



#1 in the Ed Direction School Turnaround Model Series

# SUCCESS IN SCHOOL TURNAROUND

In today's world, high school graduates are faced with an economic reality that requires higher level skills in reading, writing, computing, problem solving, and communicating than were required of previous generations. The economic reality is that post-secondary education is a requirement for most graduates to earn a living wage. Schools are in need of transformation to create the conditions necessary for higher student achievement.

To assist schools in making the shift of higher rigor for all students, many have attempted comprehensive school improvement efforts utilizing state and federal funds. Unfortunately, over \$60 billion dollars have been spent over the last 20 years with no lasting improvements in teaching and learning. Because changes in the day-to-day work of leaders and teachers were not adequate, schools have not transformed and students are not benefiting.

Perhaps ironically, there is more education research being done than ever before. We know what works and what doesn't work in a much clearer and precise way. Yet all this new knowledge has not translated into better school systems for the new generation of students. Why? The simple answer is that while the field of education research has produced a list of teaching and leadership strategies that work, there remains a dearth of implementation models that can produce strong, consistent, and scalable application of those strategies.

In the words of the Italian proverb, "tra il dire e il fare c'è di mezzo il mare" (between the saying and the doing is half the ocean). The knowledge of evidence-based teaching practices can't change a career teacher's daily practices by itself. Attending a conference on high-leverage leadership strategies doesn't create effective principals overnight.

The challenge in school turnaround is the same challenge that we all have with becoming the

people we long to become: change is hard. To dramatically improve student learning, the professionals that work in schools must make commensurately dramatic changes in their daily practices. Acknowledging this change challenge, the Ed Direction School Turnaround Model adds implementation science to the research on teaching and leadership to deliver uniquely effective school turnaround results.

The Ed Direction School Turnaround Model will be the topic of a full series of white papers, including this summary paper and additional papers on evidence-based teaching, school leadership practices, implementation science, coaching, and the role of parents in K-12 education. This series will lay out the comprehensive Ed Direction School Turnaround Model.

In this paper, we will briefly outline the three key steps of Ed Direction's turnaround model: Plan—Narrow the Focus, Implement—Go Slow to Go Fast, and Grow—Foster a Growth Mindset.



## Plan: Narrow the Focus

This first step of Ed Direction's School Turnaround Model involves conducting an all-inclusive needs assessment and co-developing a schoolwide turnaround plan.

### Needs Assessment / Appraisal

During our comprehensive on-site needs assessment, we appraise the current state, analyze root causes, and explore school and district priorities. This in-depth appraisal helps us identify the greatest strengths of the teams, the areas where we can align priorities, and the necessary focus for systemic improvement.

To understand multiple perspectives and ensure co-ownership of the school's turnaround efforts, we connect with everyone—the school leaders to

the lunch staff. In addition, we study a variety of relevant data sources, including

- Student achievement and well-being information
- Artifacts of student work, such as writing samples
- Evidence of implementation levels, such as PLC minutes
- Perceptual data, including surveys, interviews, and focus groups
- Student engagement data collected during classroom observations

## TURNAROUND PLANNING PROCESS

Following the appraisal, we collaborate with our clients to develop a schoolwide turnaround plan, which acts as a singular roadmap for meeting all district and/or state planning requirements. While each plan is thoroughly personalized for the school or district, cornerstones of every plan include leveraging research, developing the effectiveness of school leaders, ensuring teacher buy-in, and monitoring progress at 30-, 60-, and 90-day intervals.

### Details of the Plan

Ed Direction's school turnaround model explores key organizational, leadership, and competency drivers, so the resulting plan addresses every potential root cause and cross-functional issue. Specifically, these include the following.

#### Alignment of Standards and Curriculum

- Definitions of mastery for standards and objectives
- Curriculum articulation maps and pacing guides
- PLC procedures and processes to ensure a coherent a viable curriculum for all students

#### Assessment Practices and Achievement Results

- Classroom-level data
- Curriculum-based assessments
- Benchmarks
- Screeners, for example DIBELS and SRI
- State tests
- Efforts to use data to inform instruction

#### Staff

- Professional learning (talent development)
- Selection (hiring and retention practices)
- Coaching, including real-time feedback and job-embedded support

#### Classroom Instruction and Student Engagement

- Evidence-based instructional strategies
- Student work samples
- Student engagement
- Student supports for positive behavior and social well-being

#### Culture and Collaborative Relationships

- Parent engagement
- Strength of data culture and collaboration
- Prevalence of growth mindset among students and adults
- Student support services such as special education, RtI, PBIS, language acquisition, etc.

