

Principles for Measuring the Performance of Turnaround Schools

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U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan has announced an ambitious goal: Turn around the nation's lowest-performing schools. For the students, families and communities served by persistently struggling schools, the need to turn things around could hardly be more urgent. Low academic achievement places severe limits on the lifetime opportunities of the overwhelmingly low-income students who attend such schools. Every child has a right to attend an excellent public school that prepares students to participate in our democracy and to lead satisfying, productive lives. The Learning First Alliance, a permanent partnership of 17 major national education associations representing over 10 million parents, educators and policymakers, stands ready to support school turnaround strategies that advance this vision for success.

To create both swift improvement and sustained success, turnaround efforts must follow clear and actionable principles for measuring school performance. Such principles are necessary to identify schools in need of turnaround, reliably gauge the progress and staying power of turnaround efforts, and guide good decision-making.

The Learning First Alliance proposes the following principles for measuring the performance of schools involved in turnaround efforts:

Measure Progress Toward a Broad Vision of Student Success

Successful schools expose students to a breadth of knowledge and skills to give them every opportunity for success in the 21st century. While state assessment results in reading, writing and mathematics are essential measures of schools' and students' progress, they are by themselves insufficient.

Strategies for identifying and turning around struggling schools should include evidence of student performance in other core academic content areas. They should also track multiple measures of student success, such as capstone projects and other examples of student work. In addition, judgments about school performance should take into account indicators such as graduation rates, student participation and performance in advanced courses, and data on staff, family and student satisfaction. Such broader indicators of performance are necessary to determine if schools are truly preparing their students for long-term success.

Measure the Conditions for School and Student Success

Successful schools strive to meet their students' diverse needs by addressing the root causes of poor student performance. Outcome measures alone do not provide schools the guidance they need to do so effectively

Therefore, school turnaround efforts should measure the conditions necessary for school success—such as school working conditions, investment in professional learning, student learning conditions, teacher retention and transfer rates, student mobility rates, student attendance, school safety and student discipline information, the availability of support staff, the quality of facilities, and appropriate and stable financial investments.

In addition, turnaround initiatives should track essential school improvement processes. They should, for example, measure progress in: aligning strong, comprehensive curriculum and professional learning with state standards; creating sound formative assessment strategies to highlight and address student learning needs; implementing intensive systems to support struggling students and teachers; fostering school-wide collaboration among staff; promoting shared leadership from staff and administrators; and strengthening staff professional development. Turnaround efforts should also gauge the effectiveness of strategies to promote parent and community engagement, and to strengthen links between schools and social service agencies. They should measure the external supports available to students in a community—such as access to excellent health care, early childhood education and appropriate out-of-school enrichment opportunities. Attention to these foundational issues can improve staff and community capacity to serve students’ needs. It can also highlight the kinds of supports schools need—both within and beyond schools—to mount and sustain effective improvement strategies.

Ensure that Measures are Clear and Available to all Stakeholders

Clear, widely understood and widely available performance measures are critical to promoting stakeholders’ confidence in the process of identifying and supporting turnaround schools. Measures should be reported in different media and languages. Such clarity and accessibility help stakeholders follow the progress of school turnaround efforts. They are prerequisites to effective family, community, district, staff and student engagement in those efforts.

Track Progress Over Time

Turnaround efforts that ultimately produce dramatic and sustained improvements in students’ performance often take more than a year or two to meet their performance goals. The success of turnaround efforts should therefore be measured against ambitious yet attainable goals for improvement over time. In the case of individual students’ performance on state assessments, for example, evaluations of turnaround efforts should measure individual students’ academic growth over time.

Include Experts’ Qualitative Judgment When Measuring Turnaround Progress

Quantitative measures of school improvement are critical, but by themselves they do not offer enough information to guide the improvement process. Schools would also benefit from the judgments of informed observers who witness turnaround efforts first hand. Site visits to schools by trained teams of state and local educators and community leaders are essential to identifying which schools need to be turned around, what strategies should be used to turn them around, and whether turnaround schools and their students are making progress towards clearly-established goals for improvement. Well-designed site visits prompt school staff, communities and outside experts to collaborate on identifying and addressing school and student needs.

Site visits can help identify causes of insufficient progress and promote mid-course corrections in the turnaround process. They can also provide an important check against manipulation of quantitative measures through strategies such as excessive test preparation or manipulation of school climate data. Site visits should be designed first and foremost to support the turnaround process rather than to shame or punish struggling schools.

The development of reliable performance measures for turnaround schools will require intensive collaboration among policymakers, educators and communities. The 17 members of the Learning First Alliance look forward to assisting in the creation and appropriate implementation of these measures.

- American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
- American Association of School Administrators
- American Association of School Personnel Administrators
- American Federation of Teachers
- American School Counselor Association
- Association of School Business Officials International
- Council of Chief State School Officers
- National Association of Elementary School Principals
- National Association of Secondary School Principals
- National Association of State Boards of Education
- National Education Association
- National Middle School Association
- National PTA
- National School Boards Association
- National School Public Relations Association
- National Staff Development Council
- Phi Delta Kappa International