



## State Education Agencies in Charge of Turnaround: *Capacity and Delivery*

*Turning around the nation's low-performing schools became a national priority — and a central focus of education policy at all levels — with No Child Left Behind in 2001. Then Race to the Top and the School Improvement Grants program redoubled the nation's emphasis on school turnaround, giving states more resources to advance improvement efforts within federal requirements.*

Some schools improved under the targeted turnaround initiatives. Yet — despite more than 14 years in the educational spotlight and billions of federal dollars — successful, sustainable school turnaround on a large scale remains a challenge.

Now, with the new Every Student Succeeds Act, responsibility has shifted from the federal government to states to decide the best ways to support and sustain local efforts to improve low-performing schools.

Are states ready for the challenge? And how can states best build the capacity needed to do the job well?

On October 16, 2015, at the U.S. Capitol Hill Visitor Center in Washington, DC, WestEd brought together a panel that included some of the agency's own expertise on this topic and two state education agency (SEA) leaders who have been diving into the fray, focusing their states' efforts on school and district turnaround.

Carlos McCauley, Director of the national Center on School Turnaround, began with a presentation on "Understanding the Landscape," providing a national perspective on what is known about successful school turnaround. The panel then moved into discussion mode, focusing on the insights of two SEA leaders who have made school turnaround a priority: Hanna Skandera, Secretary of Education, New Mexico Public Education Department; and Brad C. Smith, Superintendent of Public Instruction, Utah State Office of Education. The panel was

introduced by Max McConkey, WestEd's Chief Policy and Communications Officer, and was moderated by Paul Koehler, Director of the West Comprehensive Center at WestEd.

This briefing paper outlines the major themes discussed during the forum and notes the policy implications of these themes by raising questions for federal and state policymakers to consider in the interest of supporting state-led school turnaround.

### Themes from the Panel

#### Communicating a sense of urgency and commitment

Both Skandera and Smith conveyed their sense that a commitment to turnaround is a "moral imperative." McCauley tied the importance of commitment to the fact that turnaround is inherently "disruptive" — it entails challenging assumptions, changing practices, and reorganizing systems. Genuine turnaround is deep, dramatic, and sustained. No easy feat.

The two SEA leaders indicated that one of their primary roles is to communicate to districts and schools a sense of urgency and commitment in order to build the necessary buy-in. One way of doing so is to highlight examples of schools that have already demonstrated commitment and success. “It was important in our state to identify that it can be done, focusing on the bright spots,” noted Skandera, who, early in her tenure as New Mexico’s Secretary of Education, traveled throughout the state seeking examples of success.

The panelists stressed that in addition to communicating a sense of urgency, state leaders also must reach a broader audience to advocate for programs that will support their turnaround goals. They must convey that schools that are identified for turnaround require dramatic change that will benefit the students currently in the school, not just students due to enroll in three to five years. Both of the state leaders emphasized that communicating a sense of urgency for immediate action (that is, change is not optional) is critical to successful school turnaround efforts.

**Policy focus:** How might federal legislation and/or funding best convey the urgency of turnaround efforts and support the capacity of SEAs to foster district and school buy-in?

### Understanding the crucial role of turnaround competencies

As the panelists spoke about school leaders who embody a sense of urgency and commitment, they often referred to the *competencies* that underlie a leader’s actions and can be key to why one principal succeeds at leading turnaround where another does not. The panelists made a distinction between an effective principal and a *turnaround* principal. Not every effective principal has the competencies or uses the skills and management practices that are needed to lead a turnaround process.

McCauley, drawing on a framework developed by the Center on School Turnaround’s partnership with several other national organizations, identified a set of competencies that are essential to turnaround leaders’ effectiveness. The competencies include driving for results (including setting high goals and planning ahead), influencing others to pursue rapid improvements (including working with teams to leverage

group expertise), problem solving (including using data and thinking analytically), and exhibiting personal traits such as self-confidence and a belief in the learning potential of all students.

McCauley and the state leaders talked about how superintendents and principals who embody these competencies are able to inspire and sustain change in spite of challenging environments and histories of past practices that have been found ineffective. They engage in “turnaround planning,” which includes identifying what they are trying to accomplish, making time for the work, and incorporating continuous feedback loops into the planning and implementation. Data-based decision-making is central to the process and can help guide effective instructional practices and performance management routines.

The panelists also made similar points about teachers, emphasizing that not all qualified or talented teachers are the best teachers for engaging in a turnaround process. As with school and district leaders, turnaround teachers need to have the right competencies, including a strong commitment to turnaround and belief that all of their students can succeed.

**Policy focus:** How might federal legislation and/or funding contribute to research and dissemination so that understanding of turnaround competencies is shared meaningfully and rapidly with SEAs and low-performing schools and districts?

### Resources — building a “human-capital pipeline”

In addition to describing the competencies that leaders need, the panelists talked about the importance of developing a “human-capital pipeline” to fill the leadership spots in the lowest-performing schools. “If we don’t think about the human-capital pipeline, you can have a great program but won’t have people to fill it in,” said Skandera.

Smith also noted the importance of developing more turnaround leaders and getting them into the lowest-performing schools. He pointed out that while there has been a lot of concern about impending shortages of qualified educators, the problem is more nuanced. He is not so concerned about an overall shortage but

more focused on a potential shortage of *the right kinds* of leaders.

