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Equity, Effectiveness and Control: The Every Student Succeeds Act and State Approaches to Defining School Turnaround

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POLICY BRIEF

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and State Approaches to Defining
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Over the last three decades, State Education Agencies and State legislatures have taken more active roles in creating policies to measure and define school performance. Guided by federal policy inducements, states have developed policies to evaluate school-level performance and define schools in need of improvement as well as the lowest performing schools in need of turnaround. In this chapter, we provide an analysis of 52 state plans submitted and approved under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015.

ESSA called on all 52 states educational agencies to detail specific turnaround plans for struggling schools. Some states submitted their plans as early as March of 2017, while others needed until February 2019 to finish their first submission. Many states had their initial plans approved, while others had multiple revisions—including Virginia, which submitted seven revisions before garnering final approval. In our review of ESSA plans, we found that submissions averaged 1.82 per state.

Our analysis of state plans focuses on variations in state-level definition and framing of three categories of school status determinations for schools in need of improvement: TSI-Targeted Support and Intervention; CSI-Comprehensive Support and Intervention; and MRI-More Rigorous Intervention. We conducted a content analysis of the approved plans from the 52 state agencies. After an initial inductive review, we found that states' approaches to the three categories of TSI, CSI, and MRI were central to turnaround school policy. We created a spreadsheet with the following information: date of submission of plan; years of low performance required to be designated for TSI, CSI, and MRI, and the number of years of increasing performance required to exit TSI, CSI, and MRI. In addition, we captured the language of criteria for entering and exiting each of the categories, as well as the factors utilized to determine the categories, including indicators and weights provided as markers of performance in the elementary, middle, and high school levels. We captured proficiency goals for each state plan and described how each defined subgroup categories and size. Finally, we listed options provided to districts for MRI strategies and turnaround options for school districts.

Given the enormously disproportionate percentage of low income and students of color attending schools in TSI, CSI, and MRI status, it can be argued that state-level plans for turnaround interventions represent a de facto state level policy lever for more equitable outcomes. While ESSA was designed to provide greater flexibility to states, and state-level and contextually sensitive flexibility is desirable, our analysis reveals a significant and wide variation in categorical definitions and identification of turnaround schools.

WHAT ARE TURNAROUND SCHOOLS?



Rosenbach, Flowers, Bird, and Algozzine (2017) define turnaround schools as:

schools that have a high proportion of students failing to meet state standards of proficiency... for two or more consecutive years... turnaround model attempts to make quick, dramatic improvements within three years... in a turnaround school, a principal may have to hire and train a small group to implement and lead change immediately (p. 11).

Murphy & Myers (2009) provide a four dimension framework for school turnaround that sets context for school turnaround

TURNAROUND AS A CONCEPT. The concept of school turnaround emerged in the late 1980's, as effective schools research informed state-based standards-based curriculum and accountability system policies. Turnaround schools were framed by state level school accountability governance policies and assessment metrics that sought to steer school-level reform activity from afar (Duke, 2012; Liu, Belibas, & Printy, 2018; Reyes & Garcia, 2014).

TURNAROUND AS A CONDITION. A "turnaround" school has, in theory, experienced several years of "poor" school performance as measured by state-level accountability metrics and is need of "dramatic changes that produce significant achievement gains in a short period (often within two years), followed by a longer period of sustained

improvement” (Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore & Lash, 2007, p. 4). Often schools deemed in need of turnaround are characterized by limited resources, low-expectation culture, overactive change initiatives with few supports or longevity, insufficient authority for robust change, teacher and leadership churn, and a high percentage of students living in poverty (Calkins, et al., 2007; Lui, et al., 2018; Murphy, 2008).

TURNAROUND AS A PROCESS. School turnaround has typically referred to a process where a state or district attempts to rapidly reform a consistently underperforming school (and sometimes districts).

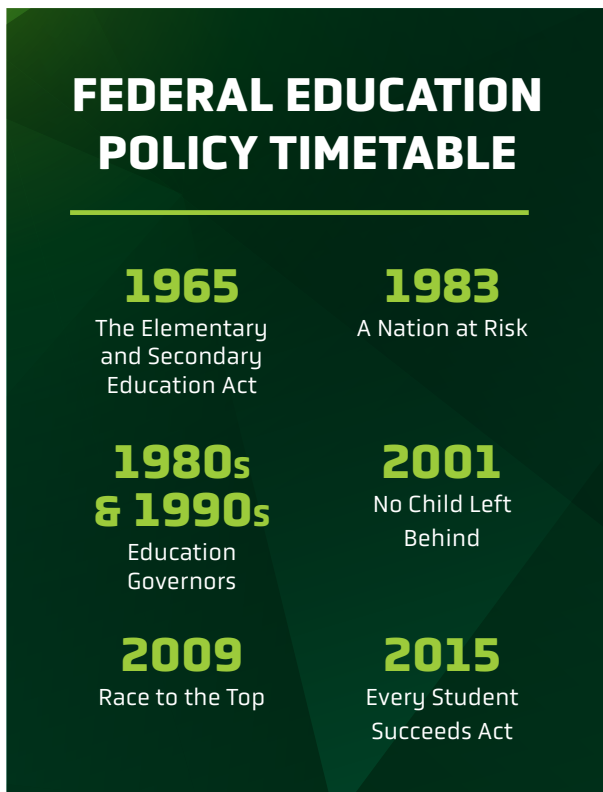
Typically, schools designated for turnaround status are provided additional supports in order to produce measurable positive change in a short period of time (Duke, 2015). Leithwood, Harris, and Strauss’s (2010) description of a four stage turnaround process include focusing on changing the environment for a set of initial improvements, making sure the organization survives, getting early victories or improvements, and building capacity to lead to further improvement.

