

Evaluating the State Turnaround Strategy from *The State Role in School Turnaround: Emerging Best Practices*

Daniel Aladjem

- ▶ [Jump to document](#)
- ▶ [Purchase the full publication](#)
- ▶ [Visit CenteronSchoolTurnaround.org](http://CenteronSchoolTurnaround.org)
- ▶ [Browse the WestEd bookstore](#)

RECOMMENDED CITATION:

Aladjem, D. (2014). Evaluating the state turnaround strategy. In L. M. Rhim & S. Redding (Eds.), *The state role in school turnaround: Emerging best practices* (pp. 157-166). San Francisco, CA: WestEd. Retrieved from http://centeronschoolturnaround.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Evaluating_the_State_Turnaround1.pdf

About the Center on School Turnaround

The national Center on School Turnaround focuses on providing technical assistance to, as well as building the capacity of, states to support districts and schools in turning around their lowest-performing schools. The Center is led by WestEd in partnership with the Academic Development Institute, the National Implementation Research Network, and the Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education at the University of Virginia.

Focus Areas

- Developing SEA Staff Capacity and SEA Organizational Structures
- Building District Capacity
- Creating Policies, Incentives, and Partnerships to Ensure a Pipeline of Turnaround Leaders
- Promoting Cooperative Labor-Management Relations
- Promoting the Use of Expanded Learning Time
- Creating Systems and Processes to Ensure a Pool of High-Quality Turnaround Partners
- Ensuring the Availability and Use of Data Systems at the SEA Level
- Supporting Schools and Districts in Establishing a Positive School Climate
- Monitoring and Evaluating School Turnaround Efforts
- Improving Capacity of School Boards to Support Turnarounds
- Engaging Families and Communities
- Building Political Will for Dramatic Change

Evaluating the State Turnaround Strategy

Daniel Aladjem

Evaluation resources, especially for evaluating school reform, improvement, and turnaround, abound and are readily available on the internet. Resources range from general, introductory, evaluation texts (e.g., Wholey, Hatry, & Newcomer, 2010) to resources focused directly on helping states evaluate their turnaround efforts (Herman, Aladjem, & Walters, 2011). Both types of resources can play important roles in improving the implementation as well as outcomes of turnaround efforts. Wholey, Hatry, and Newcomer provide a concise introduction to all aspects of evaluation. As such, it is an invaluable resource for every evaluation effort. Herman, Aladjem, and Walters, on the other hand, provide specific examples of how a state might think about evaluation of federally funded School Improvement Grants (SIG). This chapter takes a different approach. Aside from avoiding replicating prior work, this chapter seeks to address a different aspect of evaluation. Rather than explore how to evaluate SIG efforts per se, this chapter will provide examples of how states evaluate *their own* work to implement SIG. The object of evaluation for this chapter is not the schools, teachers, or students who ultimately benefit from SIG, but the work of states *themselves*. The central questions motivating this chapter are: “How can states be reflective about their own practice?” and “What lessons can states learn from other states?”

This chapter consists of three main sections. The first section will review briefly the literature on evaluating SIG and provide a simple conceptual framework for this chapter. Next, the heart of the chapter will provide examples from several states of how they have thought about their own work supporting SIG implementation and outcomes and present lessons learned from these efforts. This section is organized topically, rather than by state, as what individual states learned is less important than the patterns of their lessons that might be

generalized to benefit all states. Finally, a brief summary precedes a few pointed action principals for states.

Literature Review

The literature on evaluating school turnaround focuses primarily on the implementation and outcomes of turnaround interventions in schools. Within the literature on school turnaround (for the purposes of this chapter we ignore the broader literature on school reform and improvement that clearly has implications for any school turnaround effort), there are two categories of scholarship that bear directly on the question of evaluating state turnaround efforts. First is the broad analytic work on turnaround. Second are the few empirical studies to date of state turnaround efforts. In lieu of evaluation guidance, the federal government has enumerated a set of indicators of school performance and required states to submit data reflecting these indicators. While important metrics, these federally required data do not—and do not purport to—shed much light on the contribution of state activities to the accomplishment of desired turnaround outcomes.

