Engaging Families and Communities in School Turnarounds: When Students Can’t Wait
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To cite this chapter, please use:
Families and communities can assist districts to improve instruction through their contributions to and support of rigorous academics inside and outside of school.
School turnaround is not school improvement plus. Rather, school turnaround is a focused change effort designed to dramatically improve the performance of an organization on an aggressive timeline that benefits the students currently enrolled in the school. Unlike typical improvement efforts focusing on implementing incremental changes in three to five years, turning around the lowest performing schools requires urgent and focused efforts that will generate positive growth in one to two years. Examples of such growth would be improving fourth grade reading scores by 12% or reducing the achievement gap between affluent and poor middle school students by 5%. Whether the process entails the components defined by the U.S. Department of Education as turnaround, transformation, restart, or other approaches, these efforts require disruptive change that mandates not only district- and school-level personnel examine and change their behavior, but also students, parents, and communities.

Leveraging an Overlooked Resource: Engaging Families and Communities as Turnaround Advocates, Academic Partners, and External Experts

There is an established research base documenting the correlation between parent and community involvement and positive student outcomes (Brown, Muirhead, Redding, & Witterspoon, 2011; Jeynes, 2005, 2011; Lewis & Henderson, 1997; Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, & Walberg, 2005; Redding, Langdon, Meyer, & Sheley, 2004; Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010). The federal SIG program requires states and districts to provide “ongoing mechanisms for family and community engagement” in targeted turnaround efforts. Failure to effectively and meaningfully engage these key stakeholders represents a missed opportunity to leverage a powerful resource. In particular, based on research regarding the impact of families and communities on student achievement and factors critical to successful school turnaround efforts, they can contribute to turnaround in three key ways: (1) advocating for dramatic change, (2) supporting rigorous academics, and (3) providing external expertise (Brown et al., 2011; Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Lewis & Henderson, 1997; Public Impact, 2007; Steiner & Brinson, 2011).

Advocacy

In a meta-analysis of parent involvement research, Jeynes (2005) not only documented the positive correlation between involvement and student outcomes, but also established that the single most powerful factor is parental expectations. Parental expectations are expressed in the “curriculum of the home,” the attitudes, habits, knowledge, and skills that children acquire through their relationships with their families that serves as the foundation for how they approach school and learning (Redding, 2000).

Parental expectations are also communicated by how parents interact with the school system. Communities more generally express their expectations through their engagement, or lack thereof, in school matters. At their core, families and communities expect and need high-quality schools; parents want their children to succeed, and the broader community needs strong schools to ensure the long-term viability of the local economy.

Most tangibly, communities elect or remove school board members who enact, or fail to enact, policies that lead to high-quality schools and lobby school leaders to change policies they oppose. High-achieving suburban schools located in communities with well-educated and affluent parents are successful in part because the parents expect and demand quality schools. Parents and community members actively pursue change when schools don't meet expectations, and school leaders are readily held accountable for fulfilling family and community expectations. Advocacy for quality schools is a manifestation of high expectations.

In communities with persistently low-performing schools, channeling the desire for quality schools into advocacy—in a variety of forms—is a critical step to supporting school turnaround efforts. Lack of external support and pressure

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1 Under The U.S. Department of Education's School Improvement Grant (SIG), the term “turnaround” defines a specific approach to a dramatic change effort. For the purpose of this chapter, the term “turnaround” refers not to a specific change approach (e.g., replace the principal and 50% of the existing staff) but to the dramatic change in the performance of a school in a time-compressed manner through a variety of means, including but not limited to the approaches defined under SIG.
for change can undermine turnaround efforts that require school and district personnel to alter their practices. Policy leaders committed to turning around schools need to intentionally leverage family and community expectations to initiate, drive, and sustain difficult change efforts (Steiner & Brinson, 2011).

Advocacy translates into actions at multiple levels of the system. It can include local efforts such as attendance at school board meetings where critical decisions are made, change agents running for school boards, grassroots turnaround petitions (see sidebar regarding the California Parent Empowerment Act), or business roundtables working with mayors and superintendents to craft a turnaround campaign. It can also include state-level efforts focused on changing legislation that undermines change initiatives (Renée & McAlister, 2011).

Regardless of its form or level, the first step to catalyzing families and communities to advocate for school turnaround is to communicate the dire need for change and the tangible benefits (e.g., higher graduation rates, increased college acceptance rates, and decreased crime) for individual students as well as the broader community (Brown et al., 2011; Steiner & Brinson, 2011). They must fully understand that substantive change—including actions that some stakeholders may oppose such as removing beloved but ineffective personnel or ending pet projects that don’t advance academic goals—is required to provide quality schools for all students. Clear communication about the need for and tangible benefits of change will prepare them to endure the turbulent seas that accompany difficult change.

Ideally, skilled district and school leaders will engage families and communities to advocate for coherent turnaround plans. In the absence of strong local leadership, families and communities advocating for school turnaround can motivate district and school leaders to make changes and provide them with necessary political cover to overcome resistance.

