CADRE

The Role of the School District in School Turnaround Efforts

LITERATURE REVIEW

January 2025

Nicolás Buchbinder and Elena Diaz-Bilello

School of Education
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO **BOULDER**

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful for the valuable feedback on this review provided by our partners (Lindsay Cox, Lindsey Jaeckel, and Nicole Monet) at the Colorado Department of Education. We also appreciate the input received on earlier drafts from our colleague at CADRE, Kaitlin Nath.

About CADRE

The Center for Assessment, Design, Research and Evaluation (CADRE) is housed in the School of Education at the University of Colorado Boulder. The mission of CADRE is to produce generalizable knowledge that improves the ability to assess student learning and to evaluate programs and methods that may have an effect on this learning. Projects undertaken by CADRE staff represent a collaboration with the ongoing activities in the School of Education, the University, and the broader national and international community of scholars and stakeholders involved in educational assessment and evaluation.

Please direct any questions about this report to Nicolas.Buchbinder@colorado.edu.

Introduction

Over the last two decades, school turnaround reforms have played a key role in US education policy (and politics), especially since the establishment of the School Improvement Grants (SIGs) in 2009 (Murphy & Bleiberg, 2019). Since then, the United States Department of Education (USED), states, and districts directed considerable efforts to transform the practices of low performing schools - often through bold and radical actions that dramatically disrupted the life and work of school communities. Despite the significant investments and resources expended in these policies, results of these efforts are mixed (Dragoset et al., 2017; Murphy & Bleiberg, 2019; Redding & Nguyen, 2020; Schueler et al., 2022), and this has generated a need in the K-12 education field to rethink the assumptions and requirements for a successful school turnaround.

Traditionally, the locus of the work and literature documenting school turnaround focused mainly on actions taken by schools, instead of conceptualizing this work as one that requires system-level processes and support (Meyers & Smylie, 2017). Consequently, the role of the school district in turnaround work remains understudied and largely underappreciated (Dunn et al., 2016). Understanding the interactions between districts and schools can offer a more holistic picture for analyzing successful (and unsuccessful) turnaround efforts; especially since districts wield considerable leverage over schools (Daly & Finnigan, 2016), and turnaround policies offer a specific context for understanding how this leverage can potentially improve turnaround reform efforts in schools.

We conducted a literature review of 36 studies to understand the district role in turnaround efforts. The objectives of the literature review are to understand: 1) how the literature characterizes the role of the district in turnaround efforts; 2) whether and how the role of the district in turnaround work has changed over time; and 3) what lessons could be drawn from empirical quantitative and qualitative studies that explicitly consider how school districts can effectively engage schools in turnaround efforts. Ultimately, we hope to elevate any best practices from the literature that can illuminate how districts can take on a vital mediating and facilitative role for schools to engage in school improvement. We followed a multi-step process to define the list of articles that we included in the literature review. A detailed description of these methods is located in Appendix A.

In the next section, we outline how the theory of change of the school turnaround process has evolved and how the district's role is more prominent in more recent conceptualizations of school turnaround theory of change, particularly after the passage of the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). We then turn to reviewing the evidence from quantitative and qualitative studies that examining the effects or impact of turnaround initiatives that were either led by districts or represented state programs that gave the school district a clear role in the process. We conclude this paper with an integrative discussion of findings from the review.

The Evolving Role of the District in School Turnaround Work

School Turnaround Prior to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

There is no single and clear definition of school turnaround. In a review of different popular definitions, Murphy & Bleiberg (2019) identified four main components of a (successful) school turnaround process from the pre-ESSA era: 1) criteria are used to identify struggling schools, 2) interventions result in a substantial improvement in outcomes, 3) improvement happens in a short timeframe, and 4) improvement is sustained over time (Murphy & Bleiberg, 2019). These components themselves, however, do not define the processes and interventions that go from the identification of struggling schools to a quick and sustainable increase in learning outcomes; and the literature points to several proposed theories of change regarding how this process may unfold. Historically, the "four models" approach proposed in the federal School Improvement Grants (SIG) program during the Race to the Top (RTT) era classified the school turnaround process back then, which persist in some form today (Sun et al., 2019). These models included:

1. *School turnaround*, in which a struggling school had to replace its principal, give the new principal significant autonomy and flexibility in all aspects of management of school operations, evaluate all teachers replace at least half of the teaching staff, and implement significant instructional changes.
2. *School transformation*, similar to the school turnaround model, but without the requirement of firing at least half of the teaching staff.
3. *Restart*, in which a traditional public school is assigned to a charter management organization
4. *Closure*, in which a school is closed and students are enrolled in other higher performing schools in the same district.

The first three models can be considered alternatives for the general school turnaround theory of change, although their assumptions are quite different. These three models aim to improve school outcomes through bold changes in school management. In the school transformation model, the assumption is that changing the school leadership in conjunction with instituting organizational and instructional reforms is enough to achieve change. The school turnaround model goes beyond the staffing cuts made in the transformation model in that it assumes that changes in teaching staff are also needed, both to improve teaching quality in the school and to improve accountability at the school level. The third model, restart, goes even further by assuming that the way to transform a school is by replacing all staff and delegating management to an external organization. The fourth model, closure, as a contrast to all other models, does not intend to improve a school.

It is noticeable that in these definitions of the turnaround process, including the different models proposed in the SIG, the school is considered in isolation, and not embedded in a system. Meyers & Smylie (2017) conceptualize this as one of the "myths" of school turnaround practice: that turnaround is a problem and task of individual schools. In any case, the extant literature and approaches documented to engaging in school turnaround work, as evidenced by the number of studies removed from this review, did not pay special attention to the role of school districts in school turnaround efforts. The absence in the federal SIG models and the literature prior to the reauthorization of ESEA under ESSA, to establish a clear demand for districts to support their schools, is identified by some

as one of several reasons that explain why turnaround efforts often failed or produced highly mixed results (Dunn et al., 2016; Finnigan & Daly, 2016; Meyers, 2019). Districts can assume different functions in the turnaround process, offering structures that support the actions of school-level actors (Dunn & Ambroso, 2019), but this requires that the turnaround process is conceptualized as a system-level process rather than one where the responsibility for transformation rests solely on schools.

Pivoting to a Systems-Level Approach for School Turnaround

In this system-level framework, one key aspect of the turnaround process is that different levels (i.e., state, district, and schools) of the educational system interact in making educational change happen. Actors situated in different levels bring new ways of understanding the reality that each of them faces, and some authors argue that this *institutional interstitiality* (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2020) is key for actors to decenter from their usual practices and come to the realization that things can be different, in order to disrupt ineffective habits and practices.