The broad literature on school turnaround goes further than the federally required turnaround indicators by providing more context and nuance on the selection, application, and interpretation of indicator and evaluation strategies. Two reviews on evaluating turnaround are particularly useful. First is Kowal and Ableindinger's (2011) look at leading indicators of school turnaround. Kowal and Ableindinger approached the problem of identifying leading indicators by examining the process used outside education, including venture capital, franchising, and industrial research and development. From the experience of these other fields, they identified "key principles and processes to guide the design and use of leading indicators in education" (p. 1): identify a set of starting leading indicators, "zealously" monitor, and act on the data. To select leading indicators, Kowal and Ableindinger recommended selecting indicators that are "based on known success factors," "constantly evolving" to better predict success, "tailored to specific circumstances," and "based on specific timetables" (p. 2). School and districts in turn should monitor progress frequently and on an ongoing basis. Program monitors need to be hands-on in monitoring activities, and monitors need to tailor monitoring based on the information they collect. With data from leading indicators in hand, Kowal and Ableindinger recommended actions ranging from state and/or district intervention that may take varied forms from targeted assistance to major changes, such as withdrawing financial support to providing increased autonomy for successful progress. They applied these principles and provided an initial set of leading indicators.

Kutash et al. (2010) provided an overview of school turnaround more broadly, examining not only indicators and metrics of success but also funding, prevalent models of turnaround, and key actors. The objective was to provide

a primer on turnaround in order to promote the success of turnaround efforts. They based the report on interviews with turnaround experts and published reports and articles. Looking only at the treatment of measuring success, Kutash et al. defined school and system success. They defined school success as determining what to measure, identifying how to measure it, setting benchmarks, and establishing a timeline. They defined systems success as setting turnaround-specific goals, tracking performance of all schools, evaluating districts' support for turnaround, and finding and sharing best practices.

While neither Kowal and Ableindinger (2011) nor Kutash et al. (2010) directly address the thrust of this chapter, they present worthy starting points for looking at turnaround evaluation issues generally. Two empirical studies directly inform the central issue of this chapter. First is a look at Washington's early experience implementing its SIG award. The second study, which is ongoing, examines Michigan's SIG experience.

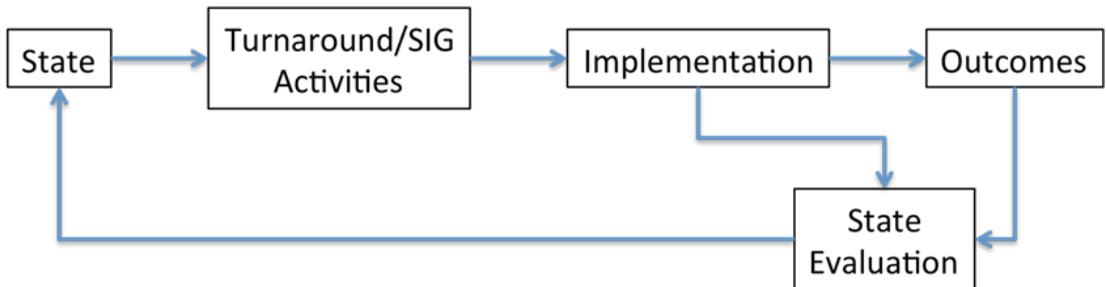
Washington's early experience stands as a cautionary tale of potential implementation pitfalls. Yatsko, Lake, Nelson, and Bowen (2012) described implementation of the SIG awards as being very much like prior school reform efforts, with few, if any, of the bold or transformative changes one might have expected to see in SIG schools. They attributed this disappointing observation primarily to rushed and tentative implementation at the district level, driven by "politics, fear of controversy, lack of knowledge, and the constraints of collective bargaining" (p. 6). They observed, moreover, districts too focused on compliance and generally lacking the capacity to undertake the ambitious agenda of turnaround. Schools were found lacking focus on turnaround strategies and mired, instead, in "kitchen sink' improvement strategies" (p. 17). They observed the SEA as a compliance monitor rather than a problem-solving turnaround partner supporting districts.

Contrast Washington's experience with Michigan's. Bojorquez, Rice, Hipps, and Li (2012) examined the first year of Michigan's SIG awards. In contrast to Washington, Bojorquez et al. documented changes to governance and leadership in SIG schools, although district level changes to governance and leadership were more limited. They reported changes to human capital management and monitoring consistent with their expectations for the first year of SIG awards. Additionally, they noted changes in teacher expectations about reform in the guise of turnaround; turnaround was not to be "business as usual." One manifestation of this was reportedly higher levels of collaboration among school stakeholders.

