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Review of *Dramatic Action, Dramatic Improvement*

Reviewed By

Tina Trujillo

University of California, Berkeley

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Summary of Review

Dramatic Action, Dramatic Improvement: The Research on School Turnaround advocates for implementing the most effective, research-based methods for turning around low-performing schools through the federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) program. It argues that the available body of research points to five dramatic actions that are necessary to bring about dramatic school improvement. Unfortunately, the rationale for its assertions is narrow, incoherent, and misleading. This limitation stems from the report's unsystematic review of literature, resulting in its failure to incorporate lessons from large bodies of research on high-stakes accountability, school improvement, and the emerging evidence on school closures and federally funded turnarounds—all of which reveal that the federal SIG program's turnaround policies are based on unwarranted claims and are contradicted by the empirical evidence. Consequently, the report's recommendations are unsupported by rigorous research. Like the SIG program itself, the report promotes seemingly bold school changes that appear seductive on the surface. But when compared to the real evidence on school turnarounds, their evidence-based foundation vanishes. In the end, schools, districts, and states that follow the report's advice stand to reproduce the unequal conditions that have led, in part, to their need for dramatic turnaround in the first place.

Kevin Welner
Project Director

William Mathis
Managing Director

Jennifer Berkshire
Academic Editor

Erik Gunn
Managing Editor

National Education Policy Center

School of Education, University of Colorado
Boulder, CO 80309-0249
Telephone: (802) 383-0058

Email: NEPC@colorado.edu
http://nepc.colorado.edu

Publishing Director: Alex Molnar

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Review of *Dramatic Action, Dramatic Improvement: The Research on School Turnaround*

Tina Trujillo, University of California, Berkeley

I. Introduction

Dramatic Action, Dramatic Improvement: The Research on School Turnaround, authored by Tiffany D. Miller and Catherine Brown and supported by the Center for American Progress, claims to offer key lessons about the most effective, research-based methods for turning around low-performing schools through the federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) program.[1]

The report is timely because in 2009 the Obama Administration announced its intention to rapidly turn around more than 5,000 of the country's lowest-performing schools by using the SIG program to provide targeted funding for states and schools (eligible schools can receive up to $2 million per year for up to three years), and to mandate drastic, school-level reforms as a condition of this funding. At the time of this publication, the federal program required recipient schools to implement one of four prescribed reforms: turnaround, transformation, restart, or closure.

The report is limited to twelve pieces of literature on school improvement, as well as anecdotal snapshots of four schools that implemented a series of changes in conjunction with their federal funding and are deemed to be successful "turnarounds." It concludes that this evidence base points to five critical elements of dramatic actions that are necessary for dramatic, successful school improvement.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report briefly describes portions of the findings from the twelve documentary sources: eleven non-peer-reviewed studies and one peer-reviewed study. The non-peer-reviewed reports are from The Council of the Great City Schools, the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, Harvard University Professor of Economics, Roland Fryer, Jr., MDRC,[2] two National Bureau of Economic Research Working Papers, the S.H. Cowell Foundation, two publications from the American Institutes for Research,

the Center on Education Policy, and the Mass Insight Education & Research Institute. The single peer-reviewed article comes from the journal, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*.

Drawing on this literature base, the report claims that "[t]he available body of research . . . suggests that dramatic action is necessary to bring about dramatic school improvement" (p. 2). It then posits that five aggressive strategies are necessary to successfully turn around a school. These strategies include: aggressive action on the part of school districts; federal requirements for better student outcomes, coupled with targeted philanthropic or government funding; school governance and staffing changes; data-driven decision making; and a focus on school culture and nonacademic supports for disadvantaged students.