Pointing to one example of how to cultivate turnaround leaders, Skandera referred to a program that the federally funded West Comprehensive Center has brought to New Mexico as well as to Utah and other states: the School Turnaround Specialist Program. Developed by the University of Virginia, this leadership development program takes principals and other education leaders through an intensive training that includes analyzing case studies of how others have solved seemingly intractable problems, and working with school teams to create action plans that target urgent problems and are geared to raising student achievement.

**Policy focus:** How might federal legislation and/or funding support states in developing pipelines of teachers and leaders who are prepared for leading turnaround schools?

### Systems focus

Although individual leaders with the right competencies are vital to school turnaround, the panelists frequently referred to the importance of a systemic perspective, noting that it takes a system to ensure that necessary changes are widespread and sustainable. “School turnaround is about identifying the underperforming systems and systematically dismantling them to create new systems that work better,” said Smith.

This theme of engaging all levels of the education system came up repeatedly. The panelists pointed out that factors contributing to low student performance are multifaceted, so solutions must address a wide array of issues. In other words, to turn around a low-performing school, the focus must go well beyond the school alone. Panelists indicated that the local community, the district, and the state all have roles to play, as do federal policymakers, and outside partners who provide expertise, resources, and guidance.

**Policy focus:** How might federal legislation and/or funding address the systemic nature of turnaround, buoying all levels of the education system, including building SEA capacity to support district- and school-level programs?

### Data-based decision-making

Foundational to systemic improvement is the strategic use of data, Smith noted. “I don’t believe there’s a single school that’s done turnaround that is not deeply committed to data-based decision-making.”

McCauley pointed out that schools are not hurting for data, given that they collect extensive student test scores, behavior and attendance numbers, parent engagement data, and much more. But the challenge is how to *use* the data in meaningful, targeted ways, and how to make the time available for doing the work of sifting through and learning from the data.

Commenting on the importance of using data to inform school improvement, Smith made a plea to federal policymakers not to give up on annual assessments as a component of accountability systems. He indicated that he values having teachers drill down into the information from annual assessments.

**Policy focus:** How might federal legislation and/or funding support the collection and use of the data that are needed to inform turnaround efforts?

### Partnerships and shared goals

Evident in all of the previously discussed themes is the collaborative nature of school turnaround. Because it is systemic, actors at the federal, state, and district levels must be involved. Universities and nonprofits can provide research and other expertise. Technical assistance and professional development providers can help build capacity.

Both of the state leaders talked extensively about the partnerships that were important to their states’ abilities to pursue turnaround effectively. Skandera, for example, noted that her SEA had benefited extensively from partnering with the West Comprehensive Center, the University of Virginia’s School Turnaround Specialist Program, the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, and “a business community that fundamentally believes in our kids.” Smith referred to the importance of his department’s developing positive relationships with the state legislature, with state leaders such as the governor, and with local education agencies and school boards.

A related theme from the panelists concerned the importance of aligning all the different players and working toward shared goals. Echoing this theme, panelists made the point more than once that the nation needs to move beyond “Democrat-versus-Republican debates” regarding the “how” of improving education and instead focus more on shared goals for what students need.

**Policy focus:** How might federal legislation and/or funding help SEAs to form productive partnerships — both within their states and with credible intermediary and external entities that can assist their efforts to lead and implement effective school turnaround models?

## Implications for Policymakers Considering Implementing State-Led Turnaround Initiatives

Under NCLB, states were empowered to take over low-performing schools and districts, but the law did little to increase state capacity to perform this role or to be strategic in turnaround efforts. As the panelists noted several times, SEAs can, and should, play a more instrumental role in creating an environment in which turnaround reforms can be substantial and dramatic at every level of the system.

If states are to do so under the Every Student Succeeds Act, what policies and conditions are necessary to support states’ efforts to advance the scalability of turnaround? This briefing paper poses questions under

each theme in the interest of highlighting areas where federal and state policies might best align to build capacity and support school turnaround.

In particular, the information and experiences shared by the panelists highlight the importance of:

- » Building SEA capacity to focus on turnaround and to foster district buy-in.
- » Identifying and improving the specific competencies that teachers and principals need in order to successfully lead turnaround.
- » Developing a “human-capital pipeline” by preparing school leaders (both current and potential future ones) for new, complex tasks.
- » Increasing knowledge of successful school turnaround strategies and models, through research and dissemination, to build state and local expertise regarding what works and why.
- » Collecting the kinds of data that are relevant to turnaround, and providing time for school and district personnel to use the data to inform the turnaround process.
- » Pursuing turnaround as a systematic issue, one that includes schools, districts, states, federal funders and regulators, and a multitude of outside partners.
- » Aligning the members of these partnerships toward pursuit of common goals.

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The intention of this briefing paper has been to increase awareness of some of the many implementation issues involved in school and district turnaround — issues that face local education agencies and state education agencies alike. If readers can benefit from the reported successful experiences to help practitioners and education leaders work more closely in concert with the extended education community, the report will have been successful. If educators are to use current and upcoming opportunities to improve — systemically — many of the nation’s underperforming schools, all stakeholders must work collaboratively to identify and spread effective practices, create the policies and conditions necessary for success, build capacity, and ensure the scalability and sustainability of the work.

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