TURNAROUND AS A CONSEQUENCE. If certain goals for improvement are not met, a range of state or district led consequences are incurred by the school. Most often, the school must change, be redefined or closed. In considering turnaround as a consequence, school context and culture matter and therefore personnel is often redeployed, including selecting a more capable and committed leader (Murphy & Myers, 2009). Within restructuring models of turnaround, the principal and half the teachers are replaced, as it is assumed that existing cultural norms restrain the work of leaders (Lui, et al., 2019).

While the emphasis of school turnaround policies and practices have historically focused on school-level activity, the role of the district and state have received considerably

higher levels of interest over the past decade. Greater attention is being placed on reforming state and district systems in ways that create a set of supporting rather than constraining conditions. In addition to targeted state and district funding for instructional coaches, software, professional development for instructional improvement and teacher retention bonuses (American Institute for Research, 2011; Rhim & Redding, 2014; Riley, Merideth, & Butler, 2019), districts and states have been called upon to provide a set of well-articulated and communicated supports around transforming instructional practices (Aladajem, von

Glatz, Hildreth, & McKithen, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2018). These include better instructional evaluation practices (Aragon, 2018a) and recruitment practices for teachers with the skills and dispositions to work in low-performing school contexts (Aragon, 2018b).



FEDERAL EDUCATION POLICY AND TURNAROUND SCHOOLS



The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965). ESEA represented the first large scale federal attempt to target support and interventions for “disadvantaged” students.

A Nation at Risk (1983). The administration consistently critiqued inefficiencies of the public sector, including education, and suggested that the United States was “being overtaken by competitors throughout the world” that public education was characterized by a “rising tide of mediocrity.”

Education Governors (1980s and 1990s). Various 1990s education summits and active mayoral intervention and control in large urban districts focused on education as a key lever to economic development and social equity. State and

local governments started taking a much more active role in governing and regulating education.

No Child Left Behind (2001). NCLB mandated that each state formulate testable standards for core subjects in targeted grade levels. The states were then expected to set targets for Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) as a means of naming and monitoring gaps in achievement between schools and between student population groups.

Race to the Top (2009). (RTT) utilized inducement to introduce large scale teacher evaluation reforms, as well as target funding for turning around the lowest-achieving schools. The program utilized competitive grants as incentives for districts and schools to rapidly improve struggling areas. RTT also included an Office of School Turnaround and increased the importance of the School Improvement Grant (SIG) program

Every Student Succeeds Act (2015). ESSA called on states “to detail school improvement efforts based on state-identified needs.” ESSA called on all 52 states educational agencies to detail specific turnaround plans for struggling schools.

Many of these policies gave rise to accountability and measurement tools that allowed state and district actors to guide from afar using performance metrics to determine what constitutes failure and need for intervention. These are then reflected in how states came to define what constitutes school turnaround within their ESSA plans.

STATE APPROACHES TO DEFINING SCHOOL TURNAROUND IN ESSA PLANS



ESSA (2015) called on all state educational agencies to determine how schools enter TSI and CSI designations, while requiring details about the more rigorous interventions that would occur if they failed to exit. Many states included broad language about TSI, CSI, and MRI, including entrance and exit requirements. We found significant variations in approaches to all three categories. Some states lacked specific language for school categorizations, including

demarcations for TSI and CSI. McGuinn (2019) noted some of the variance:

Florida, for example, initially proposed to keep its existing A to F rating system, which didn't rate schools on the proficiency of English language learners or disaggregate the performance of student subgroups (both ESSA requirements). California's plan, meanwhile, was initially sent back for revision because its proposed school rating system used a color-coded dashboard but did not give each school an overall score and thus could not identify the bottom 5% of schools as ESSA requires. The department rebuked Connecticut for not defining what it meant by "consistently underperforming" student groups in schools. In addition, states struggled with the reporting and dissemination of accountability data. (p. 10)

While the performance metrics utilized by states to determine TSI, CSI, and MRI entrance and exit criteria are varied, there are some consistencies across the categories, as next discussed.

