

Considering Turnaround for Low-Performing Charter Schools

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In concept, well-designed, well-run charter schools offer innovative practices that yield successful teaching and learning — practices from which other schools can learn and improve. In addition, effective charter schools may provide important education alternatives for students who haven't been succeeding in a traditional public school. But what happens when the reality doesn't live up to the concept?

For the sake of innovation, charter schools are given greater autonomy and flexibility than allowed for other public schools. For example, charter schools typically have the freedom to determine class sizes, curricula, education programs, length of the school day and year, and how to allocate their budget. Equally important, most have autonomy in hiring and deploying staff. To obtain this operational and programmatic freedom, charter schools enter into a performance contract — a charter — with an approved public chartering agency, or authorizer. Among other things, the charter lays out agreed-upon academic results, for which the school is to be held accountable. Charter schools are also to be held accountable for managing finances appropriately and complying with relevant laws and regulations.

Like all public schools, charter schools range widely in their performance. Some serve their

students well, meeting all the requirements of their charter. Others don't. What happens when a charter school doesn't meet its part of the education bargain? What if, for example, a school is innovative but is still not generating student success in accordance with its charter? Given an authorizer's responsibility for determining the quality of schools it has approved, what are the options when the authorizer finds that one of those schools is performing poorly?

Specific options for dealing with failing charter schools vary according to state charter school law and authorizer policy. Some states require automatic closure for charter schools that fail to meet specific performance benchmarks. But, that being said, it's usually left to an authorizer to decide how to address poor performance by any school whose charter it has approved. In practice, approaches to doing so range from closure, at one end of the spectrum, to inaction at the other.

An authorizer might close a failing school by not renewing its charter at the end of the charter's term, or it might shut the school down in the middle of the term. Yet, while closure is clearly an option, the limited research that has been done on charter school closure suggests that this option is seldom exercised. The largest study of charter school closures, which looked at schools in 26 states, found that between 2006/07 and 2012/13, only 5.5 percent of low-performing charter schools were closed.¹ This finding suggests that authorizers are dealing with low-performing charter schools in other ways. Some may try to find and engage a different operator, with a proven record of success, to restart the school. Others may issue warnings or findings of noncompliance, but allow poorly performing charter schools to persist.

This brief proposes a different approach entirely, one that should be considered with the same thought, rigor, and transparency called for in making closure or restart decisions. That option is school turnaround.

Because a range of definitions and interpretations exist, the concept of turnaround can mean different things to different people. This brief uses the aspirational definition of turnaround that comes from the federally funded Center on School Turnaround at WestEd: Turnaround is more than an initial jolt of improvement; it's an upward trajectory with rapid, significant, and sustainable improvement in the lowest-performing schools.² To support this important work, the center has drawn from research and practice to develop a clear and action-oriented framework intended to guide the work of schools as they commit to improvement. The framework, *Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement*, identifies four critical areas of focus for improvement efforts — turnaround

leadership, talent development, instructional transformation, and culture shift — and key practices within each one.³ Originally developed with traditional public schools and systems in mind, this framework is being adapted separately for specific use with charter schools, and this brief draws from the adapted version.

By this definition, the turnaround process is not a prescriptive formula for school action. Rather, it is a tailored and targeted approach based on the context of any given school. It entails, first, the school's commitment to moving forward rather than staying the same; then, an assessment of the school's strengths and challenges *within each of the four domains*; and, finally, the development and implementation of an action plan based on the results of that assessment.

Is turnaround a good option for a particular low-performing charter school? The remainder of this brief speaks to the various factors an authorizer needs to consider when making a decision about how best to respond to a failing charter school under its authority.

Reviewing the Charter School's Role in Its Education Ecosystem

There is no silver bullet for dealing with low-performing charter schools. Each possible action an authorizer might take presents its own challenges and should be carefully considered based on the context of the school and its community. Thus, making good decisions about how to address a low-performing school requires first looking at the entire system of school options within which that school operates.

That contextual review includes evaluating the needs the school is intended to meet within that education system.

It helps to review the school's unique offerings, programs, targeted student populations or the geographic region it serves, and the potential market void it is intended to fill. In addition, it is important to determine whether the school's students have other high-quality options within a feasible commuting distance.⁴ A low-performing school may be providing a safer or smaller learning environment than is offered by students' traditional school options, a unique STEM program, a unique school culture, or something else that is meeting a community need.