III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

Justifying the literature

Regrettably, the report's rationale for its findings and conclusions is narrow, incoherent, and misleading. This limitation is most reflected in the report's unsystematic review of practitioner-oriented and scholarly literature. It provides no theoretical or practical reasons behind its selection of particular sources. Of the twelve non-peer-reviewed publications summarized, three analyze evidence on the progress of SIG-funded schools,[3] two examine the practices associated with schools labeled as "turnarounds,"[4] and one examines the turnaround of a rural California district.[5] One source is Mass Insight's early advocacy piece that argued for a new, tougher approach to improving the nation's bottom five percent of schools.[6] The other four pieces of non-peer-reviewed literature focus on understanding Chicago families' choices and constraints for new school enrollment due to school closings;[7] the effects of New York's small high schools of choice on postsecondary enrollment;[8] the effects of implementing best practices from charter schools in traditional schools;[9] and the effects of NCLB sanctions on school performance.[10] The single peer-reviewed article presents findings from a district-level analysis of the impact of a data-driven reform on student test-based achievement.[11]

While some of these sources are directly relevant to the report's purpose, others are only tangentially related to the question of what leads to a successful school turnaround under the School Improvement Grant program. Of those sources that directly provide evidence on this question, the report presents only fragments of their findings, which misrepresents the emerging evidence base on SIG-funded turnaround schools.[12] For example, the report states that in a recent study by the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS), 70 percent of urban schools that received targeted assistance for school turnaround increased the percentage of students who are proficient in reading and math, and that these schools significantly reduced the number of students performing at a below-basic level.[13] Yet the full non-peer-reviewed CGCS report presents a more nuanced account of these patterns; it

shows that the percentage of students at or above proficient levels began to narrow test-based performance gaps primarily in the first year of SIG-funding, but then their progress leveled off. It also demonstrates that SIG-funded elementary schools continued to show low test achievement compared to their non-SIG counterparts years after the interventions were put in place. Notably, the CGCS report found no significant differences in student achievement between schools that used the two most commonly prescribed SIG reform models that require dramatic school changes—the transformation and turnaround options.

The report also shares part of the findings from the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) analysis of Chicago Public Schools' school closures by stating that 93 percent of students ended up in schools that were higher performing than the schools they had previously attended.[14] However, the CCSR report cautions that almost one-quarter of students attended schools that were still lower-rated than their "designated welcoming schools." In addition, the CCSR report details how and why students who enrolled in other CPS schools often chose a school with a lower performance policy rating than the designated welcoming school. It presents qualitative evidence about displaced families' barriers to attending new schools, including neighborhood safety concerns, lack of access to affordable transportation, or the lack of necessary supports for students with individualized education programs.

Another example of the report's misrepresentation is seen in the report's summary of the National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 17990. The report states that the

> . . . study found significant improvements in the test scores of schools on the "lowest-achieving" margin but not among schools on the "lack of progress" margin. These results were mostly found in schools that implemented the SIG turnaround model, which, among other things, compels more dramatic staff turnover. In fact, schools implementing this model saw greater gains in student test scores. [15]

Yet this study was based on a very small sample of schools and only on a single year's test scores. Moreover, it relied in part on California's Academic Performance Index to gauge growth—a test-based, school-wide metric that is subject to wide volatility in fluctuations from year to year.[16]

In another case, the authors cursorily summarize part of the findings from a peer-reviewed journal article, which found positive effects of a district-level intervention to support data-driven decision making in 59 districts.[17] While data from the study suggest that a reform implemented by the Johns Hopkins Center for Data-Driven Reform in Education was tied to test-based gains in student achievement, it is not clear why the report concludes that this particular reform initiative is applicable to SIG-funded turnaround efforts.

Justifying the findings

Ultimately, the report arrives at five key findings that are presumably derived from its review of the research evidence, but how these five particular patterns are identified is unclear. Its first finding states that aggressive action on the part of school districts is necessary; it cites New York's conversion of large high schools into small ones, as well as Houston's infusion of specific practices in charter schools into public schools, as evidence that districts must take drastic action to motivate SIG turnarounds. Alone, these two studies do not point irrefutably to the need for aggressive steps by central offices in SIG-funded turnaround schools.

The authors then posit that, "Federal laws that require better outcomes for students in these schools can give local leaders the freedom to take aggressive action, while additional targeted resources help make the transition smoother." The report reasons that such laws help quell political opposition to changes such as mass layoffs. Nowhere in its review of the previous literature does the report present evidence that federal high-stakes accountability laws fortified local leaders' capacity to implement drastic changes in staffing or other school conditions with less upheaval.