Institutional interstitiality plays a role across all levels of the educational system, and in turnaround efforts, this means that districts and states turning away from the federally defined SIG models had to reconsider their responsibilities in facilitating turnaround efforts with schools and with one another. At the state level, turnaround efforts changed considerably after the passage of ESSA, which had a greater focus on struggling schools and provided more flexibility to states to design school transformation policies (Black et al., 2021).

One systems-level framework conceptualized by the Center on School Turnaround (2017) at WestEd is the “Four Domains of Rapid School Improvement”. This framework proposed four pilars for effective school turnaround: 1) elevate leadership, 2) talent development, 3) instructional transformation, and 4) culture shift. This framework expands the initial set of measures that are taken in turnaround practices to a process in which effective practices and routines are established, while considering the roles that each level in the system can play in turnaround efforts.

According to the Center on School Turnaround (2017), districts have a specific role to sustain each of the four domains. In terms of leadership, district leadership must prioritize transformation and commit to change and clearly communicate these goals. Districts can also identify personnel at the district level to coordinate different turnaround efforts, oversee and support principals, give and sustain principals’ authority in decision-making, analyze district-wide data, and set and monitor goals and timelines with schools. The talent development domain specifies that districts should ensure that teachers and principals with experience and skills appropriate for turnaround are placed in struggling schools, create accountability measures for principals to examine teacher performance and provide professional learning opportunities, and identify and develop specific roles that can be useful for turnaround efforts in schools. In terms of instructional transformation, districts can develop protocols to assist teachers, ensure data sources are available to inform teaching, and provide ongoing professional development that is specific for turnaround schools. Finally, in terms of culture shift, districts can provide opportunities for collaboration across schools and survey stakeholders in the school turnaround process and involve them in the process. This facilitative role for districts to motivate culture shifts in their schools are also supported by other authors (e.g., Hambrick Hitt et al., 2018; C. Meyers & Sadler, 2018).

In addition to the district, the role of the state in turnaround efforts changed considerably after the

passing of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which had a greater focus on using the improvement sciences to support struggling schools and providing more flexibility to states to design school transformation policies (Black et al., 2021). States submitted plans that described interventions for schools at three different levels: TSI (Targeted Supports and Interventions), CSI (Comprehensive Supports and Interventions), and MRI (More Rigorous Interventions). States determined the criteria for schools to enter and exit these intervention layers, and also the roles that the state, the districts, and the schools would play in these efforts (Black et al., 2021; Dunn & Ambroso, 2019).

In their review of all state ESSA plans, Black et al. (2021) classified states on a continuum from state-centered regulatory approaches to decentralized Local Education Agency (LEA) control, with mixed approaches in between – which could entail a more regulatory language with more emphasis on supports or less regulatory language but more emphasis on sanctions. The review resulted in 14 states favoring local control, 25 mixed states, and 13 favoring more regulatory approaches.

In a somewhat similar fashion, Dunn and Ambroso (2019) classified the relationship established between State Education Agencies (SEA) and LEAs by organizing 23 ESSA state plans into four different categories: LEA independence, with a focus on building LEA capacity; SEA oversight, with a focus on accountability systems; SEA resource, with a focus on the role of state providing resources to support LEA; and SEA-LEA collaboration, with a focus on the work that SEA and LEA can do together to support struggling schools. Jochim (2016) also classified different cases of state-initiated turnaround efforts in five groups: state support for local turnaround, state-authorized turnaround zone, mayoral control, school takeover, and district takeover. These groups are ordered in terms of the strength of the state intervention. In the first group, the state role is to provide support, but decision-making remains at the local level. In state-authorized turnaround zones, districts have the power to establish within-district offices to group turnaround schools and are authorized to implement bolder reforms. In mayoral control, the state gives authority to the mayor to take control of the local board. In school and district takeover, it is the state that has the most important role, taking control of specific schools or entire districts.

Another distinguishing feature in the newer theories of change articulated by authors advocating for a system-approach for school turnaround work is the role of external partners. A critical issue encountered with school turnaround efforts is that the knowledge to build school capacity may not always be located at the school, district, or even state level (Murphy & Bleiberg, 2019). In cases in which this happens, the role of "lead turnaround partners" becomes essential (Peurach & Neumerski, 2015). These partners can be either non-governmental organizations or new units located within districts or states and act as intermediary organizations, operating between schools, districts and states.

All these areas addressed in the systems-approach for envisioning how schools, districts, and states can interact together to improve low performing schools define a complex theory of action for school turnaround efforts. In other words, there can be different theories of action for turnaround, depending not only on the actions that are taken at the school level (e.g. a school combines elements from an older SIG model such as replacing the school leader and some staff, with implementing high quality instructional materials provided by the school district), but also on the role that school districts will take in this process to sustain changes at the school level (communicate the general direction of the turnaround efforts, select and develop strong leadership in turnaround schools, develop monitoring and accountability systems in partnership with the school, etc.) and the role that states play in the

entire process (i.e., exercising more or less intervention, support, and accountability). We now turn to describing the set of turnaround studies that identify district involvement with the school turnaround work.

Studying Turnaround initiatives with District Involvement

Prior to the COVID pandemic, published evaluations of the effectiveness of turnaround interventions reported mixed results. Redding & Nguyen's (2020) meta-analysis of 35 different studies evaluating the effectiveness of turnaround interventions across the US published between 2009 and 2019, and covering cohorts of students from 1999 to 2015, found that these interventions, on average, had positive effects on attendance and graduation rates, and small positive effects on standardized tests outcomes in math (0.08sd) and ELA (0.04sd) - though it is also noteworthy that most studies failed to find positive statistically significant effects. An evaluation of the impact of the SIG program (arguably the largest and highest profile turnaround program) revealed that on average, the program did not have statistically significant effects on math or reading test scores, or on the adoption of SIG-promoted practices (Dragoset et al., 2017).

However, as described in the previous sections, we know that turnaround interventions can vary in their approach, so it can also be expected that different turnaround models will report different results. Given the objectives of this literature review, we focus this section on quantitative studies that provide information on whether researchers observe that a defined role for the district in the turnaround process can result in more positive outcomes for lower performing schools. We begin by summarizing key findings from twelve papers using quantitative approaches to evaluating turnaround interventions or programs implemented with district participation before summarizing key findings from qualitative studies.

Quantitative Studies of Turnaround Programs

In this section, we review 12 papers that analyze turnaround initiatives using quantitative methods. Nine of those papers analyzed specific state and district initiatives and attempted to evaluate their impact using quasi-experimental methods. These studies are summarized in Table 1, including information about the programs, studies, the role that district played in the program, and the outcomes that the studies found. Two studies analyzed turnaround policies using descriptive statistics. We dedicate a special subsection to two causal inference studies that evaluated the effects of district takeovers by states.