Effective authorizers will have considered such information when deciding whether to authorize a charter school; however, conducting a review of the school's fidelity to its mission and its function within the broader system of local public school options — traditional and charter — gives the authorizer critical information that can inform a decision about closure, restart, or improvement of a low-performing school.

Options for Addressing Poor Performance

Keeping in mind the general context of the poorly performing school at hand and its community, an authorizer can begin to consider specific response options. This brief now takes a high-level look at the seemingly more straightforward options of closing a school or of restarting it. It then looks more closely at the third option of school turnaround, identifying some factors to consider in deciding whether it is a reasonable approach to pursue for any given school.

Closure

School closure is an option for any charter school that doesn't meet the requirements of its charter. While the specific factors that trigger closure vary by state statute and authorizer, it is a potential result for any low-performing charter school and, in some cases, is supposed to be automatic. That being said, the earlier-mentioned 26-state study on school closure found evidence of inequity in closure decisions for both traditional public schools and charter schools. In both sectors, low-performing schools were more likely to be closed if they served large populations of Black and/or Hispanic students. In the charter sector, for example, 6.5 percent of low-performing schools in which Black or Hispanic students accounted for 80 percent or more of the student population were closed, compared to 4.2 percent of low-performing schools in which Black and Hispanic students made up less than 80 percent of the population.⁵

Although many failing charter schools are never shut down, closures are, in fact, taking place. While no one would argue that students should remain in failing schools, research has shown that closing a school does not necessarily lead to better results for students and their families.⁶ For one thing, many students enrolled in schools whose doors have been shut do not end up in a better one. The 26-state study of school closure found that only 48 percent of students from closed charter schools moved to a higher-performing school.⁷ Earlier state- and district-specific studies had conflicting findings, with students in some states and districts showing increased achievement after moving on to another school and other students showing a decline in achievement.⁸ The quality of the school to which students moved seemed to have an impact on how students did after they left a shuttered school.⁹

School closure can be hard on students and families in multiple ways. They may feel a sense of loss when an institution that has been important in their lives is no longer available.¹⁰ Parents opt for schools of choice for a particular reason — for example, it could be that the school offers a desired curriculum or program — and closing the school without having a similar alternative available denies them that option. Students' social and emotional well-being can also come into play. One study on school closures in general found that they can disrupt friendships and may create difficult social dynamics for students; for example, students who transferred to new schools were treated poorly by the existing students.¹¹ While students' learning outcomes should be front and center when making decisions about closure, social impacts should be considered because they are important to students' well-being and can also affect students' academic learning.¹²

Restart

An alternative to closure that minimizes disruption for students and families is restarting a poorly performing school.¹³ In a restart, a different charter management organization takes over the low-performing charter school or schools, serving the same students, frequently in the same buildings.¹⁴ Charter restarts typically take place in cities that have many charter schools¹⁵ because such areas are more likely than others to have a successful local charter operator with the capacity to lead a restart.

Naturally, a restart is a viable option only if there is a high-performing charter operator willing to take on the low-performing school in question.¹⁶ When this is the case, charter restart might be the best option for authorizers dealing with a charter school that appears to be incapable of

Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement

In 2017, the federally supported Center on School Turnaround at WestEd sought to understand and document what had been learned about successful school turnaround and sustainable school improvement efforts in the past decade. The Center's intent was to organize and frame the field's learning from research and successful practice in rapid school improvement efforts. From this process emerged the Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement, a framework that provides, in practical language, the critical practices of successful school turnaround in four domains, or areas of focus, central to rapid and significant improvement. The framework is now used by more than 20 states and across many districts to guide their systems of support for low-performing schools, and includes the following domains:

- Turnaround Leadership
- Talent Development
- Instructional Transformation; and
- Culture Shift

For further information, see [Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement](#)

conducting a turnaround and/or is operating in a community with few high-quality schools available to take the charter school's students. As a still relatively new concept, charter restarts have not yet been widely studied, but New Orleans, Tennessee, New York, and Washington, DC, have examples of successful restarts.¹⁷

Turnaround

The third course of possible authorizer action for a low-performing charter school is to allow — and encourage — school turnaround. Although there is relatively little research about the efficacy of turnaround efforts in the charter context, what research does exist finds charter school turnarounds to have been effective in some cases.¹⁸

