Want to Improve Low-Performing Schools?
FOCUS ON THE ADULTS

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THE ISSUE

School improvement policy for the past few decades has been characterized by mandated lists of activities—both well intended and research based—designed to stimulate a dramatic turnaround in student achievement. However, this prescriptive approach to policy, particularly federal policy, has not resulted in the systemic changes needed to get the right teachers and leaders into low-performing schools to support school improvement. In the long run, this policy approach did not engender the school-level changes necessary to create learning organizations that support teachers and leaders.
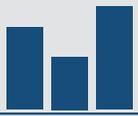
THE RESEARCH

One key lesson from the past decades of school improvement research is that an explicit focus on improving the capacity and stability of teachers and leaders in low-performing schools would benefit these schools more than another mandated checklist of improvement activities. Schools can never be any stronger or more effective than the adults who work in them—doubly true for chronically low-performing schools.

THE RECOMMENDATIONS

With the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), state policymakers must prepare for states' increased role in making low-performing schools better. We suggest that policymakers step back from requirements to implement specific improvement activities (similar to those required by the federal School Improvement Grants [SIG] program) and instead focus policy on the development and support of human capital. New policies must aim to get the right people in our schools and to create district and state systems that retain those people and build their knowledge and skills to turn schools around.

THE ISSUE
School Improvement Checklists Miss the Mark

Nearly two decades of research on turning around low-performing schools has led to an impressive library of findings about our struggling schools. Despite different methodologies, the findings are consistent: Schools that turn around a history of low performance have strong leaders; have engaged and collaborative teachers; use data to drive instruction; endorse high standards for all students; and have coherent, rigorous, and focused instructional programs (Aladjem et al., 2010; Herman et al., 2008; Herman & Huberman, 2013). Successful turnaround leaders concentrate on quick wins that build momentum for change and a belief that things can be better.

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Yet, our school improvement policies have changed little. Most reconfigure the same approach: Identify low-performing schools, provide funds and external support, and mandate the implementation of a list of research-based strategies. Even though such checklists are well intentioned and most are grounded in solid research, many districts and schools have struggled to implement a systemic, whole-school reform approach. The result has been little or no sustainable improvement. In a guide to school turnaround for state and local leaders, the U.S. Department of Education (1998) advised local officials to ensconce strong leaders in low-performing schools, promote safe and orderly schools, provide a challenging curriculum, and work in partnership with their communities. More than a decade later, SIG program guidance (U.S. Department of Education, 2011) sounded strikingly similar. Except for some success stories in high-capacity states, there is limited evidence that the SIG program has had a broad impact on low-performing schools.[1]

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The checklist approach to school improvement does not lend itself to scale-up, particularly when federally mandated. It appears to have resulted in compliance-oriented activities rather than a strategic focus on school needs (Le Floch et al., 2014). The checklist approach has fostered the idea that schools need to do everything at once rather than sequencing activities and focusing on a few salient priorities from the outset.

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[1] There is some evidence of SIG's impact in specific states (see, for example, Dee, 2012) but no evidence, to date, of a national impact.

THE REAL STORY: CHRISTMAS TREE APPROACH

Greenfield Middle School typifies many schools that applied for and received SIG funds. The application's focus was on innovative, bold, and dramatic actions to turn around the school, using a large infusion of SIG funds. But when it came time to implement the plan, the new principal was overwhelmed with the laundry list of activities that were to be launched, coordinated, and monitored all at once. They ran the gamut from revising the reading and mathematics curricula to establishing a Parent Community Center with a new director. Amid so many competing demands, improvement initiatives stalled—as did student achievement. In the grant's second year, the principal and the leadership team trimmed down the proposed activities to focus on a few core areas for improvement, including training teachers on formative assessment, establishing data teams, and strengthening student interventions. [2]

Among the unintended consequences of the checklist approach, American Institutes for Research (AIR) staff have observed that the policy often kept the best teachers and leaders out of the most challenging schools. Teachers saw it as extra work with uncertain rewards, and leaders feared they might lose their jobs within two years if they did not show results. Overall, checklist policies have done little to improve the very challenging working conditions that too often characterize chronically underperforming schools: reform fatigue, teacher turnover, and the crippling effects of profound poverty.

With the recent passage of ESSA, Congress has placed responsibility for school improvement squarely in state policymakers' hands. As states consider how to improve their lowest performing schools, policymakers should reflect on the lessons learned in implementing the SIG policy and on current turnaround school research, cultivating and maintaining every school's most important student learning asset: the adults in the building.

