

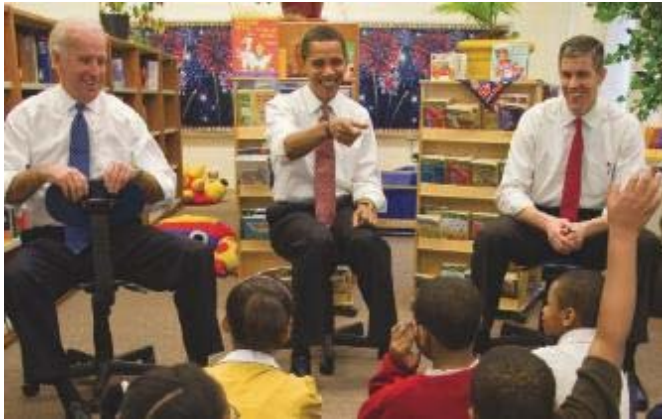
Turning Around Schools in Need

 [Printer-Friendly Page](#)

 [Email This Article](#)

A new president and secretary of education bring a new urgency to the task of turning around failing schools nationwide.

By Victor Rivero
September 2009



President Obama, flanked by Vice President Biden and Education Secretary Duncan, answers student questions at Dodge Renaissance Academy, a turnaround school located in Chicago's New West neighborhood.

Lessons in Revitalizing Corporations, Frederick M. Zimmerman extracted strategies from a study of 16 companies that had been distressed for 20 years or more. Joseph Murphy and Coby Meyers drew heavily from Zimmerman's work in their book *Turning Around Failing Schools: Leadership Lessons from the Organizational Sciences* (Corwin Press, 2007), although Mass Insight had regularly used the term in its comprehensive and more-widely disseminated research starting in 2005.

The turnaround model is a careful approach in which either the existing district or an outside partner provides step-by-step strategic oversight and tight operational support, says Julie Corbett, program manager of Mass Insight's School Turnaround Strategy Group.

On the surface, the idea of a turnaround school is simple: Got a consistently failing school? Fire everyone and start over. And, oh yeah, the students can stay.

Nonetheless, "you've got to have a model, a vision of what you want that school to look like," says Paul Vallas, the former CEO of Chicago Public Schools and the School District of Philadelphia and current superintendent of Louisiana's Recovery School District. Vallas is working on the simultaneous turnaround of 112 low-performing schools across the state. "The key is having a strong leadership team that can implement that model," he says. "After 15 or 20 years of reform, we know what works and what doesn't, but I think there is more than one turnaround approach."

Four Turnaround Models

Duncan suggested four basic turnaround models in his speech at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools Conference last June. They include:

1. Students stay and adults leave. This is similar to Duncan's work in Chicago, where new principals and lead teachers can develop the curriculum for students, followed by spring teacher recruitment in preparation for a June takeover. Teachers can reapply, and some get rehired, but most go elsewhere.
2. Replace the staff and turn the school over to a charter or management

In December, President-elect Barack Obama selected Chicago's Dodge Renaissance Academy, a 400-student pre-K8 school, as the backdrop for choosing Arne Duncan, the Chicago Public Schools' CEO, as the nation's new secretary of education. Touted as a "turnaround school," Dodge represented the idea that if change could come to a high-poverty, failing school with low test scores and most students on free or reduced-price lunches, then there was hope for all schools.

A school turnaround is "a dramatic and comprehensive intervention in a low-performing school that produces significant gains in student achievement within two academic years," according to Mass Insight Education & Research Institute, a Boston-based nonprofit education reform organization. The term has been used for decades in the business world.

In his 1991 book *The Turnaround Experience: Real-World Lessons in Revitalizing Corporations*, Frederick M. Zimmerman extracted strategies from a study of 16 companies that had been distressed for 20 years or more. Joseph Murphy and Coby Meyers drew heavily from Zimmerman's work in their book *Turning Around Failing Schools: Leadership Lessons from the Organizational Sciences* (Corwin Press, 2007), although Mass Insight had regularly used the term in its comprehensive and more-widely disseminated research starting in 2005.

The Turnaround Timeline

Here is a sample timeline for turning around a school.

Chicago Public Schools officials evaluate the performance of schools to identify ones that are in need of reconstitution. They select and announce those schools in January. After a public comment period, the board of education makes final decisions at its February meeting on which schools will be reconstituted as well as who will manage them. Regarding schools that the Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL) manages, here is the timeline:

Principals hired for each school are announced when the reconstitution decision is final. The principal begins interviewing and hiring teachers and other staff. A significant portion of the

organization, such as Green Dot Public Schools, Mastery Charter Schools, or Academy of Urban School Leadership (AUSL).

