and graduation rates the primary drivers, as noted).

Over the course of turnaround, SEAs track school progress in different ways. For example, Virginia uses the Indistar system to track school progress and fidelity of implementation—essentially, whether the schools are doing what they said they would. Virginia also assigns state staff as liaisons to individual schools or districts to serve as a direct line to the State Turnaround Office; similar systems are used in other states, like Florida and New Jersey. Rhode Island takes performance monitoring a step further, using the small size of the state to its advantage to host biweekly meetings with principals and superintendents from low-performing schools. At these meetings, the Rhode Island Department of Education presents the district and school leaders with data specific to their schools, and facilitates a discussion about what the data means, and what might need to change to improve future results. In some other states, this type of deep review of the data may take place annually to evaluate whether the school is on a trajectory to meet its performance targets.

2. Taking Action Based on Results

Federal law authorizes states to take action if turnaround schools do not meet performance targets, but does not require it.⁶⁵ Some states' legislation allows them to close the school or restart it as a charter; some states have even created "extraordinary authority districts," which give states significant power and capacity to take over and operate continually underperforming districts or schools.⁶⁶

While legislation in many states authorizes state takeovers, in many states the state education agency is reluctant to use that authority. When Mass Insight interviewed SEA turnaround leads, district turnaround leaders, and school turnaround principals in eight different states, many admitted that their SEA turnaround offices did not have the capacity to take over a school even when the data leaves no choice, and instead will cycle in new leadership or rebuild leadership capacity. Other states will instead turn to pulling SIG funding when a school is not exhibiting fidelity of implementation to their approved improvement plan or is simply repeatedly failing to improve. These decisions are often made by an SEA office such as federal programs, school turnaround, or school improvement.

In the end, many states are finding it difficult to act upon school improvement implementation after becoming an ESEA waiver state. Difficulties range from lacking financial capacity to monitor districts



with fidelity, to waiver statutes conflicting with preexisting state law. In some cases, logistics are proving to be major obstacles. For example, Virginia was unable to comply with the first Turnaround Principle (requiring an effective school leader be in place). As required by Virginia state law, an ineffective principal in a priority school must be notified of imminent removal by June; however the schools were not labeled priority until later in the summer. As a result, the state was forced to wait until the end of the following school year to take action against the ineffective principals. This discrepancy between state and federal law causes state education officials to struggle with getting the best conditions in place for students.⁶⁷

C. Why Early Learning Doesn't Make Sense Under the Current Incentive Structure

While the ability of federal turnaround funds to support actions that improve student outcomes is as of yet unproven,⁶⁸ we know that federal requirements have enormous power to drive local spending. And in this case, the incentives are aligned to point one way: away from early learning.

In any turnaround strategy where test scores in 3rd grade and upward are the key metric of success, early learning will be discouraged. Take the hypothetical of a turnaround school that, in year one of its turnaround, institutes a preschool program for 4-year-olds. Those children will not take 3rd grade accountability tests until year five of the turnaround program—at which point their impact on the success or failure of the turnaround effort will be minimal at best. Furthermore, because schools will frequently have multiple cohorts of students whose test scores are being used for accountability purposes, the impact of those preschool-educated children on a turnaround school's performance may be minimal.

Of course, this hypothetical assumes that a successful 4-year-old preschool program is instituted in year one of a turnaround; research shows that high quality is needed to have long-term impacts,⁶⁹ which can be difficult to achieve in year one of a turnaround. Moreover, research also shows that the most effective interventions for the children with the greatest needs are those that last for more than one year.⁷⁰ As noted earlier, many children will have fallen behind long before entering a 4-year-old preschool classroom,⁷¹ suggesting that for many turnaround schools a 4-year-old preschool program may help incrementally but will not necessarily deliver dramatic change in the profile of incoming kindergartners.