Taken together, this literature suggests a simple framework for this chapter. Figure 1 shows the path by which state evaluation efforts can improve turnaround implementation and outcomes. States specify certain turnaround/SIG activities that they implement directly and through third parties. These implementation activities lead to outcomes. State-sponsored evaluations collect data

from the implementation activities and outcomes (the arrows pointing to the state evaluation box). Evaluation, in turn, informs state decision makers and can result in revised turnaround/SIG activities and ultimately better outcomes.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



States will vary in their approaches to turning around low performing schools, even when doing so with resources from the federal SIG program. Approaches to evaluating school-level turnaround are many (see, e.g., Herman, Aladjem, & Walters, 2011). The literature on school improvement, both more traditional whole school approaches (Aladjem et al., 2006) as well as early work on school turnaround (Aladjem et al., 2010), suggest the importance of external support, particularly from states and districts. What states do to support reform, particularly ambitious reforms like turnaround, matters. Evaluation of school level activities, challenges, and successes is incomplete without also looking at how states support turnaround.

Lessons Learned

While the research literature offers much about evaluation of turnaround and a bit about the experiences of some states, preliminary stories from additional states offer lessons for state leaders thinking about the implications of their own activities. Four broad lessons are emerging from the states:

- Data are key, but turning data into information requires thought and care.
- Strong, professional relationships between and among key actors at all levels (school, district, state) that are focused on turnaround can greatly facilitate progress.
- Turnaround involves many aspects of the system, thereby making alignment and coherence within states even more essential.
- Timing is everything.

This section describes each of these lessons learned.

Data Do Not Necessarily Provide Information for Action

Federal data requirements focus less on end outcomes than putative leading indicators. The federal government requires states to submit data informing nine leading indicators of turnaround performance. These metrics count activities/ events at the school level and district level. None speaks to the role of any key

actor in achieving improved school performance. Information about the role of state or other technical assistance to turn around low-performing schools is not one with a broad base of support. A further challenge to states hoping to track and use data from these indicators is that some states have faced difficulty collecting quality data. There are multiple sources of data quality issues. Among the sources of data quality issues are varying/inconsistent definitions of some of the metrics within and across districts and states, existing data reporting systems were not designed for some of the indicators (e.g., the distribution of teachers by performance level), and the fact that most schools are not subject to these reporting requirements, so schools and districts lack the incentive to build the capacity to provide high-quality data. Consequently, many states have found themselves awash in data but lacking information upon which to act based on those data.

Michigan, for example, has managed to collect substantial data on student achievement and school progress, but it has not always been clear how to use the data, especially to reflect on state activities. Even using the data at the school level has demonstrated the need to have someone translate the data into meaningful information for teachers and schools.

In Massachusetts, the wealth of data on school turnaround has highlighted the importance of knowing when to listen to the data and knowing when it might be misleading. Leaders in Massachusetts have seen multiple case studies of schools that appeared to make quick, dramatic gains, only to regress. The most interesting data to policymakers tend to be lagging indicators—student achievement—not the leading indicators that practice or school conditions may have changed.

Virginia's experience similarly highlighted the importance of caution in interpreting many indicators. Virginia has found many leading indicators difficult to interpret and use because the research underlying them is questionable or missing. For example, Virginia officials have expressed concern over how to interpret teacher attendance rates: is 80% attendance high or low? Who is in the classroom when the teacher of record is absent? Instead, Virginia places greater emphasis on lagging indicators, especially reading at grade level. By simplifying the data used, Virginia can streamline data collection, improving not only their own decision making, but reducing unnecessary burdens on all.

While collecting and using data presents certain challenges, building robust relationships between districts and states seems critical to successful evaluation of state SIG grantmaking.

States Can Move Beyond Compliance Monitoring to Sharing Responsibility for Turnaround

States have addressed data issues in part by changing the nature of their relationships with districts. These transformed relationships can be powerful

ways to improve state practice. Traditionally, states would focus on monitoring district compliance with grant regulations. Monitoring visits and reports can be important tools and need to be part of a state's turnaround plan. Massachusetts, for example, has found it helpful to conduct structured monitoring site visits early in the school year and use the findings to support the renewal application process. By using monitoring in this way, schools in Massachusetts have been able to reflect on the monitoring findings and tell the state how they plan to address issues and build on successes identified through monitoring. In this way, Massachusetts has used compliance monitoring as more than a simple checklist with little effect on practice.

As Massachusetts has, other states have found that by moving from purely compliance monitor to the role of technical assistance provider or broker, they can better support district and school turnaround. Addressing turnaround as a problem for both the state and districts to solve jointly can build self-reliance at the district level and model for districts how they in turn can work with schools to drive turnaround. Mississippi ensures that districts have staff dedicated to each turnaround school to support and sustain turnaround. This is partly how Mississippi has forged relationships early on—by being candid with schools that are receiving turnaround funding because the schools are not where they need to be. The state makes clear that turnaround is something that can only be accomplished by schools, districts, and the state working together. Mississippi has been successful in building the trust required through honest dialog and following through on assurances made to districts and schools.