One turnaround program that paid special attention to incorporating the school district in its theory of change is Michigan's Partnership Model of School and District Turnaround. The Partnership Model was Michigan's plan for turnaround under ESSA, beginning in 2017. The central idea of this program was that low performance at the school level was necessarily linked to issues at the district level, so, to improve student outcomes in low-performing schools it was essential to support LEAs. If a school is designated as a Partnership School, the district in which the school is located is also designated as a Partnership District and is charged with the responsibility of leading the turnaround efforts. Partnership Districts are also eligible to receive a set of state supports: a state liaison to support district leadership and grants to support professional development and coaching. Partnership Districts are mandated to develop a Partnership Agreement with the Michigan Department

Table 1. Summary of quantitative evaluations of turnaround programs.

Policy	Papers	District role	Outcomes
Michigan's Partnership Model	Burns et al. (2023)	Partnership districts receive state supports (liaison with state, grants for PD and coaching). Partnership Districts develop an Agreement with goals and commitments with the state. Districts are encouraged to look for additional supports in their community to involve them in transformation efforts.	Achievement gains in math in Grade 4 and 8, and ELA in Grade 4. Gains in non-Partnership Schools in Partnership Districts. Gains in lowest achievement students.
Tennessee's iZones	Zimmer et al. (2017) Henry et al. (2020) Pham et al. (2020) Kho et al. (2023)	Priority schools in the state remained under district control, but district would create a new unit called iZone that would supervise and support all priority schools.	Improved test scores in English, Math and Science. Improvements were sustained 6 years after the implementation of the reform. Evidence of improved results due to capacity to recruit effective teachers.
School Turnaround Specialist Program in Ohio	Player & Katz (2016)	Initiatives to align district and school goals. Creation of a "Shepard" role in districts to support low performing schools.	Participating schools improved their state performance rating. Improved proficiency rates in state exams. Increases in attendance.
Los Angeles Unified School District's Public School Choice Initiative (PSCI)	Strunk et al. (2016)	District-led turnaround. Portfolio management.	Mixed results.
San Francisco Unified School's District SIG Program	Sun et al. (2017)	District-led turnaround. Turnaround based on "five essential supports" framework.	Increased standardized test scores, especially after the third year. Potential mechanisms are improved retention of effective teachers and increased support to schools.
Lawrence Public School's state takeover	Schueler et al. (2017)	State-led district takeover.	Increased achievement in ELA and Math.

of Education that outlines the commitments (goals, strategies, supports, accountability measures) of both parts during a 36-month period, with an interim evaluation 18 months after the beginning of the partnership. Partnership Districts are also encouraged to look for additional support in their communities, such as civic groups, the local business community or health associations (Burns et al., 2023). The Theory of Action of the program states that these actions should lead in the short-term to improved systems capacity at the district and school level. In the medium-term to increased teacher retention, more consistent and higher-quality instruction, and more efficient use of resources. In the long-term, it should lead to improved academic and whole-child outcomes.

An evaluation of the Partnership Model investigated the impact of this model on academic outcomes (standardized tests in math and ELA across grade 4-8, SAT achievement, high school graduation and high school dropout) for the first two cohorts of Partnership Schools using event study models as main identification strategy. The authors found that the implementation of the program in Partnership schools increased student outcomes overall, although with some heterogeneity. In their first estimation strategy, the authors compared Partnership Schools with schools that did not participate in the program, which included schools in the same districts of Partnership Schools and in other districts. With this strategy, the first cohort of Partnership schools showed improved outcomes in math and ELA in the first year of implementation, although only the effects in ELA continued into the second year. They also found no change in SAT scores, and small but not statistically significant positive effects in graduation or dropout – these three outcomes were tested in models with schools as units of analysis, which reduce statistical power considerably. For the second cohort, the program also had a positive effect, but not as pronounced, and mostly not statistically significant.

In a second estimation strategy, the authors compared Partnership Schools with schools in different districts. This approach was taken to investigate whether the results of this comparison were different to the results obtained in the first strategy. Any differences observed would provide information on whether the program had an impact on schools that were in Partnership Districts, but were not identified as Partnership Schools. Using this strategy, the authors found positive and statistically significant effects of being a Partnership School in math and ELA scores in Grades 4-8 for two consecutive years for Cohort 1 and a mix of statistically significant and not significant positive effects for math and ELA for Cohort 2. These effects were larger than with the first estimation strategy, suggesting spillover effects of the program to non-Partnership Schools in Partnership Districts. Effects for SAT, high school graduation, and high school dropout were still not statistically significant, suggesting that program impacts were less effective for high schools. It is also noteworthy that the authors find that, when estimating these effects for the lowest achievement quartile and for the other three quartiles, the positive effects of the program are much larger for lower achieving students. These positive results contrast with the null results reported for previous turnaround models implemented in Michigan that focused on school-level actions without active district engagement (Hemelt & Jacob, 2017).

Another interesting case to evaluate the role of the district in turnaround efforts is the Tennessee's local Innovation Zones (i-Zones). The state of Tennessee passed legislation in 2010 to establish the Achievement School District (ASD), a district directly supervised by the state. Schools that were deemed to be placed in the ASD could either be managed directly by the state or by a Charter Management Organization with autonomy to make bold changes in the school. Alternatively, the state also implemented a third model, in which priority schools would remain under their home district, but located

under the supervision of a newly created district-within-district called iZone. These i-Zones would then group, supervise and support all priority schools in a district. In all three models, change in school management were, although governance was only altered in schools placed under the ASD (Zimmer et al., 2017).

An evaluation of these models found that only the subset of schools placed in an iZone experienced increased scores in math, reading and science in a statistically and practically significant manner (e.g., between 0.1 and 0.2 standard deviations overall). Schools in iZones turned over 45% of their teachers in their first year of operations, whereas charter managed schools replaced almost all of their teachers. Also, schools in iZones managed to retain and recruit high-quality teachers, and increased the ratio of teachers with "above expectations scores" (i.e., teachers who achieved higher than predicted academic outcomes with their students) relative to teachers with below expectations scores (i.e., teachers who achieved lower than predicted academic outcomes with their students). The higher teacher recruitment and retention outcomes in iZone schools might in large part, explain the better academic outcomes achieved (Henry et al., 2020; Zimmer et al., 2017). However, these higher than predicted outcomes achieved by iZone schools were sustained six years after the implementation of the reforms (Pham et al., 2020). It is interesting to note that an additional study of Tennessee's reforms showed that improvements in the recruitment of high quality teachers in iZone schools also produced a negative effect in schools from which these teachers were hired, but that overall, the effect of the reform is net positive (Kho et al., 2023).

