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Review of *Measures of Last Resort: Assessing Strategies for State-Initiated Turnarounds*

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Summary of Review

The stated goal of this report is to strengthen the evidence base on state-initiated turnarounds and to provide guidance to help states use turnaround strategies more effectively. The report draws on multiple sources of information to develop a conceptual framework and profile of state-initiated turnaround strategies, to array the evidence on the effectiveness of turnaround initiatives, and to identify key elements of a successful turnaround strategy. However, given multiple methodological limitations, the report fails to elevate either the research base or the policy discourse. Specifically, the methods used to carry out the original research (e.g., analysis of state policies, interviews with stakeholders, and illustrative cases) are neither explained nor justified. Likewise, the methods employed in the eight evaluations selected to assess the effectiveness of turnaround approaches are not described, and the evidence base produced by these evaluations is not sufficient to support the sweeping claims made in the report. Equally important, the report neglects to consider relevant research on the specific mechanisms (e.g., school reconstitution, intensive professional development, private management systems) that states use when they employ the broad turnaround strategies discussed in the report. As a result of these problems, the report does not enhance the evidence base or provide the substantive guidance state policymakers require to make informed decisions about the use of various school turnaround strategies.

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Review of *Measures of Last Resort: Assessing Strategies for State-Initiated Turnarounds*

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I. Introduction

Over the last 50 years, states have become more actively and aggressively involved in efforts to improve public school systems. Given the unrelenting pressure to increase school test scores and the challenges of securing results by "remote control," many states have drawn on the authority they have always possessed to step up their efforts to reform schools.[1] While states have incorporated an array of reform strategies, direct intervention in school districts represents a major departure from historical efforts to influence schools through less intrusive and less punitive policies. *Measures of Last Resort: Assessing Strategies for State-Initiated Turnarounds*[2] represents an effort to examine the forms and effects of states' direct efforts to turnaround chronically under-performing schools.

This review focuses on how well this report accomplishes what it set out to do. The stated aim of this report is to "fill the gap" in the evidence base on state-initiated turnarounds by addressing key questions related to the effectiveness of various strategies, and the conditions that influence their effectiveness. As described by the author, "The report identifies various mechanisms states can use to intervene in schools and dives deep into nearly a dozen recent turnarounds in eight states... and analyzes what is known about state-initiated turnarounds in all its forms."[3] In addition, the report is intended "to help states ensure their support is more targeted, better received, and ultimately, more effective."[4] This review demonstrates that the report offers some useful background information, but falls short of realizing its stated aims.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report presents three sets of findings. First, the report provides a descriptive profile of state-initiated turnaround efforts. The author presents a conceptual framework that identifies five different approaches to state-initiated turnarounds and characterizes them in terms of their target, the turnaround lead, and the level of state authority. This framework demonstrates how the five different approaches – state support for local turnaround, state-authorized turnaround zone, mayoral control, school takeover, and district takeover – vary across

the identified design dimensions. The report also includes an appendix that provides a brief state-by-state overview of strategies, interventions, and supports for school and district turnaround.

Second, based on evidence from eight recent evaluations of state-initiated turnaround efforts, the report concludes that all types of turnaround strategies "can effectively improve student achievement, but not all do."[5] The eight evaluations met the criteria of (1) employing "rigorous methodology," (2) evaluating the impact of the turnaround strategies on student achievement, and (3) being less that ten years old.[6] The evaluations analyzed in the report addressed four of the five turnaround strategies identified in the typology – all except mayoral control. In cases, where evaluations presented multiple estimates, the author "pooled and averaged the results."[7] Taken together, the eight studies yielded 20 estimates of effectiveness (10 for math and 10 for English and language arts); all four of the approaches to state-initiated turnaround were found to have statistically significant positive effects in at least one context or subject area. Five of the 10 estimates of the impact of the intervention on student achievement in mathematics were statistically significant and positive; four of the 10 estimates of the impact of the intervention on student achievement in English and language arts were statistically significant and positive. Across the four intervention types and two subject areas, the magnitude of the effects ranged from 0.05 to 0.24 of a standard deviation.[8]

Third, the study references existing literature as well as state examples to identify the key components of an effective turnaround strategy. This "recipe for success" requires the will to initiate change, sufficient authority to ensure the effective implementation of the turnaround strategy, the state and local capacity to implement the intervention, and the requisite political support required to sustain it over time.[9] The report recognizes that, as with all education reform, state-initiated turnaround strategies are not a silver bullet, and local context can influence the implementation and the effects of these strategies. In an effort to illustrate how the various types of turnarounds may be undermined by state and local context, the author defines "assets" as the "set of ingredients that the reform can stimulate or shape directly through the actions of state leaders," and "liabilities" as the "set of ingredients that the reform cannot stimulate, shape directly, and/or require voluntary cooperation from external actors."[10] This analysis reveals several state and district factors that influence the effectiveness of various turnaround strategies: district leadership, state capacity, scale and scope of the turnaround, and political appetite for change. The assets-liabilities framework is the basis for the argument that using combinations of turnaround strategies has advantages over singular approaches.