The report presents superficial analyses of an almost entirely non-peer-reviewed evidence base.

Another finding contends that replacing ineffective leaders is related to the greatest gains in student achievement. But in a confusing step, the report refers to a Wallace Foundation-funded study that was not reviewed in the main body of the report to argue that principal leadership is the second-most powerful predictor of student learning. Introducing new evidence at this stage in its analysis is deceptive; the Wallace Foundation's report did not analyze principals who replaced fired ones in "turnaround" schools, nor make any claims about the efficacy of laying off principals as a strategy for increasing test-based student performance. In fact, that study did not analyze the effects of principal leadership in SIG-funded schools at all.

The next finding, that data-driven decision making is an essential element of school turnaround, repeats this same methodological error by citing only new literature that is not presented in the report's earlier review of evidence. Here, too, the authors refer to evidence from a report that did not examine data-driven decision-making in SIG-funded schools or even in schools judged to be "turnarounds."

Finally, the authors assert that successful turnaround schools attend to nonacademic supports and school culture in addition to academic enhancements. Only three of the report's non-peer-reviewed sources cursorily referred to such correlates of effective turnarounds. These included a "culture of high expectations," "student relationships and community partnerships" and a "safe, productive, and orderly environment."

In these and other ways, the report presents superficial analyses of an almost entirely non-peer-reviewed evidence base, one whose parameters are never justified, whose comprehensiveness is lacking, and whose ultimate presentation of findings is confusing and poorly organized. The result is a fragmented, unconvincing presentation of the research evidence on school turnarounds.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

Another major shortcoming of the report is its failure to avail itself of the lessons from large bodies of research on turnaround-style reforms and the emerging evidence on school turnarounds themselves. The report omits a significant body of research on high-stakes accountability, school improvement, charter schools, and the emerging evidence on school closures—all of which reveals that the federal SIG program's turnaround policies are based on unwarranted claims and are contradicted by empirical evidence.[18]

As I have argued elsewhere, the claim that rapid, dramatic changes in staffing, management, and other conditions inside of schools can spur quick, sustainable improvement is paradoxical because it is contradicted by research evidence.[19] Drastic changes in staffing and management engender the exact conditions that long lines of research have linked with persistent low performance—high turnover, instability, poor climate, inexperienced teachers, and racial and socioeconomic segregation.

For example, rigorous research on school reconstitution demonstrates that firing and replacing school staffs has usually failed to improve organizational or student performance. Instead, it has been consistently linked with reductions in the social stability and climate of schools, as well as increased faculty churn (but not of the weakest teachers).[20] Other analysts have concluded that the political fallout and logistical difficulties from such drastic changes carry enough unintended consequences to outweigh any potential benefits.[21] Finding enough qualified personnel to fill vacancies is common.[22]

Patterns in the reconstitution literature are supported by seminal research on Chicago's reform experiences. These earlier studies confirm that teacher turnover is consistently harmful to schools.[23] In addition to the adverse effects of layoffs on student and teacher morale, localized knowledge about students and the community declines. Collegiality, trust, professional relations, and community ties—necessary conditions for improving student performance—all wane.

With respect to the literature on school closures, mounting evidence consistently documents that such disruptions are concentrated disproportionately in African American and Latino neighborhoods.[24] Other scholars have documented that students displaced after a school closure exhibited lower academic outcomes and higher indicators of emotional stress.[25]

Finally, in one of the most comprehensive analyses to date, researchers who studied district test score data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—the

test long judged to be the gold standard in student assessment –found that turnaround-driven layoffs and related reforms did not improve NAEP outcomes.[26] Race-based test score gaps sometimes increased.