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[2] The example presented is based upon AIR's experiences supporting school turnaround efforts in a number of districts across the United States. To preserve their confidentiality, the name of the school and district have been changed in the example.
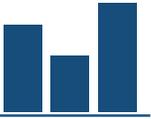
THE RESEARCH
Few Things Matter as Much as the Adults in Schools

Research consistently points to the importance of human capital—namely, teachers and leaders—in schools, particularly in low-performing schools.

Among studies of school improvement, few findings are as consistent as those that point to the importance of school leaders (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Herman, et al., 2008; Le Floch et al., 2014; Louis et al., 2010). More than a decade ago, Leithwood and colleagues (2004) found virtually no documented cases of school turnaround absent a strong leader. Years later, the same scholars reaffirmed that "after six additional years of research, we are even more confident about this claim" (Louis et al., 2010, p. 9). Studies of school leadership have described effective leadership practices associated with school improvement, including articulating a compelling vision and mission, distributing or sharing instructional leadership responsibilities, providing performance feedback to teachers, and basing instructional decisions on data (Bryk et al., 2010; Loeb, 2008). Steiner and Hassel (2011) also argued that turnaround principals require specialized skills and competencies to succeed in turning around chronically failing schools.

Mounting research supports a critical finding: Strong school leadership is associated with higher student achievement levels. With increasing specificity, researchers have documented the strength of this relationship. One study applied a value-added approach to Texas data and estimated a difference of as much as 0.21 standard deviations in test scores between schools with effective and ineffective principals. This very large effect translates into an annual impact of as much as 16 percentile points of student achievement. As the authors note, the achievement gap associated with effective and ineffective principals is even more pronounced in high-poverty schools (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013).

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Research also suggests that principals influence teacher working conditions, which often contribute greatly to teacher retention or churn. By virtue of their position, principals' practice can directly influence school conditions, teacher quality and placement, and instructional quality (Clifford, Behrstock-Sherratt, & Fetters, 2012). Positive teacher working conditions include fostering a collegial and trusting, team-based, and supportive school culture; promoting ethical behavior; encouraging data use; and creating strong lines of communication. Ladd (2009) finds an association between positive teacher working conditions and student achievement.

As important as principals appear to be in the turnaround process, the evidence supporting the critical role of teachers is also compelling. Educator effectiveness is one of the single most powerful in-school influences on student outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2004). Rigorously designed research has demonstrated that teacher effects on student achievement may be larger than school effects (Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004). In case studies of school turnaround, principals consistently point to their teachers as a critical component of their success—and the need for the autonomy to build a faculty team with the instructional skills, motivation, and dedication to work in a challenging context.

Obstacles to Attracting and Retaining Strong Leaders and Teachers

There lies a central problem. Although we know that highly capable teachers and leaders are critical for school improvement, evidence that schools serving disadvantaged students employ the least-qualified teachers is ample (Clotfelter, Ladd, Vigdor, & Wheeler, 2007; Isenberg et al., 2013). Compounding this issue, rates of teacher and principal turnover in schools serving high proportions of high-poverty students and minority students are high. Federal data demonstrate that more than 20 percent of principals leave their schools each year—and even more leave schools with high-poverty students. A study of Texas administrative data concluded that principal-retention rates are related to both student achievement and student poverty levels, with higher turnover among low-achieving, disadvantaged schools (Fuller & Young, 2009). Many schools serving America's neediest children lose more than half of their teaching staff every five years (Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo, 2009; Hemphill & Nauer, 2009).

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Several structural barriers contribute to low teaching quality and churn among teachers in chronically low-performing schools. Miller and Lee (2014) note that district hiring and placement polices—including seniority-based staffing decisions and forced placement of teachers—often inhibit principals' efforts to improve teacher quality. In addition, many low-performing schools are in districts with inefficient and rushed hiring processes that start in the summer, when the strongest teacher candidates have already accepted offers from other schools (Levin & Quinn, 2003). Even when low-performing schools acquire high-quality teachers, dissatisfaction with poor school cultures and working conditions frequently drive these teachers to look for other opportunities (Berry, Smylie, & Fuller, 2008; Ingersoll, 1999; Ingersoll, 2001; TNTP, 2012).

THE REAL STORY: TEACHER CHURN

In one medium-sized urban school district, numerous hard-to-staff schools are clustered in one area. To keep them sufficiently staffed, the district requires all new incoming teachers be assigned to open vacancies in one of these hard-to-staff schools. After serving three years in a hard-to-staff school, the teacher can apply to be transferred to the other side of the district, where the higher performing schools are located. The percentage of teachers who stay beyond the required three years is very low, and teachers regularly cycle out of these struggling schools. So, a well-intentioned policy actually contributes to teacher churn and drives out those teachers with at least a few years of experience from the schools with the most challenging students. [3]

This research is clear: The most important ingredients for school turnaround are highly effective teachers and leaders working together collaboratively. State policymakers faced with developing new school improvement policies should focus squarely on efforts to build human capital in our nation's struggling schools.