In Ohio, an evaluation of the participation of 20 schools in a turnaround program called School Turnaround Specialist Program (STSP), sponsored by the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business and Curry School of Education, found meaningful improvements in student achievement after two years. According to Player & Katz (2016), the program operates on three principles: effective school leadership, district and school ownership of the turnaround process, and importance of data-driven management. Consistent with findings from earlier literature that speaks to the essential role that strong school leaders play in school turnaround initiatives (e.g., Bryk et al., 2010), the program focuses primarily on training school leaders "to establish and communicate data-driven goals that, in turn, promote collaboration and create an environment that attracts, retains, and develops teachers of high quality" (p. 678). This focal area of the STSP program speaks to the first and third principles. In terms of the second principle, the authors note that the program implemented a number of initiatives to align the district and school goals, such as requiring districts to formulate turnaround plans and monitor the implementation of turnaround actions and goals with their schools. These plans were developed in training sessions conducted by the program staff, where both school and district leadership participated to then construct these plans for engaging in turnaround work. Additionally, the STSP required the district to assign the role of "Shepard" to a person that would be tasked with visiting all turnaround schools and liaise between schools and the superintendent. This Shepard ensures that participating schools have data systems that would allow them to use data to drive instruction (Player & Katz, 2016). Using a Comparative Interrupted Time Series (CITS) approach, the authors of the evaluation found that the STSP program improved the percentage of proficient students in ELA and math in Grades 3-5, and attendance rates. The effects of the intervention were found to be stronger for students eligible for the free- and reduced-price lunch (FRL) program.

Two papers focus on evaluating the effects of turnaround policies led by two districts in California: Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). LAUSD's Public School Choice Initiative (PSCI) aimed to turn around the district's lowest performing schools by

giving control over the operations to either internal teams (groups of teachers or combinations of teachers, parents from the local community) or external teams (non-profit or charter organizations). After identifying schools that would go through the turnaround process, LAUSD called for applications from internal and external teams to provide a detailed school plan that describe how the school would operate, including curriculum changes and professional development plans. Applicants could choose from six different models: independent charter school, pilot school, Expanded Site Management Model school, network partner school, affiliated charter school, and traditional school. The distinguishing characteristics of the program were the introduction of competition as a key element, and that the LAUSD reserved the right to bring new leadership and staff to schools if they evaluated that no application was acceptable and current staff did not have the capacity to turn the school around. The results of the evaluation were mixed, as the first cohort saw no significant improvements, the second cohort saw significant improvements, and the third cohort experienced significant decreases in test scores (Strunk et al., 2016).

In SFUSD, Sun et al. (2017) evaluated the efficacy of the SIG program. SFUSD created a special unit, the Superintendent's Zone, to provide support to SIG schools. One of the unique features that characterize SFUSD's implementation of SIG are that they followed an evidence-based, comprehensive school improvement framework, the "five essential supports" (Bryk, 2010). The supports were operationalized in specific actions led by the district: replace school leadership and redesign school support, provided job-embedded teacher professional development with intensive coaching, implement Common Core curriculum, extend learning time for students, and implement a community-school beyond parent workshops. The authors found that the program increased student scores in standardized testing modestly in the first two years, and in an even more pronounced way in the third year. Potential mechanisms for this effect are improved retention of effective teachers and increased support from the district (Sun et al., 2017).

The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) launched the School Turnaround Network (STN) program in 2014-2015. In the STN theory of action, school transformation can only be effectively achieved by enacting effective leadership and instruction, improving culture and climate, and building talent management – but addressed from a systems perspective (i.e., involving participation and interaction between the state, districts, and schools). Selected schools and their districts agree on targeted interventions supported by the state for a duration of three years. The state provides coaching, performs a diagnostic needs assessments, professional development, and funding to both schools and districts. Besides committing to implement the agreed-upon strategies, a district liaison for schools participates in all activities, and the school engages in performance management activities with the district liaison and state partners. Shear et al.'s (2021) descriptive analysis of achievement and school ratings of schools participating in the STN showed trends that were consistent with small achievement gains. However, the analysis cannot support strong causal claims, due to differences in eligibility rules across cohorts, changes in standardized tests used in the state, and self-selection of schools into the program (Shear et al., 2021).

State takeovers: District turnaround

A special case to analyze the role of the district in turnaround is the case of state takeovers of school districts. In this case, instead of taking control over specific struggling schools, the state removes the local school board authority and either directly manages the school districts, appoints a new school board, transfers the authority to the major, and/or appoints a new superintendent, receiver or manager. Schueler and

Bleiberg (2022) evaluate the effect of state takeover of districts nationally between 2011 and 2016 on language and math achievement. They found no evidence that state takeover improves academic achievement, although the effects are heterogenous. While half of districts reported negative effects in ELA, several districts observed no change in student achievement, and a few reported positive impacts. The authors also observed that state takeovers had more potential for districts with higher concentration of Latino students, but there was no difference based on district size or presence of students with free and reduced-priced lunch. They also found no substantive change in terms of changes in district size or demographics, class size, charter share or educational spending (Schueler & Bleiberg, 2022).

One of the few districts in the previous study, located in Lawrence, Massachusetts, reported improvements in both ELA and math, and underwent a specific evaluation by Schueler et al. (2017). The Lawrence Public Schools (LPS) was taken over by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) in fall 2011, and appointed a receiver with extensive autonomy to make decisions and bold changes, including the capacity to alter the collective bargaining agreement, require staff to reapply to their positions, and extend the school day or year in the district. There was no substantive change in funding for LPS from the state, although per-pupil-expenditure increased 5.7% in two years, similar to the average increase at the state level. In the second year, LPS received more than $5 million from federal funding. There were five key components in the changes that the received implemented in LPS: higher expectations, increased autonomy at the school level with differentiated accountability (including charter assignment), increased learning time (with the creation of “Acceleration Academies” to provide small group tutoring to struggling students), increased training in data use, and replacement of 36% of principals, 20% of assistant principals and 10% of teachers. The evaluation found that LPS turnaround produced sizable gains in math (0.3 standard deviations) and small but notable gains in ELA achievement (0.1 standard deviations) in the first two years (Schueler et al., 2017).

Overall, this section highlighted lessons from quantitatively oriented studies that analyzed turnaround initiatives where the district took on an explicit role to partner with schools. Most of these studies used methods that enabled the authors to estimate causal inferences about the impact of the programs on student achievement. With the exception of Bush-Mecenas et al.’s (2016) study, these studies on average, reported positive results from the interventions. We return to this finding later in the discussion section.