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**Mobilizing Parents to Advocate for Dramatic Change: The California Parent Empowerment Act**

A dramatic example of parents advocating for school turnaround is California’s Parent Empowerment Act—the “parent trigger law”—that empowers parents to petition districts to convert failing schools to a charter campus, replace staff, transform the curriculum, or close the school. If at least 50% of parents sign the petition, the district is required to respond. The legislation passed in 2010 as part of California’s efforts to win Race to the Top federal funding.

Highly controversial, the law was invoked to turn around McKinley Elementary in Compton Unified School District, but immediately encountered legal challenges from the local school board regarding the validity of signatures on the petition. The State Board of Education subsequently issued regulations clarifying how districts should verify signatures, clearing the way for McKinley parents to exercise their right to demand dramatic change to benefit their children.

Extending authority already granted to districts under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the California parent trigger law provides parents of children in low-performing schools a clear legal channel to demand dramatic change when districts are unable or unwilling to take necessary steps to turn around failing schools.

Based on the California law, parent trigger legislation has been proposed in 14 other states, and there is discussion of including similar language in reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (formerly NCLB). In an interview with Time magazine regarding parent trigger laws, Representative George Miller, ranking Democrat on the House Education and Workforce Committee, explained, “The fact of the matter is, when we look at developing a model for real change and improvement in public education, it’s pretty hard to do without parents. We’ve tried for years, and it’s not working.”

Sources: California State Board of Education, 2011a, 2011b; Watanabe, 2011; Webley, 2011.
**Academics**

The essence of any successful and sustainable turnaround effort is an aggressive commitment to improving the quality of instruction delivered in individual classrooms. Families and communities can assist districts to improve instruction through their contributions to and support of rigorous academics inside and outside of school.

**Inside School**

Historically, family and community engagement in schools has been limited to activities such as participating in parent–teacher conferences and associations, fundraising for specific programs, volunteering in classrooms, and attendance at school events. These efforts are laudable and can augment the instructional program, but often fall short of fully utilizing families or communities to advance critical goals. Furthermore, the challenge in turnaround situations is that most low-performing schools are inundated with multiple, and sometimes competing, initiatives ostensibly designed to help the school but, that in practice, frequently diffuse focus and dilute priorities (Rhim, 2011; Rhim & Redding, 2011). Effectively engaging families and communities to support targeted turnaround efforts requires that district and school leaders (1) establish a clear set of turnaround priorities and (2) strategically weave families and communities into activities that advance these priorities. Not all volunteer efforts are equal and, in fact, some can detract from turnaround efforts if they distract school personnel or require inordinate amounts of time relative to the instructional benefits (see sidebar regarding Cincinnati Public Schools’ Resource Coordinators).

The key variable in transforming scattered volunteers into meaningful contributors in schools is strategic planning that matches a school’s instructional needs with volunteers’ skills and, if necessary, proactively seeking particular expertise to help with specific academic goals (e.g., recruit a parent with technology expertise to assist a teacher in introducing a new mobile device or a local doctor to help with a biology unit). Initiatives that tap into family and community volunteers to explicitly support the academic goals of low-performing schools can bring in unique expertise while limiting distractions.

**Outside School**

Most students attend school an average of 6 hours a day, leaving the remaining 18 hours to other activities that can enhance or inhibit learning. Families and communities play a central role in shaping whether time outside of school contributes to or detracts from education. First and foremost, families play a central role in ensuring that students attend school and can play an active role in assisting low-performing schools address chronic truancy issues (Sheldon, 2007; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004).

How students spend their time out of school influences what they do in school and stands to help or harm strategic turnaround efforts focused on improving academic outcomes. For instance, a significant portion of time should be devoted to obtaining adequate sleep and eating healthy meals, but research indicates that many American students are sleep deprived (Wolfson & Caruskadon, 2003) and practice less than adequate eating habits (Apovian, 2010). While simplistic, efforts to engage families and communities to make certain that all students

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**School Turnaround in Cincinnati: Effectively Leveraging Families and Community Resources to Support Academic Goals**

As part of Cincinnati Public Schools’ (CPS) aggressive school turnaround initiative—the Elementary Initiative—school principals modified the role of existing “Resource Coordinators” from volunteer coordinators to analysts charged with allocating and tracking external resources and holding partners (e.g., student mentoring programs, parent volunteers, and nonprofits interested in providing services to the school) accountable. Volunteers are assigned to individual classrooms and programs according to schools’ academic priorities as opposed to volunteers’ interests. Focusing volunteer efforts necessitates saying no to some offers (e.g., sponsorship of a program that does not support high-priority turnaround goals). Principals in CPS schools identified the role of the resource coordinator as extremely valuable to managing the principal’s time and targeting valuable resources, including families and other community members.

Source: Rhim, 2011.
have adequate rest and nutrition could significantly contribute to efforts to improve student outcomes.