Turnaround has most often been attempted in traditional public schools, where it has yielded mixed results.¹⁹ Research pointing to differences

between successful and unsuccessful turnaround in traditional public schools identifies several conditions for turnaround success in general. A study of low-performing schools receiving federal School Improvement Grants (SIG) found that schools attempting to improve needed the autonomy to make decisions to address the specific needs of their school. When state and district priorities and decisions were not aligned to the particular needs of a SIG school, the school's turnaround efforts suffered.²⁰ The literature further reveals that districts providing schools with staffing autonomy, budgetary autonomy, flexible use of time, external accountability, and programmatic flexibility experienced more successful turnaround initiatives.²¹ These same conditions already exist for charter schools, by definition.²² (For more information on the conditions for success, see "Supportive Conditions for Turnaround.")

Supportive Conditions for Turnaround

By definition, most charter schools already operate under conditions that make them more amenable to school turnaround. When these conditions are present, authorizers, board members, and school leaders are better able to make the decisive changes needed for a successful school turnaround process.

EXTERNAL ACCOUNTABILITY

External accountability is needed to create urgency for school turnaround.²³ Charter schools do not live in perpetuity but are bound by the conditions of a performance contract, with most initial contracts lasting for five years. They are held accountable for results by an authorizer that has the ability to close them if they do not improve. External accountability from the authorizer exerts pressure on the school board and school leadership to dedicate the necessary time and resources to the turnaround effort.

STAFFING AUTONOMY

The literature on school improvement finds that a turnaround leader is an essential ingredient to the success of school turnaround efforts.²⁴ Research shows that most successful improvement efforts also involve

replacing some staff.²⁵ Most charter schools have the flexibility and autonomy to make key decisions about human capital. Charter boards are able to move quickly to replace an ineffective leader because most charter leaders are at-will employees. Since most charter schools have flexibility in hiring and don't have to meet state or district requirements for personnel, such as licensure requirements, they can build a team that has the commitment and the skills to turn the school around.²⁶

Charter schools also have the flexibility to use human capital in innovative ways so as to meet a school's specific needs. For example, they could convert an instructional coaching position to an interventionist position, or they could have a teacher serve part time as an instructional coach or a department lead, depending on the needs of the school.

BUDGETARY AUTONOMY

Turnaround leaders need some autonomy over their budget so they can re-allocate resources where they are needed to support instructional transformation and dramatic shifts in school culture.²⁷ Leaders need to be able to conduct a needs assessment and then drive resources where they are needed, rather than having to follow a template or prescription for how funding should be allocated.²⁸ Charter school leaders have this autonomy.

PROGRAMMATIC FLEXIBILITY

Turnaround leaders need the flexibility to implement the strategies that will result in instructional transformation and a dramatic shift in school culture.²⁹ In low-performing schools, leaders need to assess the effectiveness of existing programs and strategies and be able to modify or replace them. Leaders need to ensure they have structures in place to support teachers in providing standards-based instruction, using data to inform planning and differentiation, and using research-based pedagogical strategies. They also need to ensure that they have systems that create a positive school climate and provide opportunities for staff to collaborate around a shared vision of high expectations for students. Charter school leaders have this flexibility. Those leading low-performing schools, however, will need guidance in using the flexibility effectively to support needed changes to existing programs and strategies.

Does the Charter School Have Enough Capacity for Turnaround?

Although it's true that charter schools, by definition, have some of the conditions important for successful turnaround, not all poorly performing charter schools will have the internal wherewithal to achieve significant improvement. Improvement is challenging, and research has demonstrated that some schools, even with years of intensive interventions, are not able to make progress.³⁰ Because turnaround candidates must have some existing capacity on which to build, authorizers looking at school turnaround as a possible response to low-performing charter schools should establish thoughtful, rigorous, and transparent criteria by which to distinguish good turnaround candidates from those that are not. Research indicates that the following factors matter.

Academic Bright Spots

Schools are typically identified for improvement because of low academic achievement based on aggregate student performance across the school. Thus, a school might be low-performing overall but, within it, particular groups of students might be demonstrating significant growth or proficiency in some grades or content areas.³¹ Because a successful turnaround depends on many people working together to achieve extraordinary results,³² one important bright spot could be a dynamic and competent leadership team.³³ Alternatively, or in addition, there may be some teachers who have strong pedagogical skills³⁴ and could serve as mentor teachers or coaches to other teachers who need support. Finally, a culture of improvement could

be the bright spot at the school, serving as a foundation on which to build high expectations for learning and improve academic outcomes.