Qualitative Studies Documenting School Turnaround Work with District Involvement

Beyond the set of studies that evaluated the effectiveness of turnaround policies or programs at a large scale, several studies in the last decade have analyzed turnaround efforts from the perspective of the involved actors, using qualitative methods (mostly interviews, but also observations). At the state level, Dunn et al. (2016) interviewed state-level actors and asked them about the difficulties in implementing turnaround policies. Staffing was one of the recurrent topics raised by interviewees. One problem that the authors highlight is related to how state-level staff that work with schools and districts in turnaround efforts end up being hired by those schools and districts, reducing the capacity of the state. Interviewees also noted how difficult it was for states to support districts in recruiting and retaining good principals.

Differentiation of state support based on district characteristics is another relevant topic in the literature.

Mette & Stanoch (2018) narrate how the inability to take into account cultural components of the school transformation process made a school turnaround effort in a rural district fail. Dunn et al. (2016) also found that state-level actors do not necessarily think of differentiation of efforts in turnaround based in urban centers, although they pay attention to district sizes. Differentiation is considered key by state actors to achieve buy-in with school districts, sometimes requiring more flexible approaches from the state (Dunn & Ambroso, 2019).

At the district level, the literature spotlights the importance of district leadership in turnaround efforts. Meyers' (2020) case study in one school district attributes positive changes to culture at the school and district levels to the following factors: an explicit focus on equity, the communication of the sense of urgency of turnaround, the creation of a unit within the district charged with coordination of the turnaround program, regular district visits to schools to provide continuous feedback and consultation, and careful and intentional co-planning between school and district actors. Similarly, Schueler (2019) notes how the role of strong leaders to steer the vision for higher expectations in the Lawrence Public Schools turnaround effort was key to increasing buy-in, and limiting negative responses from school-based stakeholders. Schueler argues for the effectiveness of the "third way" to approach educational change, between "traditionalist" and "reformer" approaches; by highlighting the need for pragmatist and moderate approaches in turnaround efforts that involve a more distributed leadership approach. In the case of Lawrence, this approach consisted in balancing accountability and support, implementing portfolio management but maintaining neighborhood-based school assignment and delegating operation of schools to different types of managers (charters and local teachers union).

In contrast to these successful cases, the literature also points to the issue of districts with lower capacity hindering turnaround efforts. Yatsko et al. (2015) analyze the implementation of SIG in Washington State, and find that at the district level there were difficulties to articulating clear theories of change for schools. In addition, the need to adapt to external timelines and the difficulties in negotiating with unions limited the kinds of turnaround actions that could be implemented. These factors, in combination with a lack of clarity in communication by districts and a narrow focus on formal compliance, resulted in schools not implementing actions that were significantly different to what they were doing before the SIG (Yatsko et al., 2015).

Challenges in delegating operation to third parties

Our review of qualitative studies also revealed a special case in the literature about one aspect of the implementation of turnaround policies at the district level: delegating school management to third-parties. Bush-Mecenas et al. (2016) analyze the case of the Public School Choice Initiative (PSCI) in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), described in the previous section. The authors articulate aspects of four different levers of change, some of which were successful in implementation, and others in which there were considerable difficulties. In terms of screening applications and managing the selection process, the program experienced substantial problems in attracting or selecting high-quality providers to manage schools over the years. This effectively weakened the number of high-quality providers that was central to this program's theory of change. Although the district initiated a transparent screening and application process, the authors documented that many applicants reported that they felt the selection process was biased and limited the diversity of potential high-quality providers. Ultimately, the application process' objective to bring in a diverse set of providers to build capacity in

schools was difficult to satisfy given the heterogeneity and limited size of the applicant pool.

In terms of school autonomy, the program also failed to communicate expectations clearly to the stakeholders and restricted the autonomy of providers, well beyond what that program intended. According to the authors, successive changes in the program across the years resulted in further restrictions to providers. Finally, the participation of families and community members was also challenging, due to the difficulty for families to have a good understanding of the characteristics of the PSCI, and the problems the district had with politically motivated mobilization.

In another case, Therriault (2016) focuses on how Lawrence Public Schools managed the process of assigning low performing schools to charter organizations. The conclusions of the study highlighted the importance of clarifying the responsibilities of districts and external organizations, the development of incentives for external charter organizations (especially given the changes in their typical setup, e.g., having to work with the students that were already in the school, instead of performing a lottery), investing on capacity building for external providers, and developing structures to share promising practices across the district (Therriault, 2016).

Building district's capacity for turnaround work

Given that transformation at the school level is the main objective of turnaround policies, district support for school capacity building is a prominent topic in this body of literature. Studies of successful implementation of turnaround programs emphasize how capacity building plays a key role. Glazer et al. (2020) document how the Shelby County iZone in Tennessee worked to improve the capacity of schools in the district, especially in math instruction. According to district-level actors, the need to improve the schools' capacities came from the realization that bringing in strong principals would not be enough for sustained change. The iZones developed a three-pronged strategy that focused on instruction (classroom practices and a new math curriculum), school capacity (school leadership and organization), and support (the establishment of two teams to support teachers and school leaders, respectively). Key elements of this strategy were the codification of good practices and routines, the construction of collegial structures, the equitable distribution of risk of implementing innovations in teaching, and the support of the community. The authors note how this strategy was initially perceived with distrust from some teachers given conflicting notions in their previous training and the new curriculum, but convey how persistence and sustained leadership and vision, combined with negotiation and compromise, helped to give the system more coherence (Glazer et al., 2020).

Another way in which districts have built capacity at the school level is by establishing school networks. Bonda and Mitchell (2015) conduct a case study of the implementation of Massachusetts' Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) in one school district. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education provided funding for each participating district to hire a Plan Manager to assist the district in drafting a plan to turnaround low performing schools and to support that implementation of the plan, and also assigned a Plan Monitor to each district to monitor advances in the execution of the plan. This district created a District Instructional Leadership Team, comprised by all school administrators in the district that met monthly for professional development. Administrators were trained in recognizing rigorous instruction in the classroom, giving constructive feedback, monitoring progress, and using data, among others; and were also encouraged to share how they were implementing these practices in their schools. In this way, the network functioned as a capacity building space and

kept administrators accountable to each other and to the district. In Colorado, Diaz-Bilello et al. (2022) conducted a multi-site case study of schools that participated in or used the resources developed by the School Turnaround Network (STN) established by the Colorado Department of Education (CDE). The STN is a network of schools supported by the state that engages in a set of practices and activities including professional development, feedback sessions, and goal monitoring for the purpose of school improvement. By participating in the STN, schools also committed to provide support to other schools. The case study concluded that the STN was a key element to build trust among relevant actors in the turnaround process at different government levels, generating a stark contrast from previous initiatives that had mostly focused on accountability and sanctions.

Other studies show how capacity building may fall short in certain contexts, especially if it is not directed to the elements that actors consider the most relevant. Torres (2024) documents how district leadership approached capacity building under Michigan's Partnership Model (PM). In general, district leaders found that the most useful way in which the PM helped build capacity was by supporting the alignment of goals and priorities within the district, which also led to better resource allocation. In addition, the PM improved the ways in which district collaborated with other actors in the system (e.g. the state, schools, and also external partners). However, district leaders believed that capacity building efforts were limited by not having enough resources to hire and retain effective teachers, especially in larger school districts (Torres, 2024).

Although the initial turnaround theory of change expected a rapid change in school-level practices, capacity building has been proven to occur in a larger span of time. Peurach and Neumerski (2015) document how a lead turnaround partner developed its capacity to support school level turnaround successfully in a process that took over a decade to achieve. At the school level, their case study shows that the school improvement process can bring results in academic achievement in three years, but fully establishing the required educational infrastructure at the school level can take at least seven years.

Finally, the literature also pays attention to how previously existing beliefs and conceptions about the causes of school poor performance can explain how turnaround policies are implemented at the district level. For example, Torres (2023) interviewed district leadership participating in Michigan's Partnership Model to understand their perspectives about the causes of school failure, and found that district and state leaders tend to attribute poor performance to factors that are beyond their control. Actors at all levels indicated belief that a lack of strong education leadership and vision are key factors that sustain low performance in schools. Although the exact mechanisms between these factors and low performance are not clearly spelled out by interviewed participants – in general, interviewees believed that chronically low performance is attributed to lack of leadership and vision for school transformation at the state, district and school levels. In addition, and especially at the district level, structural conditions, such as poverty and insufficient school funding, were identified by interviewees as explanatory factors for low performance.

Previous conditions and ongoing policies also influence the way in which turnaround efforts are implemented. Turnaround policies are not implemented in a void, since they fall into a system that has established internal practices that, effective or ineffective, take root in the actors' mindsets. Torres et al. (2024) investigated how district leaders in Michigan during the early years, initially responded to Michigan's Partnership Model, and found that whereas many leaders leveraged the implementation of the program to create new roles and produce change in school practice, the majority

adopted the turnaround policies in a "symbolic" way, aligning their "new" turnaround plans with pre-existing practices. In this sense, leaders engaged strategically with the new policy, by selecting aspects of the policy that were more familiar (e.g., implemented previously) or deemed to be easier to implement (such as declared school planning), and deciding not to engage with other more substantial components of the policy (e.g., engaging new partners in addressing district needs). In addition, the authors found that the districts with lowest capacity tended to engage more frequently in symbolic adaptations of the program, which impeded initial school transformation efforts.

Discussion

In the previous sections, we reviewed documents and studies published after 2015 that address the role of school districts in school turnaround efforts. Conceptually, the theory of action for school turnaround became more complex with the major policy shifts that took place with education accountability following the ESEA waivers and with ESSA.

However, to date, the literature that focuses on the role of districts in facilitating school turnaround is scant. It is notable that this literature is restricted to a limited number of settings and are also authored by a limited number of scholars – and in some cases these are related, as few authors have several studies situated in the same context or location. There are few documents that study turnaround policies across different settings (Dunn et al., 2016; Dunn & Ambroso, 2019; Redding & Nguyen, 2020; Schueler & Bleiberg, 2022), but most papers focus on specific policy cases. In the documents we reviewed, the authors analyzed cases of school turnaround in Massachusetts (Bonda & Mitchell, 2015) – with a special focus on Lawrence Public Schools (Schueler, 2019; Schueler et al., 2017; Therriault, 2016) – Tennessee (Glazer et al., 2020; Henry et al., 2020; Kho et al., 2023; Pham et al., 2020; Zimmer et al., 2017), Michigan (Burns et al., 2023; Torres, 2023, 2024; Torres et al., 2024), Washington State (Yatsko et al., 2015), Colorado (Diaz-Bilello et al., 2022), Ohio (Player & Katz, 2016), and California (Bush-Mecenas et al., 2016; Strunk et al., 2016). The evidence coming largely from Massachusetts, Tennessee and Michigan are clearly prominent, but this limits the generalizability of the lessons we can draw from the literature to other sites with very different contexts and issues.

Similarly, relatively few authors seem to be writing about how districts are involved with school turnaround work. Our review revealed that one group of authors (i.e., Henry, Kho, Zimmer and Pham) wrote the vast majority of papers documenting and studying school turnaround in Tennessee, and Chris Torres authored or co-authored the majority of papers written over the years about the Michigan Partnership model. In addition, most of the conceptual pieces that reflect on the role of the district turnaround efforts are published by the Center for School Turnaround (WestEd) or by scholars that collaborate with this think tank, such as Meyers. Although these papers provide valuable insights into the role of the district, the limited number of authors addressing the district's role suggests that there is considerably more room to learn about how districts with varying organizational structures and sizes can best facilitate and leverage this transformation work in their schools.

Another noteworthy trend is that almost all of the quantitative studies included in our review that focused on making causal claims associated with district supported turnaround efforts, report positive effects of turnaround efforts on academic achievement – the only exception is the LAUSD study (Bush-Mecenas et al., 2016). This finding contrasts with the broader turnaround literature, which mostly report null effects or small positive effects (Dragoset et al., 2017; Redding & Nguyen, 2020; Schueler et al., 2022). Given that

we only select studies in which the role of the school districts is well defined, this is an encouraging finding for turnaround efforts that elevate the role of the district in this work. This trend needs to be monitored over time to see if this finding persists with more recent turnaround efforts.

However, even with the overall positive outcomes reported in studies involving districts, it seems that the magnitude of academic change expected, as stipulated by the pre-ESSA turnaround definitions, was never achieved. These studies observed positive and notable impacts in a relatively short term (i.e., most of the studies observe these effects within a three-year timeframe), but not in the order of magnitude that would make schools or districts that performing in the bottom of the rankings attain positions located at the state average. These results suggest that even when the district has a clearly defined role in the turnaround process, it is important to establish student achievement expectations that align with evidence, rather than set unrealistic performance expectations for chronically low performing schools.