Aside from attending school, sleeping, and eating, the rest of the day is devoted to a diverse array of other activities (e.g., athletics, employment, homework, socializing on- and off-line, other forms of screen time be it television or computer screens). District and school leaders can intentionally engage families and communities to develop activities that will communicate expectations regarding the value of education and augment their education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davis, 2007). For instance, a plan to create a partnership with a local museum or business to operate an after-school program or internships exposing students to professional office environments could be a part of a district's turnaround plan. Given the amount of time spent out of school, overlooking family and the broader community and, specifically, how they influence how students spend their time and the degree to which they value education is a missed opportunity. Individual families and the broader community are well positioned to support students in using their out-of-school time in a productive manner, communicate the value of school, and expose students to opportunities available as a result of persisting and obtaining a high-quality education.

**Expertise**

Districts supporting and schools embarking upon a turnaround effort must garner significant expertise to cultivate a human capital pipeline, analyze data, develop a coherent plan, and then implement the plan with fidelity. Engaging families and communities in a meaningful way in the process can leverage additional expertise while also developing buy-in from this key constituency. Families and community members can be engaged long-term to serve on volunteer associations, school councils, and school boards (Brown et al., 2011; Henderson, 2010). Parents and community members can also be engaged for shorter-term projects associated with turnaround efforts. For example, they can host community meetings about the changes that need to occur for the turnaround to be successful and sustainable, or form task forces with a clearly articulated charge to develop creative solutions to specific problems.

Having community members at the table brings in an alternative perspective that can be invaluable when tackling difficult changes. Community members may also be aware of external resources (e.g., nonprofit organizations or philanthropies) that may help the school achieve its goals or potential barriers that may undermine new programs (e.g., an after-school church program that will be disrupted by an extended school day). Furthermore, engaging influential community members (e.g., parents from an underrepresented minority group, leaders from a neighborhood council, or individuals with deep family roots in the community) in the planning process can help district and school leaders build support for a turnaround process from the very groups who, absent a seat at the table and an opportunity to contribute to the process in a substantive way, might oppose disruptive change efforts.

Essential to tapping family and community expertise is to be explicit about their official role and ensure that it is substantive as opposed to symbolic. This will include outlining the limitations of their role (Steiner & Brinson, 2011). For instance, if parents are invited to serve on a principal selection committee, it should be clear from the beginning that the final hiring decision will be made by the school board. Infusing transparent decision making into relationships to the maximum extent possible will build credibility and trust, further catalyzing family and community engagement.

**Conclusions**

Efforts to turnaround failing schools—institutions that in some instances have underserved communities for decades—require dramatic change on a compressed timeline. Students currently enrolled in these schools cannot afford to wait three to five years for incremental change efforts to bear fruit. Responsibility for the change cannot rest on the shoulders of hero superintendents, principals, or teachers. Rather, turnaround efforts require a substantive and long-term engagement of key stakeholders that influence students and the schools they attend. Parents and the broader community are uniquely positioned to advocate for high-quality schools,
support students’ academic pursuits, and contribute to the collective expertise required to turnaround and sustain these critical community institutions. To effectively engage families and community members, municipal, district, and school leaders must first acknowledge that change needs to occur, and thereafter develop a cogent plan to leverage all available resources to support the turnaround. Absent strong leadership, the community itself may need to serve as the initial catalyst for change.

There is no one “right” or “best” way to engage families and communities in turnaround efforts, as each community is unique. Nevertheless, it is critical that these stakeholders are engaged in an intentional and meaningful manner to assist district and school leaders to achieve their goals to initially turn around persistently low-performing schools and subsequently sustain the success. Developing a proactive and intentional, as opposed to reactive, strategy to engage these critical stakeholders will enable schools and districts to leverage their power and expertise to successfully turn around schools for the benefit of individual students and the community as a whole.

Examples of Family and Community Engagements to Support School Turnaround

**Advocacy**

- Lobby local legislators to change state regulations that impede turnaround efforts (e.g., state tenure laws that drive seniority-based hiring).
- Organize a grassroots turnaround campaign to drive and support the district turnaround plan.
- Engage local business associations to promote and support turnaround efforts through a marketing campaign touting the benefits of supporting high-quality public schools.

**Academic Support**

- Develop a healthy body, healthy mind campaign to educate parents and students about the importance of sleep and nutrition to academic outcomes.
- Recruit parents and community members with specific skills (e.g., literacy or mathematics) to volunteer in schools to support priority academic goals.
- Partner with a local community group to schedule after-school programs that reinforce the value of education and expose students to opportunities available to college graduates.

**Expertise**

- Develop a “community resource bank” of individuals with specific expertise that align with high-priority turnaround goals (e.g., technology experts available to donate hours to support integration of mobile computing devices in classrooms).
- Identify parents and community members with human resource skills to serve on a task force charged with developing an aggressive human capital pipeline to recruit teachers for hard-to-staff positions.
- Recruit business leaders with turnaround expertise to serve as mentors to current and aspiring school administrators.

**References**


**Resources**

http://www.annenberginstitute.org: Resources on community organizing to support schools.

http://www.centerii.org: Resources on all aspects of school improvement.

http://www.families-schools.org: Resources for schools and parents and the new issues and archives of the *School Community Journal.*


http://www.publicimpact.com: Resources related to family involvement and school turnaround.

http://www.sedl.org: Resources on connection between family engagement and student outcomes.
