

The **Research Alliance** for  
New York City Schools

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# Learning from “Turnaround” Middle Schools: Strategies for Success



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# **Learning from “Turnaround” Middle Schools: Strategies for Success**

## **Executive Summary**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The middle grades mark a critical transition for students. Recent research provides compelling evidence that students' attendance, test scores, and grades during the middle school years can strongly predict whether or not they graduate from high school.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, many young people are faltering in the middle grades. In fact, less than 40 percent of 8<sup>th</sup> graders are currently at or above proficient on standardized reading and math tests.<sup>2</sup> As in other parts of the country, middle grade students in New York City are underperforming. In 2011, after New York State raised its performance standards, just 35 percent of the City's 8<sup>th</sup> graders were proficient in English Language Arts (ELA), and 52 percent were proficient in math.<sup>3</sup>

In light of this reality, middle schools have become a priority for the New York City Department of Education (DOE). In September 2011, Chancellor Dennis Walcott addressed what he called "lagging achievement among middle school students," proposing four policy strategies to improve middle school education in the city.<sup>4</sup> This study seeks to inform the DOE's efforts to improve middle schools by learning more about schools that have turned around or "beat the odds" after years of low performance.

In New York City and around the nation, there is intense interest in the question of what it takes to turn around a struggling school. The turnaround strategies that predominate in federal policy include school closure, conversion to a charter school, dismissal of the principal and a substantial proportion of teachers, and the reassignment of students to other schools. In contrast, the turnaround schools in this study substantially improved student performance without the infusion of extra resources or the wholesale reassignment of students, teachers and administrators. Rather, these schools have made improvements by drawing on existing resources and developing internal capacity to educate students effectively. Although this kind of transformation may not be possible for all low-performing schools, the experiences chronicled in this report suggest important lessons for educators and policymakers, both here in New York and around the country.<sup>5</sup>

## The Study

The study focuses on two groups of initially low-performing schools with similar demographics. The first group—which we refer to as turnaround schools—exhibited significant growth in academic performance between 2006 and 2010. During those same years, academic performance in the second group of low-performing schools saw minimal growth or remained stagnant. To gain an understanding of how the turnaround schools had improved, we conducted in-depth interviews with principals and focus groups of 3 to 10 teachers in both sets of schools. These conversations elicited rich data about the specific practices that had contributed to turnaround and how these practices were implemented at the school level. The report focuses on topics, themes and perspectives that arose consistently in response to the open-ended questions we posed about the school’s recent efforts to improve student performance.

*“I would find it useful if there was some data analysis ... at the citywide level of the qualitative best practices that unify schools that get A’s on their report cards, so that, for instance, when I’m looking at where we stand in terms of our peer schools, I might have some sense of the practices in place in those schools rather than just the quantitative differences...I don’t have enough qualitative information about what’s going on in schools that are achieving those A’s.”*