These challenges are only magnified by the leadership turnover experienced by all schools, particularly turnaround schools, because leaders with short tenures may not be in a position to focus on long-term strategies. Research on principal effectiveness has indicated that it takes on average five years to put into place a teaching staff in addition to fully implementing policies and practices that will have a positive effect on school performance.⁷² Yet, principal tenure averages only three to four years in a standard performing school⁷³ and even less for low-performing schools.⁷⁴ A study of principals in Tier III turnaround schools in Arizona showed that the majority had tenure of three years or fewer.⁷⁵



Tenure is also low for superintendents in large urban school districts: A 2010 survey of urban district leaders found that superintendents averaged approximately three and a half years on the job.⁷⁶ If superintendents and principals do not reasonably expect to be on the job for five years, they may be unlikely to favor strategies that take at least five years to pay off, and more likely to focus on strategies that show more immediate impact on their key metrics.

Child mobility only makes it harder for local leaders to think of preschoolers as a worthwhile long-term investment. Research on school change indicates that just over half of kindergarteners remain in the same school by the end of 3rd grade, while over one-third will change schools at least once between kindergarten and 3rd grade.⁷⁷ The mobility rate is even higher in the lowest-performing schools,⁷⁸ where high mobility is associated with disadvantaged and low-income status.⁷⁹ In part because of higher mobility in high-needs schools, superintendents and principals in turnaround settings may reasonably calculate that putting turnaround resources into early learning will not serve as an effective strategy in a plan for short-term school improvement, because a meaningful percentage of the children served may end up moving elsewhere. Adopting new accountability in the K-2 grades would allow turnaround schools to see at least some short-term benefit from the early learning investment in their accountability metrics during the K-2 years. Even if leaders of turnaround schools with high rates of mobility doubt that early learning investment may not help them achieve their accountability metrics, the *state* has a significant interest in seeing children benefit from high-quality early learning: many of the children that change schools may move within a district or across districts but remain within the state.⁸⁰ This means that if anything, the state should be creating positive incentives for early learning investment.

In sum, while the children themselves and the system as a whole may benefit from the provision of high-quality early learning, the improved child outcome results supported by early learning do not currently impact the metrics for which key turnaround decision-makers are held accountable.⁸¹ Accordingly, those key decision-makers are in many instances making the rationally self-interested choice to invest elsewhere. The only way to fundamentally change the level of early learning investment in turnaround schools is to change the orientation of turnaround decision-makers' rational self-interest.



IV. REDESIGNING THE SYSTEM

Fundamentally changing how turnaround metrics influence implementation will require action at the federal, state, and local level. This section proposes actions that leaders at all of those levels can take to change the way turnarounds are implemented, with the goal of utilizing high-quality early learning as a long-term strategy for school improvement. The recommendations are written to be at least somewhat independent, so that stakeholders and decision-makers at any level can act independently; that said, clearly the change will be most dramatic if all of these actions are taken together.

A. The Federal Government Can Be Tighter on Goals, Flexible on Means

1. Requiring Early Learning as Part of Goal-Setting

US Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, has often expressed a desire to be “tight on goals, loose on means”⁸²—setting clear targets but giving local actors the flexibility to determine how to meet those targets. In school turnaround, however, federal policies have largely been just the opposite: States (and often school districts) are allowed to set their own goals for turnaround schools but are given prescriptive models for how to achieve those goals. While the means have been made more flexible in recent years,⁸³ the federal government could do more to help ensure that states, districts, and schools are setting the right goals.

The federal government could take an important step toward enhancing the incentives to include early learning in school turnaround efforts by requiring states to set goals for improving early learning and early elementary grade performance as part of any federally funded turnaround effort. The exact goals can vary by states given differences in overall state accountability systems and approaches. But it would be appropriate for the federal government to require that states have those goals, which would shape resource use and local decision-making in turnaround work. The goals would need to be grounded in revised accountability metrics (as discussed in IV.B.3 below), with a focus on both improved professional performance and improved child outcomes.

A major purpose of school turnaround is to create rapid improvement in school performance—essentially, to break and reset the school’s trajectory. But changing a school’s trajectory matters at least as much before 3rd grade as it does after. Most of the hard work of turning around a school takes place at the state and local level, so the best role the federal government can play to shape that work is to ensure that state and local turnaround leaders are addressing the issue of kindergarten readiness and early elementary performance.