Board Commitment and Capacity

A charter school's board members must be able to recognize that the school is not meeting performance targets and admit that they need help.³⁵ Beyond that, the board must have the commitment to oversee a school turnaround and the willingness to build its own capacity to take on that oversight role.³⁶ This capacity includes the ability to supervise and evaluate the turnaround from start to finish, which entails, among other things, developing goals and benchmarks and using data to monitor progress throughout the process.

Not all boards will have the means to help; many board members are not educators and have been recruited for other skills, such as fundraising or marketing. Estimates of the proportion of board members with a background in education vary tremendously, from 60 percent in a sample from Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin to 7 percent in Massachusetts.³⁷

Board members must also be willing and able to invest more time, reallocate funding, and potentially raise additional funds for the turnaround effort.

Stakeholder Support

Commitment from parents, staff, community members, and local organizations such as neighborhood councils or community centers can support the success of the school turnaround effort.³⁸ One measure of parent commitment is enrollment and re-enrollment, so, when considering whether a school is a good candidate for turnaround, one relevant

question is whether the school has been close to, or meeting, its enrollment targets over the last three to five years. If students and families do not have an interest in enrolling in the school, it may not be worth saving.³⁹

Another key stakeholder group to consider in turnaround decisions is the school's staff. It is important for the success of the turnaround that the school have at least a small group of influential staff who are passionate about and committed to the school and its mission.⁴⁰ Research has shown school improvement efforts are more likely to be successful when directed or monitored by a core team committed to its success. Action steps are more likely to be completed when they are "owned" by a person or group of people.⁴¹ Such staff can also energize the turnaround effort and help to motivate and support others in the school.

Community stakeholders and organizations can support the school turnaround effort by providing additional resources and moral support for the school.⁴² Foundations can be especially important when it comes to the next factor, a school's ability to work with a turnaround partner.

Charter schools with strengths in several of these capacity areas might be good candidates for turnaround rather than closure or restart.

Availability of Turnaround Support

Although low-performing charter schools need some degree of capacity in order to be seriously considered for turnaround, most low-performing schools will not have *enough* capacity to complete a successful turnaround on their own. Thus, they will need outside support.

A charter school board seeking turnaround will typically need to conduct a needs assessment

to thoroughly and comprehensively understand both the school's strengths and those aspects of the school that are in need of improvement, as well as the underlying reasons for the school's problem areas. School leadership will identify strategies for turnaround and, together with the board and other stakeholders, develop an intensive improvement plan for the school with long- and short-term goals for addressing needs. Successful turnaround may require coaching and other forms of professional learning, developing new processes and systems, and continually monitoring progress toward goals to determine what is working and what is not. In sustainable turnaround efforts, the school builds the necessary capacity for implementing the strategies and structures needed to run a high-performing school.

Yet for many charter schools and their boards, undertaking these intense efforts on their own is unrealistic.⁴³ Traditional public schools attempting turnaround may be able to count on support from their district's central office. For their part, charter schools in need of improvement have no obvious source of external support unless they happen to be one of their state's lowest-performing schools, in which case their state and local education agencies may have some responsibility to help. Some charter associations and authorizers may provide support to failing charter schools, but not all of them see school turnaround as part of their role or, if they do, they may not have the capacity to provide intensive turnaround support. Many authorizers see themselves as responsible for helping to identify a school's performance challenges and, potentially, to identify outside organizations that can provide improvement support. But they don't necessarily see themselves in the role of support provider.

In some cases, state departments of education have a clear mandate to support charter schools but may not have enough capacity to do so because they are directing whatever resources they *do* have primarily, or solely, to schools that have been identified for Comprehensive School Improvement or Targeted School Improvement. While some charter schools may be designated as such, it is likely that there are low-performing charter schools that do not fall into one of these categories.

So who *can* help when others can't? Authorizers should consider compiling a list of vetted organizations with the experience and know-how to help a school execute a successful turnaround. The list of improvement partners might include charter associations, district offices, or independent organizations that specialize in school turnaround. The charter school can then select a provider from the list.

In compiling a partner list, authorizers may want to seek organizations with approaches that meet the evidence levels within the Every Student Succeeds Act, so that schools using them will be eligible for support through federal funds. This is important because turnaround is labor intensive and can require significant funding. Turnaround costs frequently include coverage for coaching staff and professional learning for teachers and leaders, including classroom substitutes. It may be challenging to secure sufficient direct funding, but schools can also re-allocate their per-pupil funding to free up funds for school turnaround. Authorizers may also be able to set aside funding from their own budget to support school turnaround efforts. Other options may include securing state and/or federal funding from the state education agency to support turnaround efforts.