By building trust and shared ownership, states benefit from more open feedback on their own performance and are better able to improve the services they provide to districts. Massachusetts, for example, actively seeks feedback from districts about what schools need from the state and has committed itself to listening carefully to the feedback. Mississippi, moreover, has been candid with districts about the stakes involved in turnaround and has used public reporting of data to improve the transparency and trust of the system. Mississippi did so in part by establishing a separate office dedicated to turnaround, making turnaround a clear priority.

Turnaround Involves Many Aspects of the System, Thereby Making Alignment and Coherence Even More Essential

Trust and shared ownership have paid dividends for states moving from compliance to partnership. Partnerships between states and districts serve a purpose: school turnaround. Trust and ownership play vital roles but do not obviate the need for and importance of accountability. States have not partnered with districts for the sake of partnering. Rather, states have partnered with districts as a means to the end of successful turnaround and improved feedback to states on their own performance. The lessons from states that have successfully balanced

trust and shared ownership on the one hand with accountability on the other can be distilled into the importance of establishing alignment and coherence within a state. Aligned expectations and coherent practices and objectives have allowed states to establish trust and shared ownership while creating a statewide culture of reciprocal accountability: schools and districts are accountable for turning around underperforming schools, and districts and the state are accountable for resources and support for schools and districts.

As noted, Massachusetts actively seeks feedback from districts about its own performance. Massachusetts does not shy away from pushing back if schools are not equally forthcoming about the challenges they face and their plans for meeting the challenges. Massachusetts insists that districts also need to reflect on their support for grantee schools around what works, how they differentiate support for low-performing schools, and how they plan to sustain the work once federal SIG grants end.

In North Carolina, the state has worked diligently to bring districts and schools into alignment. The importance of this became most evident as districts that had strong ties to all stakeholder groups made greater progress than districts that lacked full stakeholder buy in. Working with the latter group of districts became a priority for North Carolina. Similarly, just as some districts had great district level support, some schools in North Carolina demonstrated strong principal leadership which necessitated everything go through the principal. In other districts, schools were supportive, but districts were not. Getting districts and schools aligned and behind turnaround became a critical priority.

Data can be a key tool in aligning the major actors. North Carolina uses an online planning tool (Indistar[®]) that provides schools and districts with indicator data that school level teams as well as the district can use to ascertain where each school is on the federal indicators as well as their own indicators. Assessing these indicators (which are easily accessed online) has been required for each school level team, including district representatives). Many of the indicators target district, school improvement team, or principal actions. What North Carolina has found to be so effective about this is that rather than each stakeholder looking at the data independently (or worse, discussing plans without any data), schools and districts have to look at the data together. Instead of working in isolation, districts and schools can move beyond the basic question of who is responsible to the more important question of what to do. Indicators like, "The principal is a change leader" yields conversations and planning that move beyond simplistic notions of accountability towards the heart of real accountability. Best of all, from the state's perspective, the work of turnaround is guided in the direction the state wants without the state having to mandate certain activities in a heavy-handed or arbitrary way.

Timing Is Everything

State approaches to evaluation and understanding of their progress have changed over time. Massachusetts began its SIG turnaround effort uncertain how exactly to approach evaluation. The uncertainty came from the realization that first year data on student achievement would likely not yield much meaningful information. The question quickly became what could they know about both the progress of school turnaround efforts as well as how to check themselves. What kind of hard data to use was central to the dilemma Massachusetts faced.

Both Massachusetts and Mississippi resolved the dilemma by viewing both turnaround and its evaluation as a continuous process, not a single, point in time event. Mississippi knew that schools, districts, and state staff were accustomed to “someone looking over [their] shoulders.” Mississippi took the attitude of not wanting to wait for perfect end outcome data but sought data to drive formative evaluation and adopted a willingness to reflect deeply on their progress and listen to outside expertise, even when outside experts delivered uncomfortable news. Mississippi found external formative evaluation particularly helpful in the process. Not only did outside expertise provide SEA personnel with much needed insight, it also modeled for districts how they needed to be open to external feedback. Mississippi accomplished this through a series of “roundtable” meetings between state officials and district staff, focused on data and conversations about the extent to which the state was meeting the needs of districts and what those district needs were.