2. Providing Dedicated Funds for Early Learning

Another approach that the federal government has been asked to consider is to provide targeted funding, through SIG or some other sources, to support early learning as part of turnaround packages, or incentives to use Title I funds to support early learning (which is already permitted).⁸⁴



While dedicated funding for effective early learning is generally a good thing, there is a risk that separate funding streams supporting early learning in turnaround schools that are not tied to the primary outcomes of the turnaround effort will turn early learning into a side project, rather than a core focus of the turnaround work. The most effective early learning programs will be those that are of high quality and well aligned to improved K–2 efforts, and while that is possible through a separate dedicated funding stream, it is less likely if the overall metrics of success in turnaround do not track progress before 3rd grade. Accordingly, dedicating turnaround funds for early learning is far more likely to be effective if the goals of the turnaround include a focus on successful preparation for kindergarten entry and achievement in the early elementary years.

It is also worth noting that dedicating federal funds to early learning represents tightness on means rather than goals. Increasing spending on early learning in school turnaround is a strategy, not a goal, and at the federal level, the appropriate focus is on the goal—improved child outcomes—rather than the strategy.⁸⁵ Dedicating a set percentage of school turnaround funds for early learning would be an improvement over the current situation, but the more impactful course of action would be to change the incentives that affect all decisions about school turnaround funds—so that early learning would be a logical investment for local leaders charged with allocating those funds.

3. Creating an Early Learning Turnaround Model

On September 8, 2014, the US Department of Education proposed new regulations governing the School Improvement Grant program.⁸⁶ The proposal includes the creation of an early learning model for school turnaround, which represents an important recognition by the Department of Education of the role that early learning can play in improving long-term school outcomes.⁸⁷ The model requires implementing districts to provide full-day kindergarten, high-quality preschool, and joint planning across grades, in addition to other requirements similar or identical to the requirements of other models.⁸⁸

The major limitation of the Department's approach is that it creates a framework for implementing early learning in turnaround without changing the incentives to do so. It is true that the regulations also extend the period of turnaround from three to five years,⁸⁹ which gives children in early learning more time to work through the system—but still, preschoolers from year one of a turnaround will only enter 3rd grade in the fifth year of a turnaround, meaning that the impact of preschool on turnaround metrics is still marginal. Accordingly, creating this model without changing the metrics by which turnarounds are judged will mean schools have no additional motivation to support early learning, even if they now have a more explicit mechanism for doing so.⁹⁰ Amending the means without changing the goals is unlikely to yield substantial new investment of turnaround funds in early learning.



B. States Can Develop and Use Better Data to Shape Local Action

While all turnaround schools have low overall performance, the nature of the problems—and most promising solutions—may vary widely from school to school. Accordingly, one important role of the state is to ensure that turnaround efforts are based on an accurate diagnosis of the problems, and include strategies reasonably calculated to address those problems. There are several data-based strategies states can support that help maximize the likelihood of success in their turnaround efforts.

1. Quantify the Kindergarten Entry Gap in Turnaround Schools

One important strategy turnaround schools can use is assessments that help them understand the knowledge and skill base of their incoming kindergarteners. In some states, kindergarten entry assessments are already in widespread use; in others, they are under development.⁹¹ Even in states without a statewide kindergarten entry assessment, states could ensure that turnaround schools are using kindergarten entry assessments to understand children's development, abilities, and knowledge prior to entering kindergarten. Kindergarten entry assessments can benefit educators by offering a baseline snapshot of children's readiness that can be meaningfully used to support instruction, promote program alignment and improvement, and enhance learning environments.⁹² It can also give school personnel and families valuable information on children's learning and development as they move through kindergarten into successive grades and acquire new concepts and skills.⁹³

