

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past few years, Colorado and the nation have dramatically increased their focus on the needs of students in struggling schools. Congress and the federal Department of Education have developed initiatives that alter the options available under federal law for state, district, and school leaders to intervene in persistently struggling schools. In addition, Colorado has recently enacted new accountability legislation that requires more significant action in schools that consistently fail to meet standards for student learning.

At both the state and national levels, these recent changes have significantly changed Colorado's approach to school turnarounds. They have also directed an unprecedented amount of resources to its districts and schools to implement dramatic change strategies and support local efforts to turn schools around. In this report, we explore the recent federal and state policies that affect low-performing schools in Colorado to share information with state and local leaders, parents and other community members about how the state is approaching school improvement.

Between 2009 and 2010, the state identified nearly 100 schools for dramatic intervention, including 19 schools under the federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) Program and 82 schools under the state Education Accountability Act (EAA).²

Colorado has been at the forefront of school reform efforts for some time, and has a strong policy environment to support successful interventions in low-performing schools. Based on our examination of the state's approach in recent months, however – including its identification of struggling schools, selection and approval of improvement strategies, and allocation of additional resources – there are several potential areas to strengthen and improve its approach in future years.

■ **Building the supply of talent to support school turnarounds.** Emerging research about turnarounds within education and from other sectors suggests that one of the most critical elements in their success is having the right leader at the helm. In most Colorado districts, the supply of turnaround principals and qualified external providers is far too short to meet the needs of all persistently low-achieving schools. The state therefore has a powerful role in helping build the talent pipelines by supporting the recruitment, selection and training of turnaround leaders for struggling schools. In addition, there is a severe shortage of organizations equipped to manage the full operations of schools, the type of arrangement envisioned under the “restart” improvement model in both Colorado and federal law. CDE and its partners can work to build the supply of these organizations in Colorado, such as by working with existing organizations that incubate new or replicate existing restart providers, and engaging in its own efforts to encourage and support highly-successful charter operators to expand into the turnaround space.

■ **Supporting rigorous turnaround strategies.** National surveys of states’ use of SIG funds show that very few districts have strategically replaced leaders or a significant portion of schools’ staff, and even fewer have used restart options such as chartering or contracting. A similar trend is playing out in Colorado. CDE and other state leaders can help foster more dramatic efforts at the local level in several ways, such as by engaging in a focused and rigorous review process for schools’ improvement plans, and closely examining each district’s commitment to success.

■ **Engaging in rigorous monitoring and rapid retry.** Turning around a persistently failing school is enormously difficult work. Research from across sectors suggests that dramatic change efforts are successful on the first try only 30 percent of the time. In the education setting, with its broader restrictions over staffing, budgeting and operations, the success rate may be even lower. It is particularly important, therefore, to track leading indicators of success or failure to learn whether a school’s turnaround is on track early in the effort – and to act on the data that those indicators reveal. CDE should use its authority under both the federal School Improvement Grant program and the state Education Accountability Act to discontinue funds or intervene in schools that are not on track, to redirect or retry major change.

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Colorado schools are benefitting from an extraordinary amount of resources and support to implement new types of improvement strategies designed to dramatically increase their performance. But the challenges facing schools that have struggled for years to better serve their students are substantial, and the odds are stacked against them to deliver results different from years past. Over the next several months, Colorado’s education and community leaders can help increase the chances of success in these schools by closely examining current efforts and identifying critical needs for the future.