TARGETED SUPPORTS AND INTERVENTIONS

Schools in this category must have one or more subgroups that are consistently underperforming, although the definition of “consistent” varies by state. School districts have the primary responsibility for monitoring performance, designating entry and exit criteria, as well as designing interventions in schools marked as needing targeted supports and interventions. In some states, TSI schools had not been identified as late as 2019 (Rentner, Tanner, & Braun, 2019). Schools marked as needing TSI have certain student subgroups that are underperforming in the context of the state's performance benchmarks (Rentner et al., 2019).

COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORTS AND INTERVENTIONS

CSI schools are characterized by overall poor performance on state-approved assessment and/or poor high school graduation outcomes. States take primary responsibility for

monitoring performance and guiding interventions in schools in need of CSI. In rolling out initial implementation of plans, CSI schools were identified before TSI schools. This category of schools tends to have less flexible entrance and exit requirements than TSI schools. CSI schools had to include the lowest performing 5% of state's title I schools as well as public high schools with less than a 60% graduation rate (Rentner et al., 2019).

MORE RIGOROUS INTERVENTIONS

More Rigorous Interventions are to occur after schools have been in CSI status and fail to exit. ESSA requires states to identify the types of "MRI" they will employ should CSI schools fail to exit the state's defined parameters before a specific deadline. States and school districts share responsibility for monitoring performance and guiding interventions in schools in need of MRI. For example,

schools that have not met their exit criteria and need more rigorous intervention ... [State Education Agencies (SEA) and Local Education Agencies (LEA)] can support the implementation of evidence-based interventions ... and determine ... levels of support in these schools and the mechanisms for delivering it. SEAs and LEAs ... determine what ongoing support and monitoring those recently exited schools might receive (McGrath et al., 2018, p. 9)

ENTRANCE TO AND EXIT FROM TSI, CSI, AND MRI

The decentralization favored by ESSA has meant that tracking the number of schools in each of the status categories (TSI, CSI, MRI) can be cumbersome. In one 2019 study that sought to determine the how many schools there were in each of the categories (Rentner et al., 2019), the authors were unable to account for the number per category, noting that complete data was difficult to access on any publicly available websites or reports. For example, the authors noted that

Maine had yet to identify schools for each of the categories, while Vermont waited until late 2019, and four states did not respond to requests for information.

As of 2019, the percentage of schools identified in one of the three categories ranged from 14 states that identified 10% or less of schools in any of the categories to states in which most schools were identified, such as Florida with 69% and Rhode Island with 99%. Five states only identified CSI schools. States varied only slightly in the time parameters given for entering TSI, CSI, and MRI status. TSI had the quickest entrance average and MRI the longest, but three years was the mode for all three designations. Some notable

outliers allowed for unusually long-time frames before designation occurred, like Florida's six years for TSI. There was greater variety still in the years needed to exit TSI or CSI status. Exiting MRI status was not defined in the same terms. Once schools entered MRI they were required to engage in a variety of turn around plans or strategies that were not necessarily time dependent. Consequence severity and levels of support did not affect the time allotments for schools within MRI status.

Our state plan analysis indicates that the average years to TSI was 2.48, but varied language from some states made a direct analysis of specific years difficult; 3.02 years was the average for CSI, and for a school in TSI or CSI status, the average time to "turnaround" before entering MRI status was 3.24 years. The mode for schools TSI, CSI and MRI categories was three years with

35 states using that time for entrance, but there were certain notable outliers. Florida, as mentioned earlier, allows for six years before entering TSI status, but the state's schools only need two years before entering CSI or MRI. Some jurisdictions, like Delaware, Washington DC, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oregon, and Pennsylvania, can move schools into TSI status with just a single year of unsatisfactory scores in certain situations.



CONCLUSIONS

- Given the disproportionate representation of students traditionally marginalized due to socioeconomic status, including race and ethnicity in schools most often subject to interventions dictated by their TSI, CSI or MRI status, we question the efficacy of the approach outlined by ESSA and implemented by the states.
- While we accept that ESSA's current school improvement parameters take a step forward in terms of flexibility, especially for states and districts to approach to the challenges of turning around schools, we posit that a better understanding of the patterns of approaches is critical to efforts to inform policy directions at federal, state, and local levels.
- The intent of ESSA was clearly to provide greater flexibility to the states and in practice it has provided maximum flexibility in principal (federal government) and agent (state agency) relationships. Duff and Wohlstetter (2019) noted that the flexibility was maximized to the extent that all plans were approved despite the wide variability in approaches taken by each of the 52 entities.
- Our analysis further suggests that the principal (state) to agent (district or school) relationship was also designed with significant variability in entrance, exit and intervention approaches.
- Local leaders, educators, and parents should be keenly aware of state roles in education and advocate at the state level for policies that influence local educational decisions.

**For more information please see:
Black, W., Rea, A., & Reck, B. (2021).
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The Every Student Succeeds Act
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International Handbook of Social
Justice Interventions in Education.**

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