Leading experts have cautioned against using kindergarten entry assessment to evaluate the effectiveness of individual early learning providers.⁹⁴ It is appropriate, however, to use kindergarten entry assessment to inform how best to use resources in a turnaround setting. For example, if the assessments show that children are developmentally behind at kindergarten entry, that indicates that the school may greatly benefit from an early learning strategy to help close the early achievement gap. On the flip side, if the kindergarten entry assessments show more promising results than 3rd grade assessments, schools might focus resources primarily on addressing disparities in the early elementary years. Of course, at many schools both kindergarten entry and K-2 performance will be an issue, but kindergarten entry assessment results will help turnaround leaders understand the scope of the problem and target resource- across the birth to 3rd grade spectrum.

2. Identify Child Early Learning Experiences

One challenge that elementary schools face is that their incoming kindergarteners have had a wide variety of experiences during their preschool years. In some turnaround schools, many of the children may have received state-funded preschool or Head Start—but not necessarily from the same providers. In some schools, children may have largely been in child care settings, either center-based or home-based.



The challenge of turnaround schools having to serve children coming from multiple settings is not unique to elementary schools because many turnaround high schools and middle schools have multiple feeder schools as well. But the challenge is far greater in elementary school. The early learning landscape is incredibly diverse, and importantly, in many communities, only a small percentage of children are served by the programs run through a school district.⁹⁵ In addition, most early learning programs operate without the attendance boundaries that most public schools use,⁹⁶ so the children entering a given turnaround elementary school may have received early learning services in other communities.

The first step to addressing this challenge is quantifying it. Turnaround schools should identify what early learning experiences their entering kindergarteners are coming from. Having that information can then shape a school's strategy for engaging the early learning community. For example, if a given school's entering kindergarteners come primarily from a small number of Head Start or state preschool providers, the school can build a strategy focused on partnership with those providers. If the entering class comes from a broader range of settings and early learning experiences, then different strategies may be needed. (Local strategies are discussed further in subsection IV.C below.) Having this information is an essential first step in the process, however, and turnaround schools should be required to undertake it as part of their work plan—potentially with assistance from the state, regional entities, or their district.

3. Create Metrics for Early Success

Whether the federal government requires states to define metrics of school turnaround success focused on improving early learning and early elementary performance, states can require such metrics in local turnarounds. States have the choice of either defining the metrics themselves or requiring each turnaround school to define the metric itself, as described in III.B.1. Presumably states will approach this issue in the same manner they approach the larger question of setting turnaround metrics.

Accountability for turnaround success should focus on the same two goals that accountability systems writ large should focus on: improving professional practice and improving child outcomes.⁹⁷ Importantly, there must be metrics that allow progress toward these goals to be measured in kindergarten through 2nd grade, so that the impact of early learning can be felt within the first three years of the turnaround. In the birth through 2nd grade years, the balance between these two categories should be weighted toward professional practice, in part because it can be measured more consistently. This is essential for the purpose of having external validators declare that a school has made sufficient progress to exit turnaround status.

- Measures of school-wide professional practice should broadly encompass the range of activities that successful schools engage in. A research-based framework for doing so has been identified



by the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (as noted in III.B.1), and includes five “essential elements”: school instructional guidance systems, professional capacity, parent-community-school ties, the learning climate, and school leadership to drive change.⁹⁸ Using these metrics involves external reviewers evaluating schools, which is already a part of some states’ turnaround process.⁹⁹

