



**REL** / research digest  
WEST

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## How “Turnaround” Schools Are Breaking the Cycle of Chronic Failure

“Turnaround” schools challenge the notion that raising student achievement in our lowest performing public schools requires several years of gradual, step-by-step reform. In a recent analysis of 10 case studies involving 35 schools, a national panel of experts identified four key strategies associated with dramatic improvement in student performance: (1) Signal the need for dramatic change with strong leadership; (2) Maintain a consistent focus on improving instruction; (3) Make visible improvements early in the school turnaround process (“quick wins”); and (4) Build a committed staff.

Schools profiled in the turnaround case studies — 6 high schools, 8 middle schools, and 21 elementary schools — were defined by two criteria: They began improvement efforts after longstanding low performance; and they realized substantial gains in student achievement in three years or fewer.

To get the word out about these four evidence-based strategies for turning around low-performing schools, REL West partnered with the Southwest and California Comprehensive Centers to convene six regional “Bridge Events” to connect research, practice, and policymaking, in California, Arizona, Nevada, and Utah between March and September of this year. More than 400 invited participants — state, district, and school staff, turnaround principals and coaches, and researchers — exchanged ideas and experiences during breakout sessions on the four turnaround strategies. The event featured keynote speaker Rebecca Herman of the American Institutes for Research, chair of the panel that authored the study report, *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools*, a practice guide published by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES).

Lessons from turnaround schools are timely. National statistics on school performance reveal an urgent need for innovative approaches to school improvement. Only 70 percent of the nation’s approximately 99,000 schools made adequate yearly progress (AYP) in reading and mathematics achievement in the 2006–07 school year, as required by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. That year, more than 10,000 schools were designated as “in need of improvement,” after missing AYP achievement targets for two consecutive years, and another 2,300 were “in need of improvement *restructuring*” as a result of not meeting targets for six years. U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan has made the *Race to the Top* initiative, aimed at finding effective ways to improve the nation’s 5,000 worst performing schools, a top priority.

Turnaround strategies are based in the literature on school improvement and business turnaround. Unlike school *improvement*, however, school *turnaround* is distinguished by rapid change facilitated by identifying and removing obstacles to reform. Study authors note

*REL West Research Digest* keeps educators and others abreast of the research carried out by the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) West at WestEd. In addition to providing abstracts of selected REL West research reports, this twice-yearly digest may include descriptions of upcoming REL West work, services, and events, and, as relevant to the Western region, of publications developed by other researchers.

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that the four recommended turnaround strategies must be combined, and that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to remedying chronically under-performing schools. For example, to achieve the “quick wins” that build enthusiasm and momentum for change, some case study principals had school grounds cleaned or buildings painted to boost morale. At one middle school, the principal took swift action on rampant discipline problems by making “sweeping changes” to the school schedule. The result was just 205 disciplinary referrals among the school’s 500 students during fall semester, down from 1,181 the previous fall semester.

Other common turnaround approaches taken by principals included: Taking a very hands-on and data-based approach to improving instruction; insisting that staff hold students

to high expectations; recruiting teacher leaders to help improve curriculum and instructional practices; and mobilizing families and the community to support the school. Illustrations of approaches at different schools are available on the Doing What Works website, a free U.S. Department of Education resource profiled at the events and popular with participants as a way to follow up back home.

A copy of the full report, [Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools](#), is available on the What Works Clearinghouse website.

For examples of recommended practices in action, go to the [Doing What Works](#) website.

Read complete proceedings of [REL West Bridge Events](#) on Turnaround Schools on the REL West website.

## Selected Fast-Response and Technical Assistance Project Reports

*In carrying out fast-response projects intended to inform quick action and policy decisions, and in providing technical assistance on regional evaluation and research activities, REL West researchers analyze or otherwise utilize existing data, studies, and research reviews. Results undergo external peer review to ensure that they meet the Institute of Education Sciences standards for scientifically valid research. The reports described below have been published since the previous issue of the Research Digest, January 2009. Published REL West reports are available at the [REL West website](#); reports from all 10 RELs are available at the [national REL website](#).*

### The status of California’s independent study high schools

This study finds that in 2006–07, 4 percent of California’s nearly 2 million high school students were enrolled in independent study, and most of them in the state’s 231 independent study high schools. Study data indicate that these schools are less likely than other high schools to be located in urban areas, or to have opened before 2001–02. They are more likely to be charter schools, or to offer instruction below the ninth grade level. [See full report.](#)

### State-level implementation of Response to Intervention (RtI): A summary for the western states

All nine states in this study described using RtI both as an alternative to the discrepancy model for identifying students for special education, and as an overarching conceptual framework for improving the achievement of all students. Respondents emphasized the importance of general education staff buy-in to RtI (9 states); evaluating RtI implementation and outcomes (9 states); and ensuring fidelity of RtI implementation (6 of 9 states). [See full report.](#)

### Multi-state review of professional teaching standards

While each of the six states reviewed in this study took a distinct approach to designing its teaching standards, there were also common points of emphasis. Four of the six states addressed instruction for English language learner students through: recognition or support of diversity, differentiation of instruction, and knowledge of related theory and strategies. A majority of the states also addressed teachers’ knowledge and understanding of state learning standards, as part of a standard on accountability and student learning. [See full report.](#)

### Achievement gap patterns of grade 8 American Indian and Alaska Native students in reading and math

From [REL Northwest](#) (with support from REL West and six other RELs). Focusing on student proficiency in reading and math from 2003–04 to 2006–07, this report compares gaps in performance on state achievement tests between grade 8 American Indian and Alaska Native students and all other grade 8 students in 26 states serving large populations of American Indian and Alaska Native students. [See full report.](#)

**UPCOMING FAST-RESPONSE REPORTS (working titles)**

**Trends in demand for school-site administrators: A county and regional perspective**

California lacks basic descriptive statistics about its future need for school administrators. In addition, the state has no formal system for developing school principals. This study will project the supply of school-site administrators based on retirement rates; project demand for these administrators based on enrollment; and provide county- and regional-level data on whether supply will meet demand.