The more qualitatively oriented literature is more nuanced about the magnitude of change achieved in district facilitated turnaround work, by highlighting the limitations and difficulties that schools and districts face in order to make transformative organizational change happen. These limitations include resistance from relevant actors (both professional and political), lack of existing capacity, incoherent accountability systems and curriculum, and lack of time and resources. It is interesting that even in settings in which these implementation challenges were clearly documented, such as in Tennessee (Glazer et al., 2020) and Michigan (Burns et al., 2023; Torres, 2024), quantitative impact evaluations still observed positive effects. This means that even policies that face a degree of initial resistance may still hold promise of having a positive impact on schools when sustained over the long run.

Finally, a few practices clearly stand out as commonalities in the literature describing successful turnaround efforts. District and school leadership that can communicate the urgency of the transformation efforts emerges from the literature as decisive. The literature also points to the need for district and school leadership to define a clear vision for turnaround work that can guide all actors toward a common purpose, not only in terms of learning outcomes, but also in terms of systematic practices that need to be incorporated in schools (Meyers, 2020; Schueler, 2019). Based on this literature, steering this vision has entailed establishing dedicated roles to specifically support turnaround schools in districts - often as units or departments inside the districts that are led by what C. V. Meyers (2020) calls “shepherds” that visit schools regularly and build communities of practice to support this work. These units can also organize spaces for principals or other relevant school-level actors to share previous conceptions, ideas, challenges, and effective practices. Ultimately, these learning communities established by districts for their schools can achieve mutual accountability and a synergistic partnership between school and district actors sharing a common goal to enact positive changes in schools.

References

Black, W. R., Rea, A. C., & Reck, B. L. (2021). Equity, Effectiveness, and Control: The Every Student Succeeds Act and State Approaches to School Turnaround. In C. A. Mullen (Ed.), *Handbook of Social Justice Interventions in Education* (pp. 1–26). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-29553-0_64-1

Bonda, N., & Mitchell, E. (2015). School District Turnaround: Leadership Development as the Nexus of Change. *European Journal of Educational Sciences, 02*(01). https://doi.org/10.19044/ejes.v2no1a5

Bridwell-Mitchell, E. N. (2020). Between What Is and What Is Possible: Theorizing the Role of Institutional Interstitiality in State-Led School Turnaround. *Peabody Journal of Education, 95*(4), 423–438. https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2020.1800177

Bryk, A. S. (Ed.). (2010). *Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago.* The University of Chicago Press.

Burns, J., Harbatkin, E., Strunk, K. O., Torres, C., Mcilwain, A., & Frost Waldron, S. (2023). The Efficacy and Implementation of Michigan's Partnership Model of School and District Turnaround: Mixed-Methods Evidence From the First 2 Years of Reform Implementation. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 45*(4), 622–654. https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737221141415

Bush-Mecenas, S., Marsh, J. A., & Strunk, K. O. (2016). Portfolio reform in Los Angeles: Successes and Challenges in School District Implementation. In A. J. Daly & K. S. Finnigan (Eds.), *Thinking and Acting Systemically: Improving School Districts Under Pressure*. American Educational Research Association. https://doi.org/10.3102/978-0-935302-46-2

Diaz-Bilello, E., York, A., & Mork, K. (2022). *Learnings from a Multi-site Case Study of Former Turnaround Schools* (CADRE Working Paper). Center for Assessment, Design, and Evaluation (CADRE) - CU Boulder.

Dragoset, L., Thomas, J., Herrmann, M., Deke, J., James-Burdumy, S., Graczewski, C., Boyle, A., Upton, R., Tanenbaum, C., Giffin, J., & Wei, T. E. (2017). *School Improvement Grants: Implementation and Effectiveness: Executive Summary*. Institute of Education Sciences - U.S. Department of Education.

Dunn, L., & Ambroso, E. (2019). *Balancing Act: State and District Roles in School Improvement Under ESSA*. The Center on School Turnaround at WestEd.

Dunn, L., Scott, C., Chapman, K., & Vince, S. (2016). *The Missing Link: How States Work with Districts to Support School Turnaround.* The Center on School Turnaround at WestEd.

Finnigan, K. S., & Daly, A. J. (2016). Why We Need to Think Systemically in Educational Policy and Reform. In A. J. Daly & K. S. Finnigan (Eds.), *Thinking and Acting Systemically: Improving School Districts Under Pressure*. American Educational Research Association. https://doi.org/10.3102/978-0-935302-46-2

Glazer, J. L., Massell, D., Winchell Lenhoff, S., Larbi-Cherif, A., Egan, C., Taylor, J. E., Ison, A., Deleveaux, J., & Millington, Z. (2020). *District-led School Turnaround: Aiming for Ambitious and Equitable Instruction in Shelby County's iZone* (CPRE Research Reports). Center for Policy Research in Education.

Hambrick Hitt, D., Robinson, W., & Player, D. (2018). *District Readiness to Support School Turnaround: A Guide for State Education Agencies and Districts, 2nd Edition*. The Center on School Turnaround at WestEd.

Hemelt, S., & Jacob, B. (2017). *Differentiated Accountability and Education Production: Evidence from NCLB Waivers* (w23461; p. w23461). National Bureau of Economic Research. https://doi.org/10.3386/w23461

Henry, G. T., Pham, L. D., Kho, A., & Zimmer, R. (2020). Peeking Into the Black Box of School Turnaround: A Formal Test of Mediators and Suppressors. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 42*(2), 232–256. https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373720908600

Hill, K. L., Desimone, L., Wolford, T., Reitano, A., & Porter, A. (2023). Inside school turnaround: What drives success? *Journal of Educational Change, 24*(3), 393–423. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-022-09450-w

Jochim, A. (2016). Measures of Last Resort. *Linking State and Local School Improvement Assessing Strategies for State-Initiated Turnarounds*. Center on Reinventing Public Education.