- Child outcome metrics for children prior to 3rd grade should be ones that are developmentally appropriate, that measure progress along critical developmental domains, and that can be externally validated. At this point, existing child assessments that meet these standards were not designed for purposes of school-level accountability. For now, in the early years, measures of professional practice should account for well more than 50% of a school’s accountability.
 - One example of a metric that might be used is chronic absentee rate. Research has shown that young children and adolescents who are chronically absent learn less and develop fewer skills during the school year and experience lower overall academic performance. Chronic absence in preschool and the early elementary grades is strongly linked to chronic absenteeism in later years.¹⁰⁰ Chronic absentee rate is already being used as a metric by the California CORE districts in their ESEA waiver.¹⁰¹
 - While there are some measures that can be used already to measure child learning and development prior to 3rd grade, the state of the art is emerging, and more work is needed in this area.¹⁰² Though leading early childhood researchers have cautioned against using child assessments as accountability measures,¹⁰³ existing tools—including kindergarten readiness assessments, and nationally-normed tool such as the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test¹⁰⁴ (measuring receptive vocabulary) and the Woodcock-Johnson-III¹⁰⁵ (measuring cognitive abilities)—have increasingly been used in research and early learning settings to examine child outcomes. Thus, while these child assessment results should not be used to determine whether a school should remain in turnaround status, they should be used by leaders in turnaround schools (and non-turnaround schools) as an important gauge of child progress.

Within these categories, to the extent possible, metrics of turnaround improvement should be aligned to the diagnosis that led to the school’s placement in turnaround status, so that the metrics measure the school’s progress in whatever areas were identified as needing improvement.

Using metrics for turnaround accountability focused on the birth through 2nd grade years is essential to getting turnaround schools to focus on instructional quality and child outcomes in these years. If these factors are weighted as heavily (or more heavily) than test scores in later years, it will create strong incentives for turnaround schools to focus on the quality of the early learning experiences of their future students, the quality of coordination between the school and early learning providers, and the quality of instruction in kindergarten through 2nd grade. Improving in these areas will not



help schools with their 3rd grade test scores within three years of launching a turnaround, but they can help change the long-term prognosis for student success in the turnaround school.

States should also emphasize the importance of rigorously evaluating the impact and quality of early learning interventions in the turnaround context. While effective early learning interventions can be meaningful, part of operating in the turnaround context is making sure that all strategies (including early learning) are also carefully evaluated. If early learning strategies are not demonstrating their intended effect, then an alternative approach should be taken.

C. Local Schools Can Provide Services and Coordinate with Partners

Schools and school districts support early learning in multiple ways. One important method is as a direct provider: Many schools provide Head Start or preschool (funded either by the federal government or state or local funds), and some go beyond that to provide additional early childhood services. Another important method is being active contributors to the local early learning community, whether or not a school is a direct service provider. How a school approaches each of these methods should be shaped by available resources and community need.

1. Schools Can Be Direct Service Providers

Some turnaround schools are already direct providers of preschool and infant/toddler services (including Head Start and Early Head Start) through some combination of federal, state, and local funds. Whether a school is currently providing early learning, part of developing its turnaround plan should be assessing whether to increase its early learning offerings. If a school's analysis shows that its kindergarteners are developmentally behind, and many of its kindergarteners have not had access to effective early learning, then the school should strongly consider expanding its early learning services—and ensuring that any services it does provide are of sufficient quality and duration to meet the needs of families and have an educational impact. There are multiple approaches schools can take to expand access to quality preschool, either through adding new classrooms or improving the quality of existing classrooms, in a manner integrated into the overall approach to school improvement:

- **Use school turnaround funds.** These flexible funds can be used for early learning, but generally have not been. The reason, of course, has frequently been that those funds were spent on strategies that had an immediate impact on turnaround metrics. If the metrics of turnaround are changed to include early learning and early elementary performance, then these flexible funds can be used on early learning as a strategy that can have an immediate impact on how the school performs under those metrics.
- **Aggressively seek available federal and state funding.** This opportunity may not be available in all states, but in states where state-funded preschool is expanding it may well be a viable option—either through a state formula or a grant application process.



- **Reprioritize other flexible funds such as general state aid, local property tax funds, or Title I dollars.** This approach is difficult because turnaround schools have many needs, but if an analysis has shown that children are entering kindergarten behind, it may be possible to make the case for repurposing funds in this manner.