#### Leadership

- Evidence-based leadership practices
- Teacher leadership and collaboration processes
- Systems-level implementation



## Implement: Go Slow to Go Fast

Once we have narrowed the focus to the most important levers for improvement, Step 2 launches the whole school into action. Implementing new practices with fidelity and depth requires

substantial change. Research shows that most schools' implementation processes fall short of making a true impact on student learning. For instance, schools often move from one initiative to the next before achieving a sufficient depth of systemic improvement, thereby creating initiative fatigue and a "this, too, shall pass" mentality. At Ed Direction, we appreciate that implementing meaningful change is an intense, lengthy endeavor, and we stay thoroughly engaged throughout this effort to support leaders, teachers, and students as they implement new ways of work.

To address the typical challenges that schools face in implementation, Ed Direction's turnaround model focuses on tightening up any loose coupling among personnel, teams, and processes. We have developed three methods for boosting success rates with implementation: implementing fewer, higher-leverage strategies successively in small slices, working in teams that are data driven and committed to action, and aligning district and school practices to create coherence.

### Implementing Fewer, Higher-Leverage Strategies

While every turnaround plan is personalized, we have found that successful plans consistently utilize strong, healthy, and intentional Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Additionally, successful plans enable administrators and established School Turnaround Teams (STTs) to provide leadership and support to PLCs. These teams collaboratively select one evidence-based instructional strategy to implement at a time. The whole school learns and refines the implementation of the strategy together, creating a strong culture of adult learning that encourages practice and feedback to develop fluency for leaders and teachers in the application of research-based practices.

### Implementation Teams

After the school has selected a small number of high-impact strategies, we shift attention to reestablishing key teams and helping them build norms (e.g. the effective use of meeting agendas) that promote co-ownership and efficiency. These norms then lead to more productive implementation and positive impact on student outcomes.

In most cases, we don't create new teams. We simply channel the efforts of existing teams toward the newly aligned school goals and priorities.

### Alignment

To ensure that all systems are working in harmony, we work to align the leadership and support systems at the district / central office with the turnaround team's efforts. In fact, at Ed Direction, we co-authored two books detailing improvement processes that are specifically designed to align support systems. From these books—*Collaborative School Improvement* and *Data Wise*—and from our extensive experience consulting school systems, we have found that the district role is essential to enabling deep and fluent implementation in school turnaround. Our model offers significant support to districts and charter leaders so that the work of school turnaround will persist after Ed Direction has completed the initial phases of the turnaround process.

### Deep Implementation

It is one thing to kick start a few high-leverage initiatives and it is another to implement them deeply. Our turnaround model helps schools avoid the well-intentioned but damaging inclination to take on too much. Instead of asking teachers to do so many new things that they are unable to do any of them well, we rigorously focus on just a few key changes at a time.

Research suggests that the same initiative implemented profoundly at one school can have up to twelve times the impact on student learning as it can at another school where implementation is more surface level. The components of our model—narrow focus, tight implementation teams, school/district alignment, and deep implementation—produce tangible results.



## **Grow: Foster a growth mindset to move the dial**

Continuous growth is a requirement for success in today's economy. For teachers and leaders, ongoing development of expertise is essential to meeting student needs through sustainable school improvement. We categorize this growth phase—the final step of Ed Direction's turnaround model—into three main components: measuring performance and implementation, developing teaching skills, and developing leadership skills.

### **Measuring Performance and Implementation**

We guide schools to gather data that measures both student achievement and teacher implementation of effective practices. At least monthly, the School Turnaround Team compares student learning to teacher practices in order to clarify the impact that the turnaround plan is having. To effectively monitor progress, these data must be analyzed in tandem. In our experience, schools that only measure student achievement are unable to pinpoint which components of the turnaround plan are (and are not) causing observed changes in student achievement.

In the monthly data-driven status review, teachers and leaders create 30-day plans using current data, thereby continually fine-tuning the overall plan. In this phase of school turnaround, we at Ed Direction

provide an outside lens to improve objectivity and reduce bias.