**Descriptive analysis of the distribution of K–12 education resources in western rural school districts**

This descriptive and comparative study will examine patterns of spending, staffing, and resources available to rural school districts from 2000–06, compared to their urban/suburban counterparts, in Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah. The study will examine factors that differentiate rural and suburban/urban communities, such as per pupil funding sources, factors that drive expenditures, and staff-pupil ratios.

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Topics include District Improvement, Diverse Learners, Assessment and Accountability, Technology in Education, and Early Childhood.

For information on upcoming webinars or to access the webinar archive, go to the WestEd [SchoolsMovingUp](http://SchoolsMovingUp) website.

**English learner mobility in Arizona**

Arizona has the fourth highest English learner (EL) population in the country, a population often reported to be highly mobile. Given prior literature suggesting a relationship between mobility and negative academic outcomes, study findings are intended to help policy-makers to better plan continuity of services for these students. Using a dataset that longitudinally tracks K–12 students throughout the state of Arizona, this study will report on how often EL students switch schools, and the characteristics of the schools they leave and enter.

**Where do English learners go to school? Student distribution by language proficiency in Arizona**

English learner (EL) students are a large and growing percentage of the school population in Arizona. This study examines the distribution of EL students in Arizona and how the number and percentage of EL students vary by school level, type, and ..... free or reduced-price lunch status. It will inform ongoing discussion in Arizona regarding how best to support EL student achievement.

**Visit the new REL West website featuring:**

- Research on improving student outcomes
- Free reports on state issues
- Events that connect research, policy, and practice

**Update on Multi-Year Evaluations**

Final reports on two of the six randomized controlled trials (RCTs) conducted by REL West — *High School Instruction in Problem-Based Economics* and *Assessment Accommodations for English Language Learners* — are undergoing final review and will be published in 2010. Data collection and analyses are underway on the other four: *Understanding Science Professional Development and the Science Achievement of English Learners*; the *Quality Teaching for English Learners (QTEL)* program; the *Program for Infant and Toddler Care (PITC)*; and *Lessons in Character (LIC)* program. RCTs look for causal evidence of the impact of well-defined and fully developed interventions that have shown promise in preliminary studies and that address high-priority needs in the region.

For a full description of the [six multi-year studies](#), go to the REL West website.

# ASK • A • REL

**Ask A REL** is a collaborative reference desk service provided by the 10 regional educational laboratories. Functioning much like a technical reference library, it answers education-related questions by providing referrals to IES research projects, publications, and reports; references for and bibliographies of existing education research; referrals to federally funded education organizations and websites; and regionally specific educational information. To **Ask A REL**, go to the [national REL website](#) and select your state..

## Publications from Other Organizations

### **National High School Center**

*High School Course-Taking Patterns for English Language Learners: A Case Study from California.* English language learner students' chances of meeting college preparatory requirements increase with early access to appropriate high school coursework. Academic support programs are critical to this access. (April 2009) [See full report.](#)

### **REL Southeast**

*Reducing Stereotype Threat in Classrooms: A Review of Social-Psychological Intervention Studies on Improving the Achievement of Black Students.* Stereotype threat arises from a fear among members of a group of reinforcing negative stereotypes about the intellectual ability of the group. The report identifies three randomized controlled trial studies that use classroom-based strategies to reduce stereotype threat and improve the academic performance of Black students, narrowing their achievement gap with White students. (July 2009) [See full report.](#)

### **What Works Clearinghouse**

*Helping Students Navigate the Path to College: What High Schools Can Do.* Access to higher education remains a challenge for many students who face academic and informational barriers to college entry. This guide targets high schools and school districts, and focuses on effective

practices that prepare students academically for college, assist them in completing the steps to college entry, and improve their likelihood of enrolling in college. REL West Senior Research Scientist Neal Finkelstein served on this guide's panel. (September 2009) [See full report.](#)

*Using Student Achievement Data to Support Instructional Decision Making.* This guide offers five recommendations to help educators effectively use data to monitor students' academic progress and evaluate instructional practices. The guide recommends that schools set a clear vision for schoolwide data use, develop a data-driven culture, and make data part of an ongoing cycle of instructional improvement. The guide also recommends teaching students how to use their own data to set learning goals. (September 2009) [See full report.](#)

*Structuring Out-of-School Time to Improve Academic Achievement.* Out-of-school time programs can enhance academic achievement by helping students learn outside the classroom. The five recommendations in this guide are intended to help district and school administrators, out-of-school program providers, and educators design out-of-school time programs that will increase learning for students. The guide also describes the research supporting each recommendation, how to carry out each recommendation, and how to address roadblocks that might arise in implementing them. (July 2009) [See full report.](#)

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