Before expanding the number of early learning classrooms a school provides directly, it should also survey the early childhood landscape in the community. It may be that in some instances, the provider best equipped for rapid expansion is not the school itself but a private provider or Head Start grantee. Every community's needs and resources will be different, so analysis and communication will be critical for schools seeking to fund direct expansion. One option that many districts have used is to use district funds to provide services through private providers, and there are numerous models that can be effective depending on state law and local context.¹⁰⁶

2. Schools Can Partner with Community Providers to Improve Quality and Access

Even if a turnaround school has no new funds to dedicate to expanding access to early learning, it can improve the effectiveness of its partnerships in the community to create a more seamless continuum of learning. There are a number of practices schools can engage in that improve the experience for children enrolling in kindergarten:

- Effective transition planning that focuses on children's movement through the learning continuum, particularly during the shift from prekindergarten to kindergarten.¹⁰⁷ To help sustain gains from early learning, a smooth transition plan must ensure the readiness of children for school, readiness of schools to serve children, and readiness of families and communities to support children.¹⁰⁸ This can include intentional time for transition practices, data alignment and transfers, and clear communications about transition processes for parents.
- Aligned curriculum and assessments between and within pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, including cross-training for teachers. These linkages have important implications for how children experience continuity and should be aimed at what is meaningful to children's learning and development.¹⁰⁹
- Effective, aligned professional development for early learning and K-12 teachers that emphasizes the full birth to 3rd grade continuum. Professional development should be high quality and ongoing in its approach. For example, professional development at Educare Schools is built into the program structure and occurs routinely. The Educare professional development model focuses on intensive embedded staff development, an interdisciplinary approach, and reflective practice and supervision.¹¹⁰ Joint opportunities for professional development including both preschool and K-2 teachers can also help create a smoother educational continuum.
- Quality family and community engagement is an essential component to supporting and advancing young children's learning, as referenced in Part II.C. Schools can help to foster the notion that this



transition is a shared responsibility among many individuals and institutions. It is also a process that all partners experience and not only an event that occurs to a child.¹¹¹

Schools with students coming from a diverse array of early childhood experiences may face different challenges to engaging in these practices compared to schools that draw a high percentage of their students from a small number of early learning providers. Regardless of the number of partnerships involved, however, schools must continue to work closely with communities. By developing strong connections with local providers and the larger community, schools recognize the dynamic nature of relationships involved in the successful transition of a child from early learning to elementary school.¹¹²

How schools approach their relationships with community providers may vary somewhat depending on the district's provision for school choice. Elementary schools in districts where attendance boundaries largely define enrollment may have an easier time approaching early learning providers in their catchment area because those providers will know that their children will likely end up in that public school. In contrast, elementary schools in districts with strong choice provisions may have stronger incentives to form meaningful partnerships with high-quality early learning providers and engage in instructional alignment efforts, which could lead to parents of children enrolled in those early learning programs choosing to send their child to that elementary school.

V. CONCLUSION

Early learning is an important strategy for improving the lowest-performing schools, but the current incentive structure in school turnaround is set up to discourage the use of this strategy. By changing how the success of turnaround efforts are measured, turnaround leaders—at the federal, state, and district level—can change the practices used in turnaround schools to increase the percentage of children who enter kindergarten ready to succeed. Improving kindergarten readiness is a strategy with significant potential to permanently improve long-term child outcomes in turnaround schools, so creating incentives that support kindergarten readiness are a critical change to school turnaround efforts—one that could substantially boost the likelihood that once schools have been turned around once, they will remain on the right trajectory.

Importantly, the problem of accountability structures setting the wrong incentives for early learning is not one limited to turnaround schools. While non-turnaround schools may not face quite the same level of pressure to improve dramatically in three to five years, they too are accountable primarily for their test scores in 3rd grade and up. What makes the turnaround context special is the required timeline for improvement, and the additional resources provided to make that rapid improvement. But there is no question that lessons to be learned from changing the accountability metrics for turnaround schools are ones that could potentially be meaningful throughout the public education system.



ENDNOTES

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Mass Insight Education
18 Tremont Street Suite 1010
Boston, Massachusetts 02108
617.778.1500

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Ounce of Prevention Fund
33 West Monroe Street Suite 2400
Chicago, Illinois 60603
312.922.3863

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