### **Developing Teaching and Leadership Skills**

We target teacher and principal growth with the highest-leverage and most impactful practices. For teachers, we leverage meta-analysis research (e.g. Hattie and Marzano) on evidence-based instructional strategies to prioritize those that have “High Impact” effect sizes. For principals and other administrators, we focus on leadership practices that are impactful to student achievement and within what Robinson calls the “zone of desired effects.” Not surprisingly, we focus principal attention on leading teacher learning and development because principals who focus on this leadership function produce more than double the impact on student learning as typical principals.

Effective school turnaround efforts achieve maximum impact via regular professional development for the whole school, for small groups, and for individuals. We have seen the greatest improvement when schools commit to a minimum of 80 professional development (PD) hours, preferably job-embedded, for each teacher and administrator. Research indicates that 80 is the minimum number of PD hours required for a teacher to fully implement an evidence-based teaching practice and a principal to fully implement an evidence-based leadership practice.

### **Coaching and Feedback**

In addition to professional development, we know that changing daily practices requires regular coaching in the classroom and PLC meetings for teachers, and in a variety of settings for principals. In fact, new evidence-based practices are more than twice as likely to be implemented with fidelity when professional development is strategically designed for teachers and principals to practice

targeted skills in safe environments (e.g. role plays and case studies) and followed up with teachers and principals receiving coaching on their application of the new practices. Our model for effective professional development and coaching draws upon the growing body of research on adult learning (e.g. Joyce and Showers). Ed Direction's turnaround model relies on extensive on-the-ground coaching and feedback for teachers and administrators.

## Example Scope and Sample Results

Below is a summary of our recommended scope for achieving effective school turnaround. Because each situation varies, Ed Direction will personalize the scope as needed.

- Start with a comprehensive appraisal of curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices; current state of collaboration within the school and between the school and district; leadership practices (including those of administrators and teacher leaders); and the overall climate and level of inclusivity.
- Develop a roadmap for improvement that includes an emphasis on short-run markers of success (e.g. 30-, 60-, and 90-day plans)
- Provide weekly, on-site coaching for every teacher
- Engage in coaching and thought partnerships with leaders
- Conduct on-site, job-embedded professional learning, which includes at least 80 hours per educator per year and is as job-embedded as possible
- Deliver whole-faculty, small-group (PLC), and individual-level development, communicating clear criteria for success
- Using existing or newly created PLCs, provide structure and support for transparent practices that increase actionable feedback to teachers and leaders. This could include

lesson study, learning walkthroughs, peer coaching, video analysis, and other effective collaborative learning techniques for adult learning

We have helped many schools and districts make lasting changes via our turnaround model, leveraging the best research in teaching and leadership coupled with implementation science. The following short case studies show successful implementation of our school turnaround model in various types of settings.

### Large Urban District

A large urban school district reached out to Ed Direction initially for basic professional development regarding using data to make informed decisions. This opportunity opened the door for Ed Direction to rewrite the school improvement process within the district, and provide direct coaching to leaders, school improvement teams, and PLC leaders. For three straight years, the senior leadership team in the district worked hand in hand with the Ed Direction team to transform more than 50 schools.

Over this time period, the performance of nearly all the district's schools improved dramatically. Almost half of the schools now have A grades—a 300% increase. Where 15 schools used to have “D” or “F” grades, only six remained in that range. In fact, the overall turnaround was so impressive that district leaders received the Data Quality Campaign's top national award for their use of data to improve student achievement.

### Large Suburban High School

The Ed Direction team met a visionary high school principal at a national education conference where we presented our “Transparent Teacher” model in several breakout sessions. The principal asked our team to begin a multi-year turnaround process

with the teachers and administrators of his 4,000-student high school.

For two years, the Ed Direction team worked closely with department chairs, PLC leaders, and administrators to turn the culture of the school from status quo into a zone for improvement. Teachers began implementing common formative assessments, planning lessons together, and observing and assisting one another. They literally opened their classrooms to each other and become transparent with their teaching.

The results were staggering. Not only did the school go from an “F” grade to a “C” grade, but 40% more freshmen and sophomores got on track for graduation compared with the year before.

### Small Rural District

The school board president of a small rural district reached out to Ed Direction on a referral from a board member in a neighboring district. The school district had recently set several ambitious five-year goals. The board and senior district leadership were confident that these were the right goals for the children, but were unsure how to actually achieve them.