Kho, A., Henry, G. T., Pham, L. D., & Zimmer, R. (2023). Spillover Effects of Recruiting Teachers for School Turnaround: Evidence From Tennessee. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 45*(2), 268–284. https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737221111807

Mette, I. M., & Stanoch, J. (2018). School Turnaround: A Rural Reflection of Reform on the Reservation and Lessons for Implementation. *The Rural Educator, 37*(2). https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v37i2.270

Meyers, C., & Sadler, J. (2018). District Leaders Engaged in School Turnaround: Identified Challenges and Espoused Responses. *NASSP Bulletin, 102*(2), 89–110. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192636518786008

Meyers, C. V. (2019). District-Led School Turnaround: A Case Study Of One U.S. District's Turnaround Launch For Multiple Schools. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 19*(4), 710–729. https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2019.1637902

Meyers, C. V. (2020). District-Led School Turnaround: A Case Study of One U.S. District's Turnaround Launch for Multiple Schools. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 19*(4), 710–729. https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2019.1637902

Meyers, C. V., & Smylie, M. A. (2017). Five Myths of School Turnaround Policy and Practice. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 16*(3), 502–523. https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2016.1270333

Murphy, J. F., & Bleiberg, J. F. (2019). *School Turnaround Policies and Practices in the US: Learning from Failed School Reform* (Vol. 6). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-01434-6

Peurach, D. J., & Neumerski, C. M. (2015). Mixing metaphors: Building infrastructure for large scale school turnaround. *Journal of Educational Change, 16*(4), 379–420. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-015-9259-z

Pham, L. D., Henry, G. T., Kho, A., & Zimmer, R. (2020). Sustainability and Maturation of School Turnaround: A Multiyear Evaluation of Tennessee's Achievement School District and Local Innovation Zones. *AERA Open, 6*(2), 233285842092284. https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858420922841

Player, D., & Katz, V. (2016). Assessing School Turnaround: Evidence from Ohio. T*he Elementary School Journal, 116*(4), 675–698. https://doi.org/10.1086/686467

Redding, C., & Nguyen, T. D. (2020). The Relationship Between School Turnaround and Student Outcomes: A Meta-Analysis. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 42*(4), 493–519. https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373720949513

Schueler, B. E. (2019). A Third Way: The Politics of School District Takeover and Turnaround in Lawrence, Massachusetts. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 55*(1), 116–153. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X18785873

Schueler, B. E., Asher, C. A., Larned, K. E., Mehrotra, S., & Pollard, C. (2022). Improving Low-Performing Schools: A Meta-Analysis of Impact Evaluation Studies. *American Educational Research Journal, 59*(5), 975–1010. https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312211060855

Schueler, B. E., & Bleiberg, J. F. (2022). Evaluating Education Governance: Does State Takeover of School Districts Affect Student Achievement? *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, 41*(1), 162–192. https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22338

Schueler, B. E., Goodman, J. S., & Deming, D. J. (2017). Can States Take Over and Turn Around School Districts? Evidence From Lawrence, Massachusetts. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 39*(2), 311–332. https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373716685824

Shear, B. R., Diaz-Bilello, E., Student, S. R., & Pierre-Louis, M. (2021). Evaluation of Colorado School Turnaround Network and School Turnaround Leadership Development Grants: Descriptive Analysis of 2015- 2020 Cohorts. The Center for Assessment, Design, Research and Evaluation (CADRE).

Strunk, K. O., Marsh, J. A., Hashim, A. K., Bush-Mecenas, S., & Weinstein, T. (2016). The Impact of Turnaround Reform on Student Outcomes: Evidence and Insights from the Los Angeles Unified School District. *Education Finance and Policy, 11*(3), 251–282. https://doi.org/10.1162/EDFP_a_00188

Sun, M., Penner, E. K., & Loeb, S. (2017). Resource- and Approach-Driven Multidimensional Change: Three-Year Effects of School Improvement Grants. *American Educational Research Journal, 54*(4), 607–643. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831217695790

The Center on School Turnaround. (2017). *Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement: A Systems Framework*. The Center on School Turnaround.

Therriault, S. B. (2016). *A New Approach to School Turnaround: Charter Operators Managing District Schools* [Policy brief]. American Institutes for Research.

Torres, A. C. (2023). Causal Stories and Problem Definitions: How Policymakers and Superintendents Frame School Turnaround. *AERA Open, 9*, 23328584231186425. https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584231186425

Torres, A. C. (2024). Are resources and demands from accountability policies productive? How leaders build district capacity in response to school turnaround policy. *Journal of Educational Administration*. https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-10-2023-0248

Torres, A. C., Frost Waldron, S., & Burns, J. (2024). Compliance, Chaos, or Coherence? How Superintendents, Districts, and Schools Craft Coherence From School Turnaround Policy. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 46*(1), 133–159. https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737231161363

Yatsko, S., Lake, R., Bowen, M., & Cooley Nelson, E. (2015). Federal School Improvement Grants (SIGs): How Capacity and Local Conditions Matter. *Peabody Journal of Education, 90*(1), 27–52. https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2015.988523

Zimmer, R., Henry, G. T., & Kho, A. (2017). The Effects of School Turnaround in Tennessee's Achievement School District and Innovation Zones. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 39*(4), 670–696. https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373717705729

APPENDIX A: Literature Review Methodology

To select articles for this literature review, we first searched for documents related to the district role in school turnaround in two digital academic search engines: Google Scholar and ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center). We used the phrases "school turnaround" and "school transformation" followed by the term "district", restricting the search to documents that were written after 2015 to focus on which lessons could be drawn from more recent studies. Although we restricted the search to publications produced after 2015, we draw on the background information provided by several of these articles on the history of turnaround work to trace the evolution of this work to become more systems-oriented following the passage of ESSA. As part of our selection process, we reviewed the links in the first 10 pages for each search. We conducted a screening by reading the titles and abstracts (or introductions if a document did not have an abstract) to decide whether to include a document in the review.

Our main criterion for inclusion in the review was that the research explicitly discussed the role of school districts (in general or a specific school district) in school turnaround or transformation efforts. We excluded individual school transformation or school leadership case studies, which comprised the majority of the school turnaround literature. We included different types of research documents, from peer-reviewed articles published in academic journals to research reports produced by different think-tanks (e.g., AIR, WestEd). We included research documents that used qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches. We excluded dissertations and restricted the review to documents written in the United States.

After the initial screening from the database search, we read all the articles and looked for other relevant sources in the references included in the articles. Our document review also led us to exclude additional documents, if a more in-depth reading revealed that the article was not relevant for our purposes of understanding district turnaround work.

For some of the quantitative evaluation studies that we reviewed, it was not obvious in the description of the turnaround program whether there was an explicit role for the district. In some cases, we were able to find more specific information about the district role in the turnaround program in other sources (e.g. other studies or program websites). However, for the sake of this literature review, we only include studies that clearly outline this information within the paper itself.

Lastly, there was one specific group of turnaround studies for which we needed to make a specific decision: district turnaround studies. Here, instead of having districts leading school turnaround, the entire district was subject to a turnaround policy with state takeovers. We include these studies in a separate section of this review. The process for searching and selecting relevant studies is represented in Figure 1. The final selection of literature reviewed for this paper totaled 36 documents. Given that we include quantitative and qualitative studies, this review takes on a narrative approach to highlight main findings from each paper and draw out shared lessons for consideration.

Figure 1. Process of search and selection of relevant studies.