Charter School Authorizers' Role in Turnaround

Much about the role of charter school authorizers is clear and consistent across all jurisdictions that have charter schools. Any entity sanctioned by state charter school law to be an authorizer — whether it be a state or local education agency (SEA, LEA), an independent charter board, a not-for-profit organization, or any other entity — is responsible for reviewing and approving charter school applications, for setting operational and performance expectations and monitoring progress against them, and, ultimately, for deciding what to do when a school is not meeting those agreed-upon expectations. Less consistent, and in some cases less clear, is whether an authorizer is responsible for actively supporting a charter school's improvement efforts.

For example, separate from any authorizer responsibilities they have, SEAs and LEAs are responsible for supporting their lowest-performing schools, whether they are traditional public schools or charter schools. If a failing charter school, irrespective of who has authorized it, does not fall into that category, it is less likely to receive active support.

Without any legally required role in school improvement, an authorizer may simply choose not to join in the effort. Other authorizers may want to but lack the resources to help. SEAs and LEAs that serve as authorizers may want to help any failing charter school they have approved, but their required focus on the lowest-performing schools (e.g., Comprehensive School Improvement or Targeted School Improvement schools under the Every Student Succeeds Act) may well consume the agencies' limited improvement

resources. And other types of authorizers may not have improvement capacity to begin with, no matter how they view their role.⁴⁴ Many have created “tiers of intervention designations — such as notices of concern, notices of warning, notices of probation, and charter warnings — designed to notify schools of deficiencies in their performance.”⁴⁵ While such notices alert schools that they have performance issues to address, the notices alone haven’t been effective as a response to low charter school performance because low-performing schools typically need significant support if they are to improve.⁴⁶

Finally, irrespective of an authorizer’s ability to support a school engaging in turnaround, doing so creates an awkward tension because, in the end, if the turnaround fails, the authorizer is the one who pulls the plug. Many authorizers are uncomfortable with the idea of providing turnaround support for precisely that reason — if the support doesn’t work, the authorizer may have to close the school. The school may then protest the closure because its board and leaders could argue that the authorizer didn’t do a good enough job in providing support.