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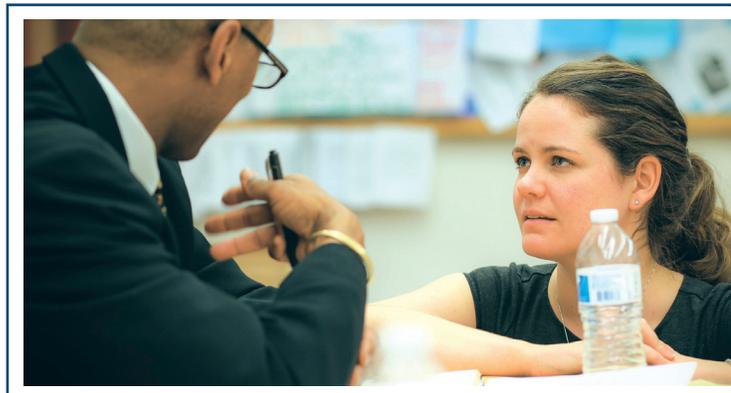
[3] The example presented is based upon AIR's experiences supporting school turnaround efforts in a number of districts across the United States. To preserve their confidentiality, the name of the school and district have been changed in the example.

THE RECOMMENDATIONS
School Improvement Policy Should Prioritize Strong Teachers and Leaders

State policymakers reconsidering the state's role in furthering school improvement in low-performing schools may want to step back from a list of requirements to implement specific improvement activities and instead focus primarily on policies to develop and support human capital in four ways:

1. **Ensure that districts hire strong leaders for their low-performing schools.** State policymakers should first ensure that districts use rigorous practices that promote hiring principals with key competencies to turn around low-performing schools. These policies should outline minimum hiring requirements for districts that allow them to consider leaders who possess these core competencies yet may not fit the role of traditional school leaders. Districts should be allowed to offer strong incentives to attract these leaders to their schools.

2. **Give principals the decision-making authority to assemble their own teams of teachers with the skills, dispositions, and energy to work in chronically low-performing schools.** These policies should provide schools with the autonomy needed to hire teachers who meet each school's specific needs (and to dismiss teachers who are not meeting those needs).

3. **Insulate chronically low-performing schools from seniority-based staffing policies.** State policymakers should prevent the use of low-performing schools as "dumping grounds" for ineffective educators or mandatory placements where teachers are assigned not by choice. This change should involve working with local teachers unions and other stakeholders to ensure that low-performing schools are staffed with experienced, effective teachers who embrace the challenge of turning around a low-performing school. This hiring approach requires creative solutions, such as allowing these schools to waive extra-district seniority requirements. Policymakers also should encourage schools and districts to innovate in recruiting and retaining educators—by, for example, providing grant money to offer larger salaries and offering strong professional development opportunities.

THE REAL STORY: HOW UNIONS CAN HELP IN GARDEN GROVE, CALIFORNIA

Recognizing that teachers are the fundamental drivers of student success, the Garden Grove school district in California set an ambitious yet attainable goal of hiring, supporting, and retaining the best teachers possible. The district's approach included recruitment and student teaching supports, selective hiring practices, and induction activities. According to the California Collaborative on District Reform, Garden Grove worked with stakeholders—including teachers unions—to develop comprehensive human capital policies that included a selective tenure system as well as procedures for dismissing ineffective teachers. All of these policies were enacted with union support. As the district's union representative explained, "As association president, I'm not here to protect poor teachers. I'm here to protect the process.... Ultimately, if they're a poor teacher, they're not good for students, schools, or teaching as a career."[4]

4. **Adopt a purposeful approach to professional learning.** Too often, the lowest performing schools have an ad hoc, unfocused approach to professional learning for teachers and principals. State policymakers should require the school improvement plans to include professional learning plans that provide teacher and principal training and collaboration at the district, school, and individual levels, with an emphasis on what takes place in the classroom. These plans should also feature provisions for working with struggling teachers and principals to help them improve, or when these efforts fail, a commitment to remove those who are harming student learning.

If state policymakers provide low-performing schools and districts with the supports necessary to staff these schools with strong teachers and leaders, they will see a stronger return on their investment than with those checklists of years past.

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4 Knudson, J. (2013). *You'll never be better than your teachers: The Garden Grove approach to human capital development.* San Mateo, CA: American Institutes for Research, p. 28.

Want More Information About Human Capital and School Improvement?

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