The report offers some useful background information, but falls short of realizing its stated aims.

The report concludes with a set of recommendations for state policymakers considering turnaround strategies as a mechanism for school improvement. Specifically, the report recommends that states should work toward building a stronger evidence base on turnaround strategies; consider using multiple strategies simultaneously; seek assistance from

site-based educators, community organizations, and district administrators; avoid conflict where possible to build political capital; address issues of sustainability; and consider alternatives for building collaborations with local stakeholder groups.

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

The report draws on four sources of evidence: (1) a review of state laws and regulations with respect to turnaround reforms; (2) interviews with 15 stakeholders including state leaders, district personnel, community groups, and support providers on the role of the state in the turnaround effort, on the political and substantive effects of state-initiated turnarounds, and on implementation challenges; (3) an analysis of eight recent evaluation studies of state-initiated turnarounds as well as literature on the conditions and factors related to successful turnarounds; and (4) "deep dives in 11 cases of state-initiated turnaround in eight states."[11]

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

As noted above, the report relies heavily on eight extant evaluations of the effectiveness of state-initiated turnarounds augmented by references to other research. Unfortunately, the report does not specify what makes the eight evaluations included in this analysis rigorous (or more rigorous) than the studies that were excluded. In fact, the report reveals little about the specific interventions studied, or the data and methods employed to evaluate them. According to the author, the eight studies do not provide explanations for the results they document; consequently, they provide little insight into how different types of state-initiated interventions operate or the reasons their effects vary across settings and studies.

Recognizing that research on state-initiated turnarounds is thin, the report does little to compensate for that limitation. State-initiated turnarounds incorporate a variety of mechanisms (e.g., charter schools and private management firms, school reconstitution, instructional coaches and technical assistance) to engender school improvement. The growing body of research on the efficacy of these approaches could be instructive as states try to figure out how they might intervene and what governance, management, human capital or instructional program changes they could impose on school districts and individual schools. Yet these streams of relevant research are not included in the analysis of turnaround options and their likely effects.[12] As a result, the basis for gauging the potential effectiveness of state-initiated turnarounds is more fragile than it would be if the full range of relevant literature had been considered.

The report does cite references that address some of the conditions that may shape the impact of state-initiated turnarounds. However, the criteria for selecting these references are not specified; moreover, most references included in the report are not peer-reviewed

journal articles.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

While the report draws on four sources of evidence, the methods used to secure information from these sources are not well documented. For example, the report does not specify (1) how relevant state laws and regulations were identified and analyzed, (2) the criteria for selecting the interview pool (i.e., the 15 stakeholders) or the procedures used to collect and analyze the interview data, (3) the basis for determining the rigor of the effectiveness studies or the methods these studies used to determine policy effects, or (4) the criteria for selecting the 11 cases or the methods used to compile the case summaries found in Appendix B. The report notes that the cases are "a non-random sample of prominent examples of state-initiated turnarounds" and that researchers "reviewed original research on the turnaround, interviewed participants and observers, and consulted media accounts."[13] The report also notes that researchers "assessed how the state intervened, what impacts it had on policies and practice and the political ramifications of the intervention."[14] But the absence of information on the original research reviewed, the interview pool and the methods used to gauge the impact of state-initiated interventions on district and school policies and practices makes it hard to determine whether the cases have a defensible foundation. The general summaries of the cases, noted in Appendix B, suggest that the researchers did not secure information on key facets of the cases. The summaries tend to describe state action and political responses to it rather than provide systematic assessments of how state-initiated turnarounds may have influenced local school policies and practices.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

As described above, the report presents three sets of findings and conclusions: (1) a conceptual framework and profile of state-initiated turnaround strategies, (2) evidence on the effectiveness of turnaround initiatives, and (3) elements of a successful turnaround strategy. Our review discusses each of these in turn.

