



OVERVIEW OF DIFFERENT TURNAROUND PHILOSOPHIES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR DISTRICT APPROACHES

Moderator: *Karen Hanley Miles – President and Executive Director, Education Resource Strategies*

Panelists:

- *Alyssa Whitehead-Bust – Chief of Innovation and Reform, Denver Public Schools (DPS)*
- *Allen Smith – Executive Director, Denver Summit Schools Network, Denver Public Schools (DPS)*
- *Deborah McGriff – Partner, NewSchools Venture Fund (NSVF)*
- *Noemi Donoso – Chief Education Officer, Chicago Public Schools (CPS)*
- *Ann Clark – Chief Academic Officer, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS)*

Denver Public Schools (DPS) is taking a portfolio approach to turnaround

DPS (in its second year of turnaround) takes a data-based approach to deciding what action to take with persistently low performing schools and manages them as a portfolio where schools have different types of management and flexibility. Explained Alyssa Whitehead-Bust of DPS, “We are systematically looking at schools and deciding whether to turnaround, replace, phase out, or close down. Next, we determine which schools should be district-run, innovation - a district-run school with much more flexibility in programming and staffing - or charter. This approach provides a hybrid of flexibilities that will provide us new models for improving.”

Whitehead-Bust explained the structure DPS is using to support its district-run turnaround schools that are part of the Denver Summit School Network - 10 schools that have been low-performing for over 30 years. She said, “We

needed to create a system in which schools were able to meet and leaders were able to come together.” Allen Smith, ED of the Denver Summit School Network, explained that these schools have a mix of new teachers and master teachers and also have extended day and year. Results are positive so far; of the eight schools in year two of turnaround, all but one moved out of red –our lowest category of performance-and are on the cusp of meeting/exceeding expectations.

In regards to the district’s turnaround approach, the two panelists from DPS noted a couple of lessons learned and areas of struggle: (1) A need for community engagement, which wasn’t working well initially. (2) Trying to determine “What is good enough and in what amount of time?” (3) Making it sustainable: “When a certain personality or central personnel move on, the system doesn’t continue.” They also shared things that seem to be working: (1) “Many people in DPS have a role in turnaround, which ensures a comprehensive strategy and a great thought partnership.” (2) Professional learning communities and collaborative environment.

NewSchools Venture Fund (NSVF) invests in high-performing turnaround organizations

Deborah McGriff of NSVF explained that the organization initially supported CMOs and when that was successful, they began to invest in turnaround organizations such as AUSL, Green Dot, Unlocking Potential and many more.

In regards to results, NSVF’s standard for success for turnaround schools is that they perform at the same level as the state average, and thus close the achievement gap. NSVF looks at the results of

each organization in which they invest. McGriff cited the results of Mastery Charter Schools and AUSL and said that student achievement is higher with each year that those organizations operate any given school.

McGriff reviewed NSVF's major lesson learned: "We want to invest in a variety of entrepreneurs doing different designs." And she also detailed the hurdles to success: inefficiencies within the district partner, an inadequate school leader pipeline, Federal funds not flowing directly to operators, an unsettled policy environment, and limited pre-turnaround startup funding.

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is examining low-performing schools to determine best solution for each

Summary not yet available.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) focusing on strong leaders and teachers

Ann Clark of CMS outlined the district's turnaround strategy, called Strategic Staffing: "We invited the very best principals in the district to run low-performing schools, allowed them to bring a team with them, gave them freedom and flexibility, and allowed them to remove teachers. We give teachers a \$20K bonus across three years and principals a 10% pay bump. We ask for a three-year commitment." Clark explained that it has become an honor to be a Strategic Staffing principal, because CMS uses a "pull/invite" strategy: "We've only had one principal turn down the opportunity (out of 25 schools)." Clark shared the results from Cohort 1, which just finished three full years of Strategic Staffing; the differences in percent proficient before/after the strategy were significant.

The strategy has evolved over time; Strategic Staffing is currently in year four, and looks different now than it did in year one. As Clark

said, "It started out as a more prescriptive strategy—for example, Cohort 1 had a defined team and didn't go into turnaround schools until July 1, but Cohort 2 had more flexibility with team structure and a March 1 start date. Now [year 4], there is a lot of variation in how principals are approaching the work; we have as many different approaches as we do principals in the job. Clark said that one of the major lessons learned along the way is to spend a lot of time on the exit plan for principals leaving high-performing schools to go to Strategic Staffing schools, so that school communities understand the need for the change.

Clark pointed out that this is not a standalone approach, but is instead a reflection of an overall district approach to get an effective principal in each school and an effective teacher in every classroom. Clark stated, "We are really close on the principal front. My goal is to end turnaround, because we will no longer need it."

Each panelist listed their biggest challenges in doing turnaround work

Alyssa Whitehead-Bust of DPS:

- "We need to better balance flexibilities and district mandates. We have a level of incongruity in the system itself that we need to fix."
- "We need to more strategically use principals and teachers and have a better pipeline in place."
- "How aggressive is enough? We're seeing modest progress, but is that enough?"

Deborah McGriff of NSVF:

- "Many of people we work with get mixed results depending on who is looking at numbers. We don't have a clear and standard set of indicators or benchmarks for measuring what successful turnaround means"

- “We need to have exit strategies for turnaround partners, because there are turnaround operators who don’t want to do that forever; they want to build capacity but not manage schools forever.”
- “When we close schools, we can’t be shuttling kids into another low-performing school that will be closed in 15 years.”

Ann Clark of CMS:

- “We didn’t do a good job in thinking about what would happen after three years of Strategic Staffing; we didn’t think about what happens to compensation, etc.”
- “We learned that status matters. We’re going into year four with no cost-of-living increase. We learned that it is less about the compensation and more about a moral obligation; it is about lifting up our best people and giving them the highest/greatest challenge.”