Bringing It All Together for Intentional Decisions

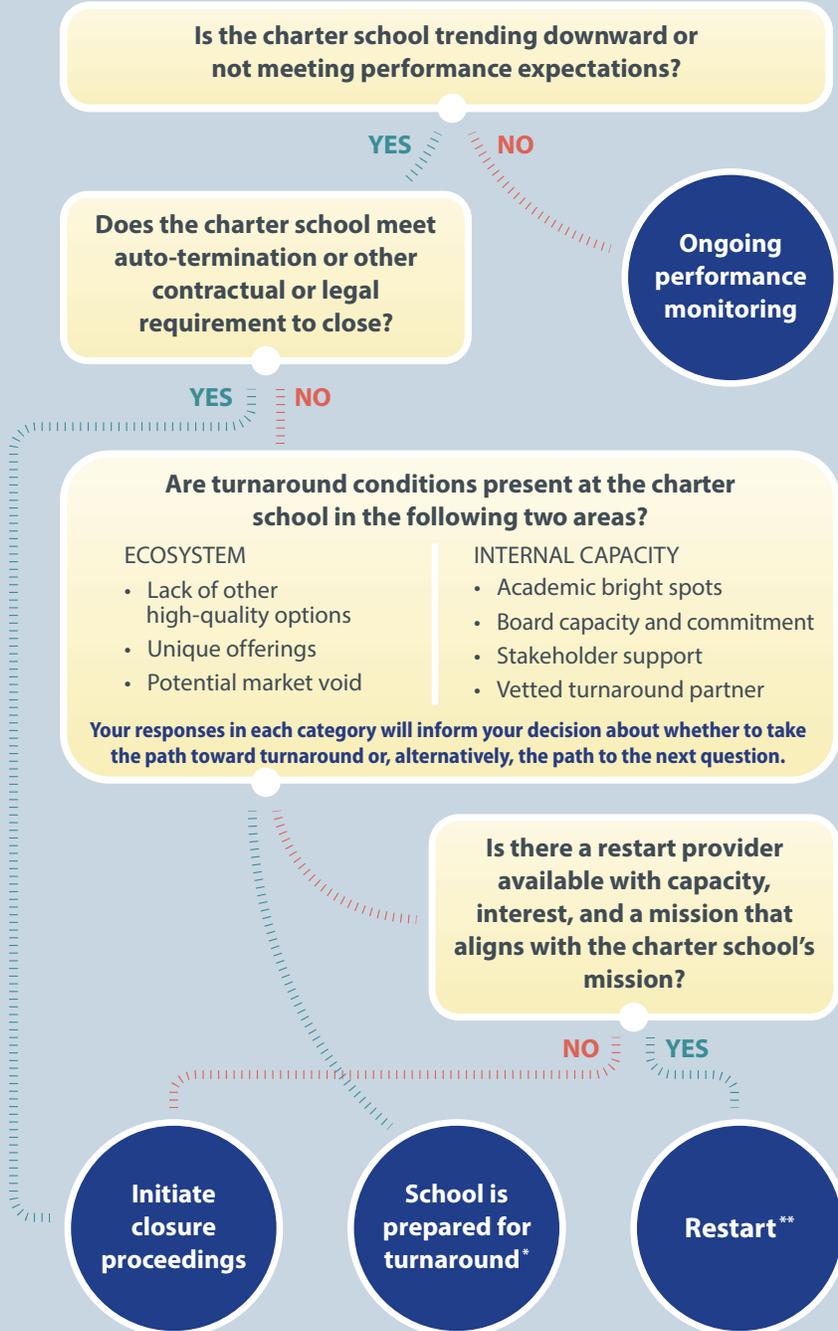
In part because many of the policy and regulatory conditions fundamental to successful turnaround are already in place for all charter schools, this brief proposes that turnaround be considered, along with closure and restart, as an option for low-performing charter schools. The decision map on the following page underscores the need for authorizers, when thinking through the options, to assess both the role that the poorly performing school is intended to play within its education ecosystem and the school’s capacity for turnaround.

An obvious question is what happens if an authorizer recommends turnaround and the school is unable to make progress. Anticipating this possibility, an authorizer could structure a turnaround agreement indicating that the school will be in turnaround status for a specified period of time with agreed-upon outcomes, and that the school may either engage in a turnaround

process on its own or may contract directly with an approved turnaround provider. (In setting a timeframe for improvement, an authorizer might note that turnaround initiatives rarely generate observable impacts on achievement until three to five years after they begin.⁴⁷) This kind of agreement provides the charter school with the autonomy to decide on a course of action while also preserving the authorizers’ ultimate accountability option: closure.

In any case, an authorizer who opts to recommend turnaround for a low-performing charter school will want to remember that low-performing charter schools may be able to learn from high-performing charter and traditional schools, particularly those serving similar student populations.⁴⁸ Improvement partners or processes should, to the degree possible, enable a low-performing charter school to learn from its higher-performing peers. While some cities and states have systems and structures for sharing best practices from high-performing schools, this sharing of best practices is not widespread and may be an area of opportunity.

An Authorizer's Decision Map for Low-Performing Charter Schools



* Turnaround is defined as comprehensive improvement with the same charter operator, students, and facility.

** Restart refers to a new charter operator taking over the school with the same students and facility.

The Need for More Research and Policy Support

There remains a clear need for research on school improvement in charter schools. Studies should focus on such questions as the following:

- » What factors are associated with successful school turnaround in charter schools?
- » What policies (state-local) need to be in place to allow a low-performing charter school to engage in turnaround?
- » What supports do low-performing charter schools pursuing turnaround need, and for how long?
- » In what ways are school turnarounds different in charter schools than in traditional public schools?

There is also a need for broader discussion about policy levers, funding, and organizational support for charter school improvement. In many cases, there isn't a clear organizational entity with the capacity to support turnaround in charter schools. To support turnaround in those charter schools identified as having turnaround capacity, state policymakers should consider applying the same policies and making the same degree of funding available that is used to support turnaround in traditional public schools. National foundations might consider investing in the development and testing of models for charter school turnaround and in sharing effective practices. Local foundations might consider providing funding to organizations that, in the right cases, could support charter school turnaround.

Ultimately, when any school turnaround is successful, students and families benefit. While not all low-performing charter schools are candidates for turnaround, this brief suggests that many more such efforts could be undertaken in the charter sector.

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