Conceptual Framework and Policy Profile

A conceptual framework for state-initiated turnaround policies is a potentially useful contribution, given the evolving policy landscape around these sorts of strategies for school reform. However, the typology offered in this report is underdeveloped. For example, the dimension of the typology that identifies the "level of state authority"[15] is not a useful category because, in reality, states have the ultimate authority to enact education policies and to create or disband local districts as they deem appropriate.[16] A category that describes the

role of the state in exercising its authority would be more instructive. Moreover, a major missing piece is the identification of the specific mechanisms that states use as they exercise their authority. More specifically, the framework does not consider whether and how states adopting these various turnaround policies adjust the management, curriculum, personnel, and teacher professional development practices of districts and schools. That omission is problematic because these adjustments embedded in the state turnaround strategies are, arguably, the critical levers of change.

In addition, the turnaround policy categories identified in the typology are not consistently used throughout the report. The author specifies five categories, but the examination of state laws and regulations presented in Appendix A and depicted on the map in Figure 1 include only two of those categories: school takeover and district takeover. It is not clear why the other three strategies are not included in these profiles, but the omission of them in the state policy profile translates into an incomplete picture of the policy landscape. Likewise, the analysis of evaluations that have estimated the effectiveness of state-initiated turnaround efforts include only four of the five turnaround categories. While the author clearly recognizes that no studies of the effects of mayoral control met the selection criteria, the exclusion of one strategy is a serious weakness. Given these limitations, the conceptual framework and the profile of state policies provide, at best, an incomplete picture of state-initiated turnaround.

Evidence on Effectiveness

As noted above, the report analyzes the effectiveness of alternative approaches to state-initiated turnarounds using eight studies of policies in eight different states. Since the standards for determining rigorous methodologies are not specified, it is difficult to assess the credibility of the analysis offered in this report. In addition, the conclusion that state-initiated turnaround policies "can effectively improve student achievement" rests on a standard of statistical significance in a single case.[17] While more than half of the estimates in the evaluation studies presented were not statistically significant, the conclusion presented in this report suggests a more positive picture. The positive results in the eight evaluations could be the product of other state and district policies and resources. Without more information on the policies, contexts, and evaluation studies, it is impossible to assess the validity of the conclusion.

Elements of a Successful Strategy

The report concludes with a "recipe for success" for state-initiated turnarounds.[18] Given the current literature base on school reform, the ingredients identified in this report could have been identified without any study. The four factors – the will to initiate change, sufficient authority to ensure the effective implementation of the turnaround strategy, the state and local capacity to implement the intervention, and the requisite political support required to sustain it over time – are a recapitulation of conventional wisdom and empirical findings on

the viability and effectiveness of reforms.[19] That said, these factors could have been interesting categories around which to array the 11 cases in the report. In other words, information on how those conditions played out in the 11 cases of state-initiated turnaround summarized in the report would have provided some interesting data to nuance these constructs. Based on the evidence presented in the report, the cases are not "deep dives,"[20] but rather, superficial thumbnail sketches that provide little evidence on the nature of the design and implementation of the policies, let alone the conditions that might be associated with effectiveness.

The analysis of "assets and liabilities"[21] is also problematic, given the imprecise conceptualization of what appears to be a distinction between factors directly affected by the turnaround strategy and those that are driven by contextual conditions. While this distinction may be instructive, the terminology of assets and liabilities does not seem accurate or appropriate. This section concludes that turnaround strategies work better together, but the basis for that claim is not clear. In fact, the evidence presented in the report suggests that some states already use multiple strategies. However, the report provides no analysis of those cases to ascertain the benefits of combining multiple turnaround interventions.

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

The report does not deliver on its ultimate stated purpose "to help states ensure their support is more targeted, better received, and ultimately, more effective."[22] At best, it provides a broad-brush profile of the various forms of state-initiated turnarounds. The analysis falls short conceptually and empirically. The conceptual framework does not address the full range of dimensions that state education policymakers need to consider in order to assess their options. Empirically, the basis for rendering conclusions is too fragile to be helpful: the state profiles include only a subset of available interventions; the analysis of the effectiveness of turnaround strategies is too thin to be credible; the recipe for success is too general to be useful.

Notes and References

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8 The text and the table in the report disagree on the effect sizes reported. The text indicates that "All four of the approaches evaluated were found effective in at least one context, with significant effects ranging from 0.13 to 0.24 standard deviation units" (p. 15). The table, however, shows significant effects ranging from about 0.05 to 0.24 of a standard deviation unit.

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12 See for example, the studies identified in Appendix C but excluded from this analysis as well as research on the effectiveness of various mechanisms states might deploy. See also, Finigan, K. & O'Day, J. (2003). *External support to schools on probation: Getting a leg up?* Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Center for Policy Research on Education;

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