3. Keep the staff but drastically change the school culture. Establish rigorous performance evaluation systems; increase support, training and teacher mentoring; strengthen the curriculum and instructional programs; and increase student learning in outside regular school hours. This is more suitable for smaller communities with limited staff. These schools must show measurable attendance, parental involvement and achievement results quickly.

4. Everyone goes. Underperforming schools are simply closed. Students re-enroll in better schools. This turnaround model brings a failing school to “a swift and thorough conclusion,” Duncan said. Closure is a state and local responsibility, as there is no federal authority to do this.

Some will work better in big cities, while others are more suited for smaller communities, Duncan stated. “We’re still working this through,” he said.

Corbett adds that operations are an “incredibly huge piece” of the program. Principals shouldn’t have to figure out professional development needs, or deal with students’ behavioral issues or even fund raising, she says. “When you have an efficient district office, it actually lets the principal really be the leader of that environment and change it.”

The History

Several years before being in the spotlight under the Obama administration, Mass Insight monitored reform efforts in consistently underperforming schools across the country that were conducted on a “light touch” basis, which refers to incremental school changes, such as redirecting curriculum or providing leadership coaching, versus those where there was “dramatic, transformative change,” such as firing most or all of the staff or even closing the school.

In 2005, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation funded a two-year study by Mass Insight that culminated in The Turnaround Challenge, a report detailing “why America’s best opportunity to dramatically improve student achievement lies in our worst-performing schools.” Reviewing intervention efforts across 10 states and four districts, over 50 organizations and individual experts contributed directly to the report and its recommendations.

“Most schools in Restructuring (the federal designation for chronic under-performance) are like organisms that have built immunities, over years of attempted intervention, to the ‘medicine’ of incremental reform,” the report states. Turnaround is different from mere school improvement, according to the report, because turnaround is the kind of change that is “propelled by imperative: the school must improve or it will be redefined or closed.”

The Operators

Many of those early Chicago turnarounds are still district-run; however, the force behind several other successes, including Dodge’s renaissance, is Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL).

A nonprofit organization that partners with Chicago Public Schools, AUSL was founded in 2001 by venture capitalist Martin Koldyke and has received support in part from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, NewSchools Venture Fund, Boeing, Motorola, and other Chicago corporations and donors.

“Sometimes it takes a whole-school transformation, a dramatic intervention, in order to create the kind of opportunities where children will be successful,” says Don Feinstein, AUSL’s executive director and a former Chicago schools’ principal.

teachers for new turnaround schools are selected from the class of AUSL residents who are wrapping up their training year.

During the spring, the principals also meet as many parents, community leaders, and others in the community as possible—including students, in the case of high schools—and listen carefully to what the community wants for the school. Community requests implemented by AUSL in prior turnaround schools include extended learning time and extracurricular arts and sports programs.

During the summer, the school’s facility is renovated, using money provided by the district and AUSL’s donors. Physical improvements may include new outdoor athletic facilities, paint, landscaping, and science and computer labs, which signal to the community that the school is going to be a different place in the coming year.

The entire staff for a new turnaround school comes together in mid-July for five weeks of planning to prepare for the school’s opening.

In the final weeks before school starts, the principal and staff open up the new school to the community, hosting a picnic and tour of the school and visiting the homes of students to introduce themselves.

On the first day of school in September, the students return to a completely different experience of school.

AUSL's approach is to completely overhaul a school without relocating students, who return in the fall to renovated facilities, a new curriculum, a new principal, new teachers, new staff, including the janitor, and what Feinstein calls "an entirely new culture of success."

Green Dot Public Schools, another player in turnarounds, is a nonprofit school management organization that has opened 18 public charter schools in Los Angeles.

Focus on Teacher Training

At Chicago Public Schools, long considered one of the most challenging districts in America, then-CEO Duncan closed some 60 chronically underperforming schools and reopened about a dozen schools with new leadership and staff as turnaround schools; many of those were AUSL-managed.



Music teacher Holly Mullenix drums with her students at the National Teachers Academy in Chicago, a pre-K8 turnaround school.

In Chicago and other places such as Los Angeles, many turnaround schools adhere roughly to what Green Dot calls "The Six Tenets of High-Performing Schools": (1) small, safe and personalized schools, (2) high expectations for all students, (3) local control with extensive professional development and accountability, (4) parent participation, (5) maximized funding to the classroom, and (6) keeping schools open later.

According to AUSL, teachers are 27 percent more likely to leave the profession if they begin teaching in a high poverty school. Because of this, a major part of AUSL's efforts have focused on using an urban residency program in which a teacher completes a full-year apprenticeship with a mentor teacher at a Chicago school.