- Teacher

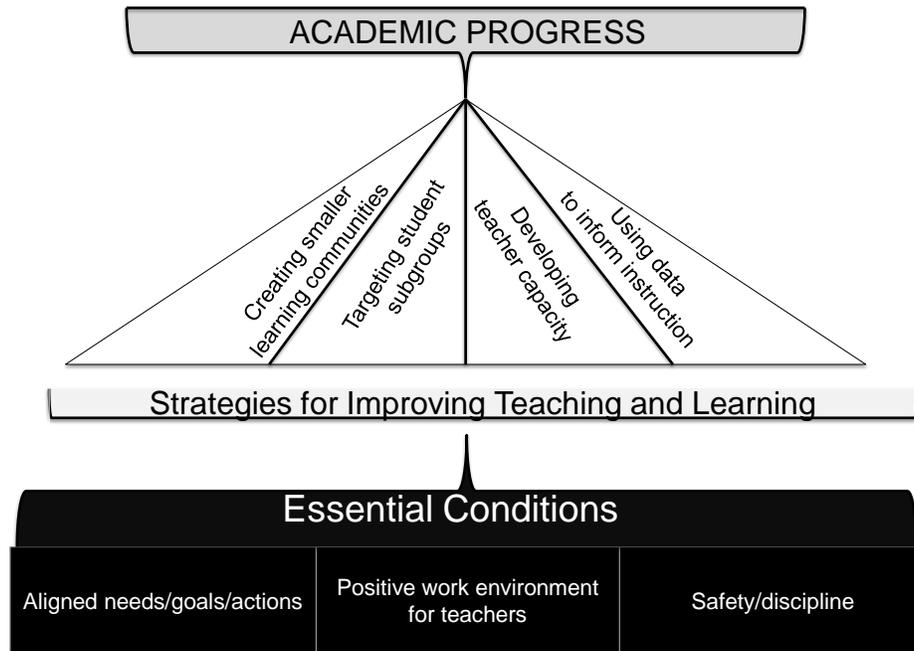
## Key Findings

Turnaround schools shared three conditions that principals and teachers reported were essential to their capacity to improve student achievement: 1) aligning needs with goals, 2) creating a positive work environment, and 3) addressing student discipline and safety. Principals and teachers also attributed their school’s success to the implementation of specific strategies aimed at improving teaching and learning: 1) developing teachers internally, 2) creating small learning communities, 3) targeting student sub-populations, and 4) using data to inform instruction.

As illustrated in Figure ES 1, the essential conditions were the foundation upon which strategies for improving teaching and learning could be implemented. Fundamentally, the alignment of needs, goals, and actions in the schools drove the selection and use of appropriate strategies to improve teaching and learning. The positive work environment helped ensure the success of these strategies, while addressing safety and discipline issues made it possible for teachers to focus more energy on teaching and learning. These three conditions were leader

driven, though they required the cooperation of other staff members to be successful. It was the multi-pronged effort of these schools that ultimately led to academic improvement.

**Figure ES 1:**  
***Essential Conditions and Key Strategies for School Turnaround***



### **Essential Conditions for Success**

**1. Aligning needs, goals, and actions:** The principals of the turnaround schools each assumed leadership when their schools were struggling academically, and recalled a desire to make large, schoolwide changes that would improve performance. But rather than talk about “school improvement” as a general concept, these leaders focused on the particular needs or challenges of their own schools, setting specific goals and taking targeted actions to meet those goals. The principals shared an ability to communicate their vision to school staff. And while the specific goals differed from school to school (e.g., improving instruction for a certain subgroup of students or in a particular subject area), the principals displayed a similarly strategic placement of resources and energy toward the areas most in need of improvement.

**2. Creating a positive work environment for teachers:** Interviewees reported that a positive principal-teacher relationship helped ensure alignment between schoolwide goals and teacher work and played a key role in sustaining instructional changes over time. Principals helped create strong relationships with their teachers by providing professional and personal support as well as ample opportunities for teachers to make decisions about curriculum and instruction. At the same time, these leaders struck a balance between building rapport and trust with their staff and dealing very directly with any resistance that emerged.

*“I didn’t want ... the teachers or the students or the parents to see me as just a principal, so they saw me everywhere, doing everything and helping them. .... They have to see you as a real person, not someone that will demand things of them that they’re not doing themselves.”*

- Principal

**3. Addressing safety and discipline:** Principals and teachers also cited the importance of establishing order in their school buildings as essential for improvement. Though not directly related to instruction, effectively addressing safety and discipline allowed schools to focus more time, energy, and resources on teaching and learning. Among the methods described as most successful were significantly increasing principal and teacher presence in areas where students congregate and building strong personal relationships with students.

## **Strategies for Improving Teaching and Learning**

- 1. Developing teacher capacity internally:** Teachers in the turnaround schools received professional development from their peers in a way that was closely tied to their daily work. Turnaround schools employed specific structures, such as Lead Teacher, peer mentoring and intervisitation programs (in which teachers and principals visit classrooms to learn about successful instruction). The approach to professional development was collaborative in nature and thus dependent on a strong culture of sharing and professional growth.
- 2. Creating smaller learning communities:** Principals in the turnaround schools took specific measures to create smaller learning communities, including establishing learning academies that focus on specific themes and looping across grades (which allows students to remain with teachers for several consecutive years). This was intended to expand opportunities for individualized learning and help teachers develop stronger relationships with students. According to teachers, it also improved instruction and increased collaboration among staff.

**3. Targeting student sub-populations:** Interviewees spoke of the importance of targeting student subgroups for improvement, especially special education students and English Language Learners. Specific measures to help serve these students included hiring new staff, assigning staff to particular classes, and offering specialized programs to address academic and non-academic needs.