Ed Direction helped the district define a two-year action plan to get each school on track for the full set of ambitious goals. Ed Direction provided professional development, direct leadership coaching, site visits and appraisals, ongoing project management, and progress monitoring. Where it previously received “C” grades from the state, the district achieved one of only nine “A” grades after two years with Ed Direction.

What’s more, each school in the district was given an “on track” rating by the school board—in other words, every school showed performance growth that supported achieving the ambitious goals.

### Large Urban Middle School

One of our client districts asked us to work specifically with a struggling inner-city school. That school was suffering from declining math proficiency that was exacerbated by declining enrollment. In fact, the school was at risk of being shut down because the district simply couldn’t justify running the building with the falling enrollment numbers.

Of the many initiatives that Ed Direction implemented at this school, we are most proud of the structured math and reading labs designed to be held daily for roughly 20% of the school’s students without requiring additional funds. Along with the implementation of several evidence-based instructional strategies school-wide, the labs were a huge hit with students and parents—they led to 27% improvement in math proficiency over a three-year period. Not surprisingly, the inbound student choice permits increased by 31% over the same time period.

### Large Suburban District

The school board of a large suburban district in financial and organizational disarray asked the Ed Direction team to help reorganize and re-align the district’s vision with its goals, priorities, and initiatives.

Prioritizing evidence-based, high-yield instructional practices, the Ed Direction team developed and implemented a new district-wide instructional framework. We provided job-embedded professional development and coaching and established new data protocols to monitor progress. Over six years with Ed Direction, the district experienced student achievement gains.

At the beginning of the partnership, the district’s 45+ schools saw student achievement at or below state averages. However, after three years of working with Ed Direction, the district was named

to the College Board's annual AP honor roll for substantially increasing both participation and pass rates in AP classes. In the sixth year of Ed Direction's involvement, 76% of the schools received an "A" or "B" grade, and no schools received an "F" grade. The district sustained double-digit growth in proficiency in all tested grades and subjects.

### Small Rural Elementary School

The superintendent of a rural school district engaged Ed Direction to help him turn around a state-defined "failing" elementary school. The students were disengaged and put in minimal effort. Staff mindset had become stagnant—teachers wondered how to shift decades of poor performance and lack of interest from parents and students.

Ed Direction applied its turnaround model in full force over a three-year period. The staff, parents, and students were re-energized by the quick wins that Ed Direction helped them achieve. Then, the work was sustained via strong parental engagement programs, classroom-level coaching, and small-group, job-embedded professional development. At the conclusion of the three-year period, the school's grade had risen to "A," and disciplinary referrals had decreased by 50%. Reflecting on their success, the staff was thrilled to see how much tangible growth they had achieved.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the significant strides that have been made in education research over the last several years, success at improving student learning at scale has remained elusive to most school systems. By leveraging implementation science in addition to the research in teaching and leadership, Ed Direction has created a school turnaround model that has helped hundreds of schools improve student learning.

## The Ed Direction School Turnaround Model series

1. [The School Turnaround Success Model](#) (this paper)
2. Teaching Optimization
3. [Leadership in School Turnaround](#)
4. [Collaborative Coaching](#)
5. [Parent Engagement in Student Success](#)
6. [Implementation Science](#)

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## About the Authors

**Dr. Trent Kaufman** is a co-founder of Cicero Group and founder of Ed Direction, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Cicero Group. Dr. Kaufman has a doctorate in Education Policy, Leadership, and Instructional Practice from Harvard. He has written two books (Harvard Education Press, Wiley Jossey-Bass) that are used by thousands of educators worldwide to better leverage data in K-12 leadership and assessment.

**Dr. Hollie Petterson** has over 22 years of experience in public education. She has developed and implemented comprehensive curriculum and other instructional programs. She is a frequent author of articles on student achievement, educational improvement, and social impact. Dr. Petterson's doctoral dissertation focus was on systematic change in Utah schools. She holds

master's degrees in Educational Leadership and Policy and Special Education.

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Ed Direction ([www.eddirection.com](http://www.eddirection.com)) is a premier provider of school turnaround services. By partnering and collaborating with existing school and district staff, we maximize student achievement by providing personalized support with evidence-based practices to increase student success.

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