Michael Whitmore, director of AUSL's Urban Teacher Residency Program, recalls his own experience in a traditional program in the early 1990s—"teacher preparation by hazing"—where his mentor handed him the keys to the classroom and said, "See you in 16 weeks!" "It was a 'because I've suffered so you're going to suffer too' approach," he says. In many ways the opposite of this early approach, the new model created by AUSL is a disciplined transformation process closely connecting theory with practice with strong teacher support. Graduates are certified and earn a master's degree through partnerships with various local universities. By tightly controlling professional development and its implementation, AUSL is better able to ensure results.

"You need a career professional development process based on continuous growth so teachers improve and become more effective," says Feinstein. Bringing "talent" to schools that need them most will close the achievement gap, he says.

Now an AUSL teacher training site, Dodge emphasizes teacher quality. And the result? Dodge posted the largest one-year test score gains in math and reading in the state in 2006 and continued strong in 2008, making double-digit gains in both reading and math with an average annual gain of 20 points over four years.

In his charter schools speech, Duncan noted other accomplishments of Chicago schools that had undergone turnarounds: Dodge and Williams Elementary Schools have more than tripled the percentage of students meeting state standards in science, reading and math in the past five years. Sherman Elementary saw a five-point jump in the percentage of students meeting state standards in reading and math in just the first year, and Harvard Elementary reduced absences by five days per student.

Nationwide Shift

School districts in Miami-Dade County (Fla.), Charlotte-Mecklenburg (N.C.), New Orleans, New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Atlanta and the state of Massachusetts have taken similar measures in forcing dramatic change. "There's

Six Essential Characteristics of Successful Turnarounds

1. Clearly defined authority to act based on what's best for children and learning: flexibility and control over staffing, scheduling, budget and curriculum.
2. A relentless focus on hiring and staff development as part of an overall "people strategy" to ensure the best possible teaching force.
3. Highly capable, distributed school leadership—not simply the principal, but an effective leadership team.
4. Additional time in the school day and across the school year.
5. Performance-based behavioral expectations for all stakeholders, including teachers, students and

not a lot of difference, as far as I'm concerned, between turnaround schools, high-poverty schools with low achievement, or Title I schools with poor performance," says Peter Gorman, superintendent of the 137,000-student Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. "These are all adult distinctions that we make in how we approach the same problem: kids not learning, or learning enough."

Nonetheless, at Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Gorman rejects fixing problems in some of his most struggling schools in a piecemeal way. He calls his approach a "strategic staffing initiative" and emphasizes (1) leadership, (2) sending in a team of strong educators, (3) removing anyone who does not fully support the changes being made to increase achievement, (4) ensuring and nurturing community support, and (5) maintaining support from the district office. "When these five things are in place, schools improve," says Gorman. In each of the seven schools implementing Gorman's method in 2007-2008, test scores rose for 2008-2009. The number of students who were proficient increased by as much as 23 percent. "Strategic staffing is the best approach to turn a struggling school around," Gorman says.

At the Los Angeles Unified School District, Superintendent Ramon Cortines has a similar mindset. "I've been a teacher and administrator probably longer than anybody in America," he says, "and I'm still struck by the challenge. But don't tell me it can't be done. Of course it can be done. It's not about the kids. They will learn what they are taught and respond to how they are treated."

Since January 2009 when he took on the job, Cortines has already removed the administration of one of his lowest-performing schools and made nearly half a dozen follow-up visits to the new staff. "I have a responsibility to help them build capacity—to ask, 'What if ... ?' 'Why not ... ?' 'How come ... ?'—but then also, when they do identify issues, to bring the right people to them."

Inside a growing handful of Los Angeles schools, the kind of support Cortines refers to comes from people like Marco Petruzzi, president and CEO of Green Dot Public Schools. "We should have the courage to close down and turn around all the chronically underperforming schools. Period. There is no excuse for waiting," says Petruzzi, who comes from the charter school management and international business worlds. With Green Dot founder and chairman Steve Barr, Petruzzi was instrumental in improving attendance and student retention rates at Locke High School in Watts—one of the city's most troubled—dividing the 1,800-student district into eight smaller academies, each with its own staff and principal. In Petruzzi's turnaround work, everyone had to reapply for a job. "So we have no problem with Arne's approach," says Petruzzi.

The New Orleans Factor

If turnaround schools are all about confronting the lowest-performing schools in a school system, then what can be said for confronting a whole school system facing utter devastation? For the last two years, Paul Vallas has been charged with turning around a growing district of 112 low-performing schools across Louisiana, all part of a special legislature-created Recovery School District that was put in place pre-Katrina but made all the more relevant after the storm.

"You need to have a model for what constitutes a high-quality school district," says Vallas. "Turnaround is not just taking over a failing school and then not having a clue of how to fix it. A lot of turnaround schools, they'll just take a successful principal and stick him in a school thinking by osmosis that school is going to get better. You've got to have a turnaround plan."

"Turnaround is not just taking over a failing school and then not having a clue of how to fix it. You've got to have a turnaround plan." -Paul Vallas, superintendent, Recovery School District, New Orleans, La.

Vallas acknowledges that the basic model may vary from district to district. "But it doesn't deviate that much," he says. "It's a two-year process: first year, stabilize; second year, take your reforms to scale."

By stabilizing, Vallas means inspecting schools for curriculum and instruction usage that aligns to state standards, for

(often) parents.

6. Integrated, research-based programs and related social services that are specifically designed, personalized and adjusted to address students' academic and related psycho-social needs.

strong professional development programs, and for benchmarking to learn from student progress for intervention and monitoring teacher performance for purposes of support. Then each school must be adequately staffed with a strong leadership team. “Spend a week [observing] and come up with a school improvement plan you can start implementing,” he says.

M-m-m-money

According to Chicago’s turnaround school funding model, estimated costs for up to three turnaround planning positions (new, salaried administrative staff members that lend authentic capacity to address turnaround efforts) at a typical elementary school might be \$300,000, while the same positions for a high school would run \$520,000. Add in another \$120,000 for a new assistant principal position, and factor in an annual turnaround stipend of \$420 per pupil (\$500 for high school students) during years one through five of the school turnaround, renovations not included.

Petruzzi says costs depend on many factors, the main ones being school size, real estate in the area and available state funds. “In our case, it was fairly expensive: we had over 3,000 students. We had to build two satellite facilities to be able to serve them all, and being in California, we are pretty low in terms of funding,” he says. Philanthropy picked up the extra costs, says Petruzzi, but the intention is to break even on government dollars by year four.

And what about the federal funds? In his charter schools speech, Duncan said something that most education leaders aren’t used to hearing: “We have a lot of money to support this work.”

Combine Race to the Top funds, What Works and Innovation funds, and \$3.5 billion in Title I School Improvement grants with another \$1.5 billion Duncan will seek in 2010, and there is over \$5 billion in federal funds specifically targeting turnaround schools. Breaking it down, this amount represents hundreds of thousands of dollars above normal funding levels for every turnaround school, according to Duncan.

With congressional support, says Duncan, turnaround efforts are “likely to receive more money in subsequent years.” This is money needed for school and district commitment of staff (Atlanta, for example, allocated \$1.2 million for each large school) and to enhance turnaround efforts through capital improvements such as paint, carpeting, furniture and landscaping, which could cost around \$900,000, as well as technology updates, which could cost \$300,000.

“To fix these schools will cost a lot, but we can also look at how to reallocate existing dollars,” Corbett says. “In the long run, not fixing them will cost even more.” To receive not just some but all of the money in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, turnaround plans for the poorest-performing schools are a must. “Show the plans and you’ll see the money,” says Corbett.

Future of Turnarounds

Currently, 1,100 schools nationwide have fallen into “restructuring”—the most extreme federal designation for failure—and face the threat of closure for underperformance under the No Child Left Behind law. That number is on track to rise to 5,000 schools by 2010—representing more than 2.5 million students, Duncan claims. “We need more of you to get into the turnaround game,” he said in his charter schools speech.

Feinstein points to districts in Washington, D.C., Hartford, Conn., and New York to watch regarding turnaround efforts. “Next year we’ll have eight turnarounds; seven will be elementary schools and one a high school,” he says. “You’ll see a lot more of this transformational work catch on across the country. Turnaround schools are probably the hardest work in education, but it’s rewarding work.”

Meanwhile, Mass Insight will produce manuals for states, large urban districts and outside funding partners on how to start turnaround schools. Additionally, according to Mass Insight, a new system of “turnaround zones”—designated clusters of turnaround schools with set conditions for smoother, successful turnaround efforts—will serve as entry points for reinventing the way districts, states and external partners organize their work. In 2009-2013, Mass Insight “partnership zones” in three states will serve as proof points for turnaround school and district redesign strategies.

“The education reform movement is not a table where we all sit around and talk,” Duncan has stated, “It’s a train that is leaving the station, gaining speed, momentum and direction. It is time for everyone—everywhere—to get on board.”

Victor Rivero is a freelance writer based in Malden, Mass.