*“My class has been together for quite a long time, so they are very comfortable with each other. They’re friends, like a little family.”*

- Teacher

**4. Using data to inform instruction:** Teachers in turnaround schools reported using performance data to group students and tailor instruction to meet their specific needs. They also had structures for sharing data with their students, which helped the students better understand academic expectations, set goals, and become more engaged in the learning process.

### **Ongoing Challenges**

Some of the practices identified in past research as important for school turnaround remain ongoing challenges for the schools in our study. These challenges include communicating with and engaging parents and providing services and programs that support students’ social and emotional well being. Though the schools offered various kinds of extra support for students, administrators and teachers cited difficulty in acquiring and maintaining resources to meet their students’ many needs, particularly in the context of recent budget cuts. Despite these ongoing challenges, the turnaround schools demonstrated significant improvement in student performance.

### **Recommendations for More Effective Middle Schools**

The national conversation about school turnaround has largely focused on drastic approaches to reform. In New York City, the underperformance of middle grade schools in particular has become an area of concern for the DOE. This study was motivated by a desire to learn more about how to improve and support middle grade schools—without the aid of dramatic reform strategies that cannot be as readily applied across an entire system. We hope the findings can inform the work of school-level educators by providing rich descriptions of the practices that played a role in the improvement of these schools. We also believe that the study suggests ways

that city and state administrators can support middle grade schools, and how further research may extend what we know about school improvement. As such, we recommend the following:

- **Cultivate strong leaders for struggling schools.** The importance of the school leader in the turnaround of these schools suggests that strategic principal placement is critical for supporting the improvement of middle grade schools. School districts might consider offering incentives to successful principals to take positions in persistently low-performing middle grade schools. Another more limited measure would be to provide a sustained mentorship between these successful principals and principals in low-performing schools through intervisitation and principal learning groups.
- **Train leaders in strategic goal setting.** District and school support networks should help build principal capacity to identify *specific* areas where their school is struggling and create measureable goals (and benchmarks) that address those needs (as the Comprehensive Educational Plans that are required of all New York City schools). After establishing goals and measures, principals should select key teacher leaders who can help ensure that the goals are driving teachers' work. It also may be useful to develop a tool in ARIS—the city's comprehensive student data management system—to help principals track their progress.
- **Train principals to head off potential disciplinary issues by offering socio-emotional support for students.** Concerns over safety and discipline are a common complaint among middle grade principals and teachers. We found that the principals of the turnaround schools made establishing order in their buildings a significant priority. Providing leaders with targeted training in this area may be an important first step in improving outcomes. Schools with high suspension rates and a large number of incident reports may particularly benefit from such training.
- **Develop structures to support increased teacher mentorship.** One of the most important strategies shared by these turnaround schools was providing regular and ongoing opportunities to develop teacher capacity within the building. Setting up specific structures to support mentorship and the use of effective practices among the entire staff seems critical not only for enhancing teachers' capacity, but also for supporting their morale and confidence. One option in New York City would be a targeted forum on ARIS communities around mentorship.

The findings and themes that emerged from this study also raise challenging questions for ongoing research being undertaken by the Research Alliance and others. For example, how can these conditions and strategies be sustained? Under what circumstances can we expect the conditions and strategies exhibited here to take hold and develop across the spectrum of low-performing middle schools in New York City and other urban school districts? Are these conditions and strategies more or less likely to occur under the threat or implementation of dramatic externally imposed turnaround models? Exploring these questions and studying other middle school reform efforts as they unfold would help us better understand the success of these schools and provide further guidance on how to turn around other persistently low-performing middle grade schools in New York City and around the country.

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## Executive Summary Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Balfanz, 2009; Keiffer, Marinell et al., 2011; Kurlaender, Reardon, et al., 2008. For complete citation, see full report.

<sup>2</sup> National Assessment of Educational Progress. See <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/data/TestResults/ELAandMathTestResults>.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://schools.nyc.gov/Offices/mediarelations/NewsandSpeeches/2011-2012/msspeechatnyu92011.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> For this study, *turnaround* is defined as an end state or consequence of successful actions, and a *turnaround school* is one that has shown great improvement (Murphy, 2008). This differs from common usage in federal, state, and local policy, when “turnaround” frequently means school closure, restart, or replacing the principal and a large percentage of the staff.