Even the business and management literature on corporate turnarounds—the field in which the turnaround concept originated—concludes that such dramatic changes rarely yield the intended results.[27] One analysis associated only a quarter of business turnaround efforts with major organizational improvements.[28] Others found that corporate turnarounds are not associated with either short- or long-term improved company performance.[29]

V. Review of the Report's Methods

Regrettably, the authors are ambiguous as to what criteria they used, if any, to select pieces of literature for analysis. Why they chose not to review the empirical evidence on school reconstitution, school closures, or the broad research on high-stakes accountability, is unclear. Given that the report claims to present a review of the evidence on school turnaround, this omission seriously undermines its avowed purpose.

At the same time, the report never defines which SIG-funded reform model it is investigating or promoting (transformation, turnaround, restart, closure, or all of them combined). Thus, readers are left to assume that the report is considering all four reforms together, each of which carries significantly different implications for the types of changes schools are required to implement—from mass layoffs, to converting the school to a charter status, to implementing teacher and principal evaluation systems, to closing the school altogether.

This imprecision and lack of transparency result in a set of assertions that is neither strongly supported by the literature included in the report, nor even weakly supported by the full range of research on school turnarounds and related reforms.

With respect to the report's snapshots of four school turnarounds, the report repeats several methodological errors that characterize much of the media coverage and non-scholarly writing about school improvement. For example, the authors never define an effective turnaround, which calls into question their justification for selecting the four cases. Researchers have proposed various methods for identifying successful turnarounds,[30] yet there is no single agreed-upon definition for the amount of growth that is required, the length of time in which this growth should occur, or the requisite sustainability of the results. As my colleague, Michelle Renée, and I have demonstrated elsewhere,[31] presumably successful turnaround cases are often based on anecdotal evidence and ignore counter-examples in which the same turnaround efforts may be associated with stagnant or decreased test scores.

In addition, the four cases narrowly operationalize an effective turnaround only in terms of test-based notions of student success. This definition limits considerations about other

academic, civic, social, and emotional indicators of quality that may or may not be present in these schools.

Moreover, it is not clear what data sources the report is using to categorize the four schools as successful turnarounds. The non-peer-reviewed evidence that is included is limited to two short paragraphs per school, which report state mastery-level performance and otherwise seems to come from self-reports by school or district staff, though that is not clear. No data from classroom observations, student interviews, community interviews, or other forms of evidence is explicitly cited. As a result, the authors appear to assert a causal relationship between staff members' self-reports about what they believe led to improved test scores and the scores themselves—an unwarranted claim in light of the scant data they reference.

Finally, the descriptions of the four cases concentrate nearly entirely on the within-school factors that may have shaped the school's performance trajectory, yet we know from long lines of research that the social, political, and economic conditions that surround schools largely predict their potential for improvement.[32] In doing so, the report presents four de-contextualized accounts of turnaround that perpetuate a narrow focus on technical changes inside of schools, absent considerations about potential investments in the social and institutional conditions in which schools are embedded.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The report's findings and conclusions are largely invalid. The authors' claims are based on an uneven, incoherent collection of literature, most of which is not peer-reviewed and some of which is only tangentially related to its purpose. They omit any discussion of the theoretical or practical reasons for selecting the literature and cases that they summarize. They obscure the data sources upon which they base their claims about the four cases of turnaround. Overall, the report lacks the rigor that is required of a disciplined, systematic review of research. Consequently, the report reads more like a cherry-picked piece of advocacy material than a high quality review of evidence.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

Unfortunately, the report fails to meet the standards of evidence and analytical transparency necessary for it to be useful to policymakers or practitioners looking for guidance on the best practices for meaningfully turning around underperforming schools. Not only can users not be confident in its claims, but available research suggests that users who follow the report's guidance are likely to be disappointed in their results, as will their students, teachers, and communities. By ignoring the substantial base of evidence that stands in contrast to its findings and conclusions, the report functions as a type of deceptive advertising. It promotes seemingly bold changes in schools that are seductive on

their surface, but when compared to the real evidence on school turnarounds, its evidence-based foundation vanishes. In the end, schools, districts, and states that follow the report's advice stand only to reproduce the unequal conditions that have led, in part, to their need for dramatic turnaround in the first place.

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E-MAIL ADDRESS:	trujillo@berkeley.edu
PHONE NUMBER:	(510) 642-6272

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