Mississippi also credits the U.S. Department of Education with linking states’ turnaround initiatives to resources for improvement. Mississippi replicated the state-to-state turnaround network with its own district-to-district network. The key for Mississippi, however, was the widespread, shared sense of urgency for turnaround. The size of the SIG grants alone made clear that results were expected, while understanding that change takes time.

One official in North Carolina summed up the importance of timing well by observing that year one was about cultural shifts, year two was about implementation of turnaround strategies and ensuring the fidelity of turnaround, and year three was about student achievement. Evaluation activities need to remain attuned to that cycle.

Summary

With so much invested in school turnaround and so much at stake in terms of students’ futures, states can ill afford not to take every opportunity to ensure the success of their turnaround efforts. An important tool for doing so is the use of evaluation—evaluation that looks not just at how schools and districts are implementing turnaround and the outcomes those efforts are yielding, but evaluation that looks critically and reflectively at what states themselves are contributing to the process. This analysis leads to a discussion of how states can improve their

own support and assistance to districts and schools. In this chapter we have seen that the literature by and large ignores this important perspective, focusing instead on equally important issues of measuring implementation and outcomes. From a review of the turnaround activities of a small set of states, this chapter identified four lessons learned for states from turnaround evaluations:

- Data are key, but turning data into information requires thought and care.
- Strong, professional relationships between and among key actors at all levels (school, district, state) that are focused on turnaround can greatly facilitate progress.
- Turnaround involves many aspects of the system, thereby making alignment and coherence within states even more essential.
- Timing is everything.

Next we offer action principles for SEAs.

Action Principles

The Goldilocks Data Principle

- Evaluations are about data, analysis, and use of the findings. Most SEA staff have seen evaluations that collected the wrong data (too few data) and evaluations that collected too much data.
- The challenge is to collect the right amount and right quality data. An important tool for identifying the right data and ensuring collection of high quality data is to engage districts in structured conversations about data. If schools and districts are using the data and thereby demand the data, they are likely to provide SEAs with quality data on time. If schools and districts see data requests as just another compliance activity, SEAs (and the federal government) are not likely to get quality data and are not likely to get them in a timely fashion.

Twenty-first Century Accountability Principle

- As the states described here can testify, accountability need not be punitive. SEAs can establish (and some have done so) systems in which SEAs and districts share responsibility for turning around low performing schools.
- The Goldilocks Data Principle can be a useful way to begin to reshape the relationship between SEA and district such that each sees the other as playing an important role in turnaround.
- SEAs can model for districts how districts need to work with schools by working with districts in the same way they would have districts work with schools: acting professionally, focusing on data, taking ownership for outcomes, reflecting on practice, and committing to revised plans based on data and analysis.

References

- Aladjem, D. K., Birman, B., Harr Robins, J., Orland, M., Heredia, A., Parrish, T. B., & Ruffini, S. (2010). *Achieving dramatic school improvement: An exploratory study*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Aladjem, D. K., LeFloch, K. C., Herman, R., Zhang, Y., Taylor, J. E., Kurki, A.,...Carter, K. R. (2006). *Models matter—The final report of the National Longitudinal Evaluation of Comprehensive School Reform*. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research.
- Bojorquez, J. C., Rice, J., Hipps, J., & Li, J. (2012). *Evaluation of Michigan's 1003(g) School Improvement Grants: Implementation trends in the first year*. San Francisco, CA: WestEd.
- Herman, R., Aladjem, D. K., & Walters, K. (2011). Evaluating strategies to turn around low-performing schools. In I. Perez-Johnson, K. Walters, & M. Puma (Eds.), *Evaluating ARRA programs and other educational reforms: A guide for states* (pp. 39–49). Retrieved from http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/PDFs/education/ARRA_eval_guide.pdf
- Kowal, J., & Ableidinger, J. (2011). *Leading indicators of school turnarounds: How to know when dramatic change is on track*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia's Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education. Retrieved from http://www.darden.virginia.edu/web/uploadedFiles/Darden/Darden_Curry_PLE/UVA_School_Turnaround/Leading_Indicators_of_School_Turnarounds.pdf
- Kutash, J., Nico, E., Gorin, E., Rahmatullah, S., & Tallant, K. (2010). *The school turnaround field guide*. San Francisco, CA: FSG Social Impact Advisors.
- Wholey, J. S., Hatry, H. P., & Newcomer, K. E. (Eds.) (2010). *Handbook of practical program evaluation*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons
- Yatsko, S., Lake, R., Nelson, E. C., & Bowen, M. (2012). *Tinkering toward transformation: a look at federal School Improvement Grant implementation*. Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington.