

SCHOOL TURNAROUNDS IN COLORADO

Untangling a Web of Supports for Struggling Schools

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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.

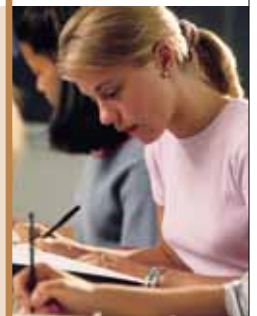
■ **Building the supply of talent to support school turnarounds.** Emerging research about turnarounds within education and from other sectors suggests that one of the most critical elements in their success is having the right leader at the helm. In most Colorado districts, the supply of turnaround 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.



BACKGROUND

Over the past few years, Colorado has focused significantly on the needs of students in struggling schools. The state has invested substantially in policy changes and systems related to standards and student assessment, and recent amendments to the state's accountability system have increased accountability and support for persistently low-achieving schools. These efforts have been bolstered by recent policy changes at the national level. The Obama administration and Education Secretary Arne Duncan have called for states and districts to turn around 5,000 of the nation's lowest-performing schools, and have designed new national policies to focus attention and resources on schools that persistently fail to offer high-quality learning opportunities to their students.

As a result of these efforts, an unprecedented amount of resources has flowed to states, districts and schools over the past several months – all designed to identify schools that persistently fail to meet standards, implement dramatic change strategies, and support local efforts to turn schools around. In Colorado, thousands of students attend schools that struggle to meet their needs year after year – including dozens of schools where proficiency rates have stagnated at 15 to 20 percent. Dramatic improvement efforts are crucial to offer significantly better opportunities for students in these schools. But recent reforms are not the first designed to turn around schools' performance; while the amount of resources available is unparalleled, the aspirations are not. Will this most recent wave of reform be more successful than those past?

This report begins with a survey of recent policies and legislative reforms at the state and national levels that have changed the direction of reform efforts in struggling schools. We then outline the process that Colorado has followed to identify the state's lowest-performing schools, approve improvement strategies, set expectations and timelines for improvement, and provide school-level supports. Finally, we draw from the emerging research about dramatic school improvement and a growing experience base nationally to offer context and future directions for Colorado's efforts to provide better opportunities for students in low-performing schools.



NATIONAL AND STATE POLICIES ON LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

The **No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act** has provided the backdrop for the nation’s response to persistently low-achieving schools since its passage in 2001. Under the law, struggling schools enter various stages of improvement if they fail to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for two years in a row. Without sufficient progress for five years, under the federal law schools are required to undergo major “restructuring” such as replacing all or most of their staff, contracting with an external manager or charter school operator, turning governance authority over to the state, or implementing other major reforms that change the governance of the school. In 2009, more than 4,500 schools across the country were in “restructuring” status under NCLB, including 52 schools across Colorado. Most of these schools both nationwide and in Colorado have chosen the “other” option, which allows them to design their own changes to bring about improvements.³

Recently, however, 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.

Recent Federal Policies to Improve Persistently Low-Achieving Schools

The federal program with the largest impact on low-performing schools in most states, including Colorado, is the School Improvement Grant (SIG) program. Distributed under section 1003(g) of NCLB, these funds are designed to support student achievement in struggling schools nationwide. Traditionally, SIG funds have been distributed to states based on a formula tied to student enrollment, and have carried with them the school improvement requirements of NCLB. Beginning in 2009, however, the federal Department of Education distributed SIG funds to states under new requirements. Key to the new approach is a targeted strategy for identifying schools most in need of assistance, a new set of improvement models that schools and districts must choose from to bring about dramatic improvements, and an unprecedented amount of funds flowing to schools to support their change efforts.

- **Identifying schools for improvement.** Under NCLB, only those schools that receive Title I dollars are required to implement federal improvement strategies. New policy initiatives enable states to direct improvement funds toward schools that serve high proportions of economically disadvantaged students, but are not receiving Title I funds (see Figure 1). In addition, NCLB requires states and districts to

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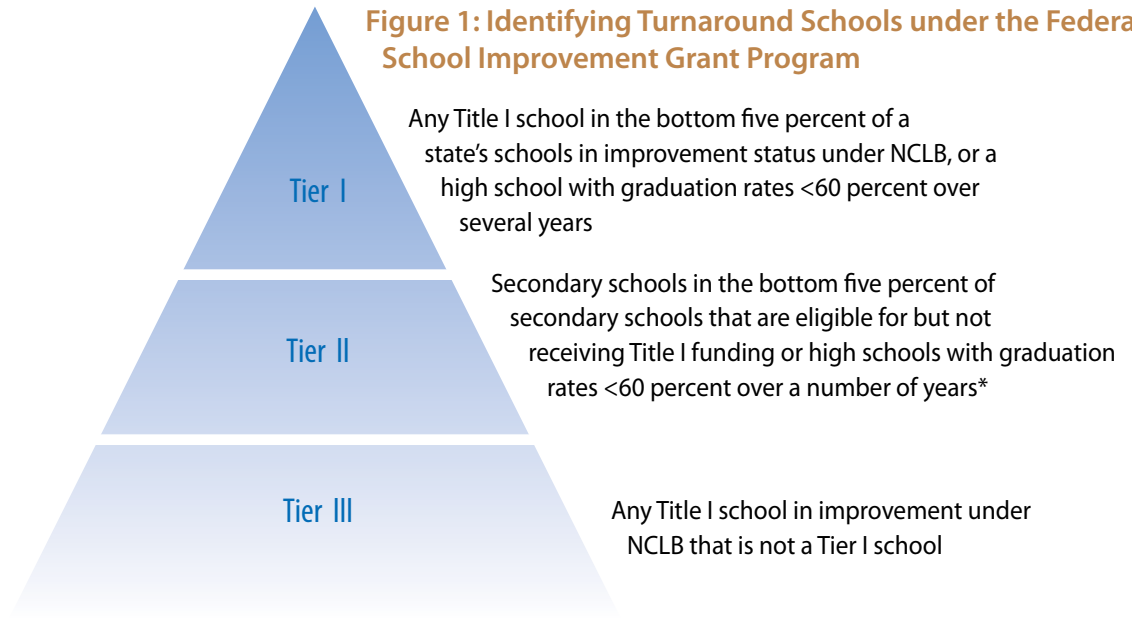


identify schools for improvement based on whether they have achieved adequate yearly progress. New federal policy initiatives specifically target schools among the bottom five percent in each state according to both student growth and achievement. Student achievement metrics examine schools' absolute performance on state assessments in reading and math. Student growth measures examine the learning gains that students make over the course of a year, relative to a specific standard or the average gains of schools in the state.

In contrast to NCLB, new federal initiatives specifically target the bottom five percent of schools in each state according to measures of student growth and achievement.



Figure 1: Identifying Turnaround Schools under the Federal School Improvement Grant Program



**Note: federal regulations allow each state to apply the definition of "secondary school" normally used under state law. In Colorado, secondary schools include those serving high school or middle school students.*

■ **Improvement strategies.** New federal policy initiatives set out four specific improvement models to turn around eligible schools' performance (see Figure 2). These models include rigorous requirements regarding the school's leadership, staff, governance, autonomy, and operations such as teacher evaluations and the length of the school day. All require replacement of the school principal, except under limited circumstances. These options also eliminate the notorious "other" option available under NCLB, though some see the "transformation" model as similarly flexible.

Figure 2. School Improvement Models under Federal School Improvement, Race to the Top and Innovation Funds

Transformation	Turnaround	Restart	Closure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Replace the principal • Increase teacher and leader effectiveness, reform instruction, increase learning time & create community supports • Provide operational flexibility and support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Replace the principal • Grant the new principal significant operational autonomy • Replace at least 50% of the school's staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convert the school or close and reopen it under the management of a charter school operator, charter management organization, or education management organization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Close the school and enroll students in higher achieving schools

■ **Significant additional funding.** The most recent SIG program was supported in part by funds made available through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), which provided an unprecedented infusion of federal funds for education. In 2010, the federal Department of Education provided \$546 million to states through the SIG program. States also carried over roughly \$825 million in SIG funds from 2009, creating a total of nearly \$1.4 billion in federal funds flowing to low-performing schools through the 2010 Program. The most recent regulations also increased the amount that states can award to each school in the SIG program, so that individual schools can now receive up to \$2 million per year to support their improvement efforts.

The Colorado Context

In 2009, Colorado passed the **Education Accountability Act** (EAA; also referred to by the bill number of the original legislation, SB09-163) to develop a streamlined and uniform set of indicators by which to hold the state, districts, and individual schools accountable; to create a fairer, clearer and more effective cycle of support and intervention; and to improve turnaround efforts in the state's lowest-performing schools.⁴ This system runs parallel to federal accountability systems, with varying degrees of overlap in different groups of schools.

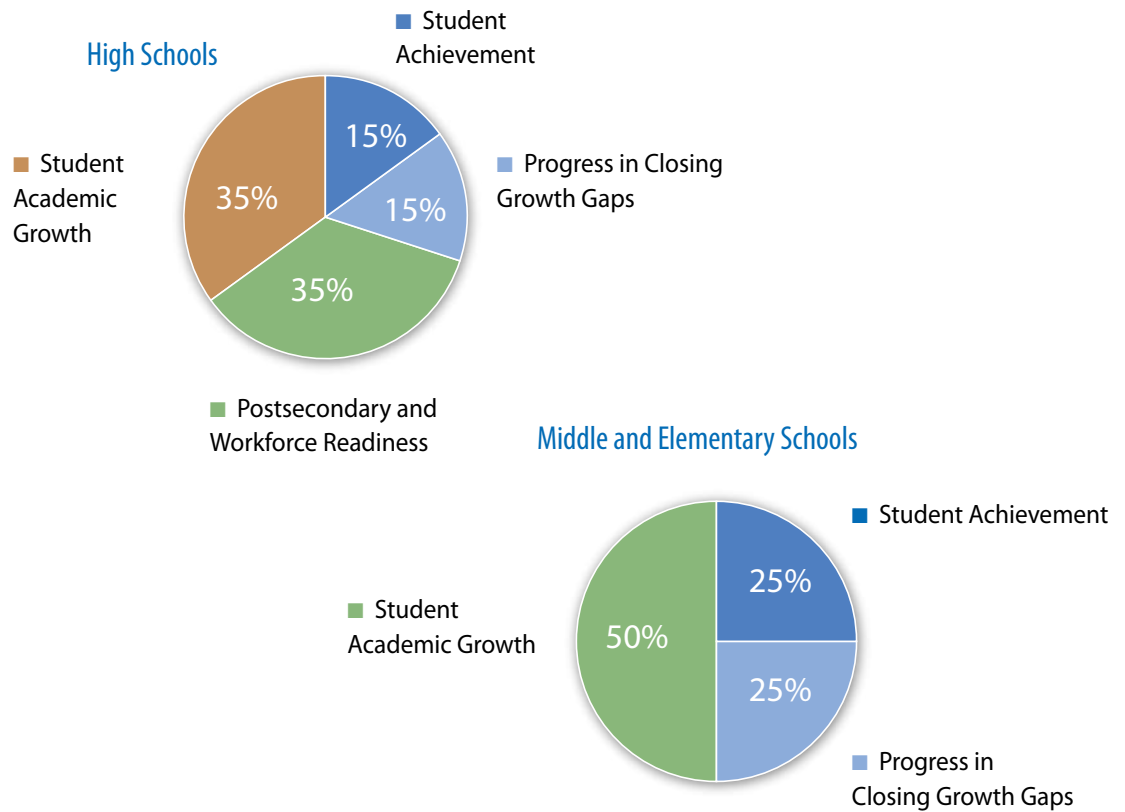
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■ **Identifying schools for improvement.** Colorado’s EAA examines student and school performance according to a School Performance Framework (SPF) that includes four key indicators: student achievement; student academic growth; schools’ progress in closing growth gaps for students from low-income households, minority students, students with disabilities, English language learners, and students with below-proficient performance; and, for high schools, students’ postsecondary and workforce readiness. Measures for each of these performance indicators are combined on a weighted basis to arrive at an overall evaluation of a school’s performance (see Figure 3). Schools that do not meet the state’s overall performance expectations based on these indicators are required to develop a plan to dramatically improve students’ performance.⁵

Figure 3. Performance Indicators and Weights under Colorado’s School Performance Framework



■ **Improvement strategies.** For schools that persistently fail to meet performance targets, Colorado has designed multiple turnaround strategies to offer students better opportunities for learning. The models include contracting with a turnaround partner to develop and execute the turnaround plan; reorganizing the oversight and management structure within the school; granting status as an “innovation school;” converting to a charter school; contracting with a public or private entity to manage the school; closing the school; or taking another action of “comparable or greater significance or effect.” This “other” category specifically includes the interventions required under federal accountability policies to help align the state and federal systems. For charter schools, options include replacing the operator or governing board with a different operator or governing board, or revoking the school’s charter (see Figure 4). Districts must use one of these options to improve consistently low-performing schools and submit their plan to the state Board of Education for approval.

Figure 4. Improvement Strategies under Colorado’s Education Accountability Act (EAA)

Turnaround Partner	Reorganization	Innovation	Chartering	External Management	Closure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage with a proven partner to develop and collaboratively execute a turnaround plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Oversight and management structure within the school is reorganized to provide greater, more effective support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement innovation in curriculum, staffing, budgeting, or other areas; many state statutes and regulations may be waived 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Convert to charter status Charter schools renegotiate charter contract 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contract with public or private entity to manage the school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Close the school Revoke a charter school’s charter
Other: Engage in similar action, including one of the federal turnaround models					

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TURNAROUNDS IN COLORADO

In 2009, Colorado identified 315 schools eligible for SIG funding according to three criteria: student academic achievement, academic growth, and graduation rate.



Colorado received \$37 million in federal SIG funds through the 2009 Program, and has distributed just over \$33 million to eligible schools following a multi-stage process, described below. Rather than receiving funds automatically based on their student enrollment, as in previous years, districts were required to apply for funding from the state on behalf of their eligible schools. The state will receive additional funding through the 2010 SIG program, which state leaders intend to distribute following a somewhat modified application process, building on lessons learned from the first year.

At the same time, Colorado Department of Education (CDE) staff are in the process of implementing the new requirements of Colorado's EAA for the first time. The state has reviewed schools' data and, in late 2010, assigned performance designations to all schools. Schools in the lowest performance categories will begin improvement planning to implement one of the turnaround strategies outlined above in 2011.

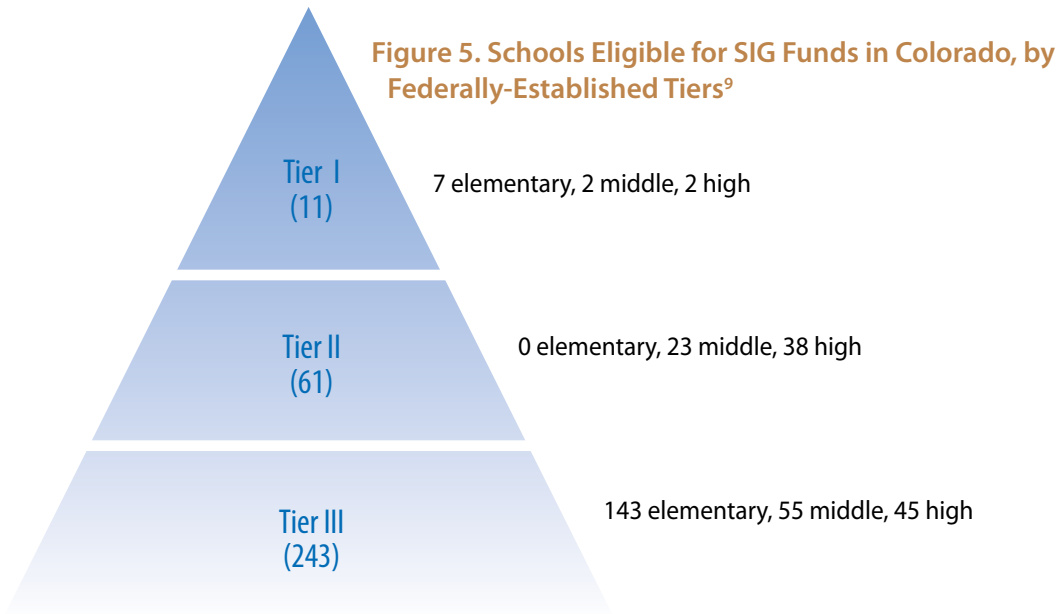
In the following sections, we outline the process that Colorado has followed to identify schools for turnarounds, under both SIG and the EAA; how it has approved improvement strategies for individual schools; the expectations and timeline set out for improvement; and the support the state has made available to turnaround schools to help them improve.

Selecting Schools for Improvement

As noted above, the federal SIG program includes specific requirements about the criteria states apply to select schools for targeted improvement strategies. Within those criteria, however, states are free to add additional conditions and to choose the specific methods by which they identify eligible schools. In the 2009 program, Colorado identified 315 schools eligible for SIG funding according to three criteria: student academic achievement, academic growth, and graduation rate.⁶

- **Academic achievement.** The state examined the number of students scoring at proficient or advanced on state standardized assessments (CSAP) for each school, grade and content area.⁷ These numbers were aggregated for 2007, 2008, and 2009 to generate a final multi-year achievement metric for each school.
- **Academic growth.** Each student was assigned a student growth percentile (SGP) based on The Colorado Growth Model, which examines how the change in her CSAP performance compares to that of her peers. The state then aggregated growth scores within individual schools by taking the median of all SGPs for students in a given grade across 2007, 2008, and 2009, separately for reading and math.
- **Graduation rate.** To be eligible for SIG funding, high schools must have a graduation rate of less than 60 percent for each of the previous three years.⁸

Colorado then combined the measures for academic achievement and academic growth to generate a Standardized Performance Index (SPI) for each school, in which growth counted for two-thirds and achievement counted for the remaining one-third. CDE staff then used the SPI to categorize schools into the three federally-mandated tiers described above (see Figure 5). Because schools are required to apply to the state for SIG funds, these tiers help the state prioritize which schools to fund first, as described in more detail below.



CDE has also identified schools in need of improvement under its state accountability system. In fall 2010, department staff reviewed each school’s performance based on the state’s school performance framework (SPF) described above, and submitted recommendations to the state board about the type of plan that each public school must implement.¹⁰ The performance categories include performance plans, improvement plans, priority improvement plans, and turnaround plans. Of a total of 2,082 schools in Colorado,¹¹ the state identified 82 schools for turnaround in 2010 (see Table 1).

Table 1. Schools to Develop a Turnaround Plan under EAA

	Turnaround
Elementary	39
Middle	25
High	18
Total	82

For the four percent of Colorado’s schools assigned to turnaround status, approximately 42 percent are located in three school districts, with the highest concentration located in Denver. Approximately 54 percent of the state’s 183 school districts do not have any schools requiring priority state oversight or support.



Of a total of 2082 schools in Colorado, the state identified **82** schools for turnaround in 2010.

The state's SPF had not been fully developed in early 2010 when eligibility determinations were required to be made under SIG. Therefore, while the performance indicators that Colorado used to determine eligible SIG schools were similar to the indicators under the state accountability framework, the two were not identical. Both consider graduation rates, student achievement, and student growth, but SIG determinations did not include schools' progress in closing growth gaps. Ultimately, the schools assigned turnaround or priority improvement plans under the state accountability system overlapped significantly with those identified for improvement under SIG. At the high school level, however, and among schools eligible for but not receiving Title I dollars, there was a smaller degree of overlap between schools identified under the federal and state systems. To help align schools' performance designations under the two programs in the future, the state intends to apply to the federal Department of Education for approval to use its newly-developed SPF to make all eligibility determinations for SIG funding. If approved, this should result in the same schools identified through the federal SIG process as those identified for turnaround via the state's EAA process.

Approving Turnaround Strategies

Once schools are identified for dramatic improvements, under both SIG and the EAA, the state plays a role in helping schools and districts determine the best improvement strategy. CDE approved turnaround plans for SIG-eligible schools in spring and summer of 2010 for schools to begin implementing at the start of the 2010-2011 school year (see Figures 6 and 7). The turnaround planning stage of the state's accountability process is taking place for the first time in late 2010, with plans for schools to begin implementing improvement strategies at the start of the 2011-2012 school year.



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Figure 6. Timeline for Review of District Applications under the SIG Program¹²

Dec'09 - May'10	April - May'10	May'10	Aug'10 - June'11
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expedited Diagnostic Reviews take place • CDE supports local stakeholder meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District applications due • CDE reviews applications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CDE works with districts to provide all necessary information in application • CDE awards grants to districts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation of intervention model prior to or during 2010-11 academic year

Figure 7. Timeline for Review of School Plans under EAA¹³

Aug'10	Sept - Nov'10	Jan - March'11	March - Apr'11	May'11 - June'12
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CDE releases School Performance Frameworks and makes initial plan recommendation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CDE reviews requests to reconsider and additional data • State Board makes final determination of plan type 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools submit plans to CDE for review/feedback • State Review Panel and commissioner recommend modifications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revised turnaround plans submitted for approval • CDE publishes plans at schoolview.org 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implementation of intervention model prior to or during 2011-12 academic year

Approving Turnaround Strategies under the SIG Program

Because the 2010 SIG funds were allocated on a competitive basis to eligible schools, CDE required districts to engage in a specific process to determine which turnaround strategy they would use to raise performance at the school, and to complete an application detailing their turnaround plan.

■ **Determining school needs.** The state required districts to conduct detailed reviews of every eligible school for which they intended to apply for SIG funding. These “Expedited Diagnostic Reviews” (EDRs) were based on the same standards, indicators, and protocols that Colorado’s School Support Teams use in all schools, but tailored specifically to identify the root causes of a school’s poor academic performance in a shorter timeframe. A subset of the state’s support team members conducted the reviews, spending one to two days at the school site to examine its curriculum, assessment systems, instruction, school culture, professional development offerings, and the leadership’s capacity and planning. The EDR teams did not make specific recommendations about the turnaround strategy that each school should use, but categorized and summarized the school’s main challenges in reports provided to district and school staff.

■ **Choosing turnaround partners.** Based on the findings of the EDR, districts then selected an intervention model for each school from among the federal options – turnaround, restart, transformation or closure. For those schools that chose the turnaround, restart or transformation model, the state conducted an RFP to identify external partners who could work with school and district staff to help turn the school around. This RFP process was designed to identify and pre-screen national and state-based organizations with the capacity to help schools implement their turnaround plans, and to assist schools in identifying high-quality partners. Ultimately, the turnaround partners on [the state-approved list](#) tend to provide assistance services, rather than whole-school governance for turnaround schools (see Table 2). Some districts and schools chose not to work with turnaround partners at all.

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Table 2. External Providers Partnering with SIG Schools in Colorado, 2010-2011¹⁴

Provider Name	Schools
Evans Newton, Inc.	Clifton Elementary
The Flippen Group	Fort Logan Elementary
Focal Point	Fort Logan Elementary, Haskin Elementary
Global Partnership Schools	Yafa High School, Central High School, Risley Middle, Freed Middle, Roncolli Middle School, Pitts Middle
Lindamood-Bell	Haskin Elementary
Riverside Publishing	Fort Logan Elementary
RMC Research Corporation	Hanson Elementary
WestEd	Hanson Elementary

Of the 19 schools receiving funding, the majority (11 schools) are located in Denver or districts surrounding the capital. Six participating schools (31 percent) are located in Pueblo City public schools.



■ **Developing SIG applications.** After selecting a turnaround model and a turnaround provider, if necessary, districts developed and submitted applications to the state for each school they intended to serve under SIG. The state prioritized funding for district applications based on several criteria:

- The Tier in which the school is located (with priority for Tier I over Tier II and III, Tier II over III, and for districts that could serve both Tier I and Tier II schools. Schools were also prioritized from lowest- to highest-achieving within each Tier);
- The district’s capacity to provide support to enable the school’s turnaround, including resource alignment, necessary autonomies, community support, progress monitoring and reporting;
- The rigor of the process through which the district identified a turnaround partner to support the school, if applicable; and
- The capacity of the CDE and the Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) serving the district to provide direct support to the school.

CDE also provided clear guidance to districts that it did not anticipate funding any schools in Tier III and would only fund a portion of those in Tier II, which encouraged only those districts serving Tier I and II schools to apply. CDE developed a process and rubric by which to evaluate districts’ SIG applications, and tapped both CDE and external reviewers to read each application. The review teams scored each application and provided feedback to CDE leadership and the district about whether schools should receive SIG funds. CDE staff then worked extensively with each district to rework applications that might not have originally been funded. In many cases this negotiation only required more information from the district about its capacity to implement the chosen turnaround model in the school. In other cases, districts were required to develop more specific plans to provide adequate support and flexibility to the identified school.

Ultimately, CDE approved every application, and all schools that applied for funding received grants between approximately \$375,000 and \$1,000,000 per year over three years to implement their turnaround plans.¹⁵ Of the 19 schools receiving funding, the majority (11 schools) are located in Denver or districts surrounding the capital. Six participating schools (31 percent) are located in Pueblo City public schools (see Figure 8).

Across all districts, nine schools are implementing the transformation model; six are implementing the turnaround model; one school chose to restart under a contract with an external operator; and three schools were closed, including one charter school (see Figure 9). Student achievement in SIG schools is uniformly low, with proficiency rates hovering between 11 and 50 percent (see Figure 10).¹⁶

Figure 8: Location of Schools and Districts Participating in the SIG Program, 2010-2011

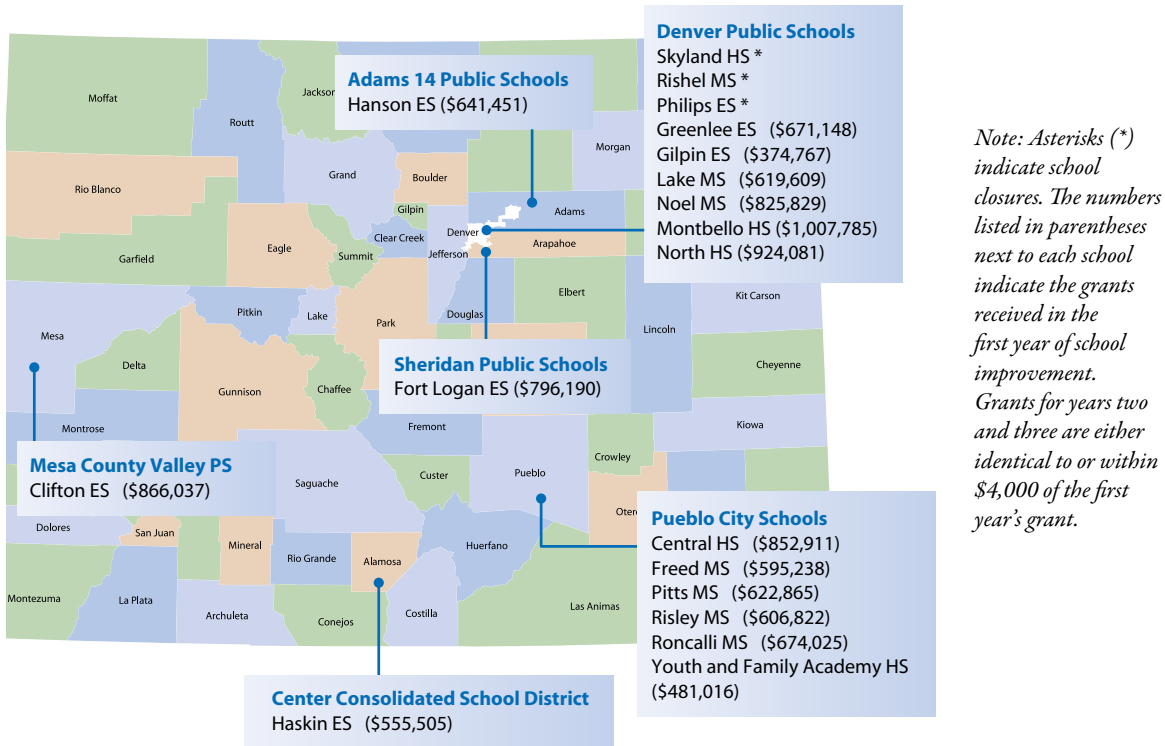


Figure 9: Number of Colorado Schools Using Each of the SIG Improvement Strategies, 2010-2011

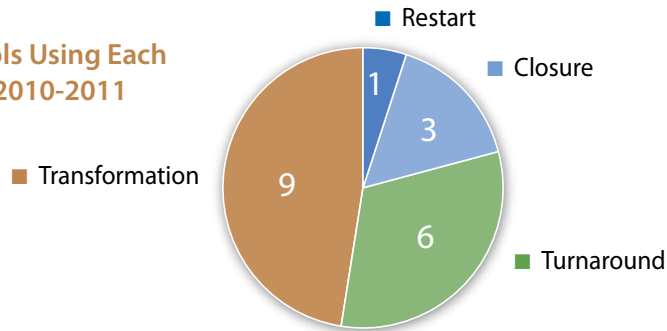
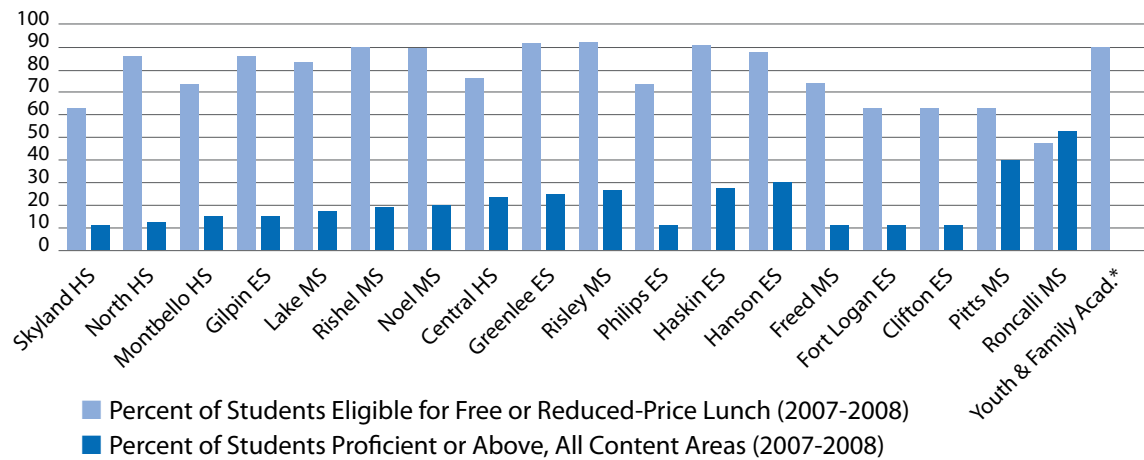


Figure 10: Student Demographics and Proficiency Rates in SIG Schools, 2010-2011



* Note: comparable achievement data is unavailable for the Youth and Family Academy, which is an alternative education campus.



Student achievement in SIG schools is uniformly low, with proficiency rates hovering between 11 and 50 percent.

Approving Turnaround Strategies under the EAA

As mentioned above, a state-level identification and planning process will also be taking place for persistently low-performing schools throughout the fall of 2010 and spring of 2011. Based on their performance designations, a subset of Colorado schools will be required to develop turnaround plans that identify which of the state's turnaround strategies the schools will use to dramatically improve performance (see Figure 4, above). CDE staff and School Accountability Committees appointed by each school's principal specifically to assist with turnaround planning will provide feedback and work with the school and its district to develop the details of each plan. A State Review Panel of experts appointed by the commissioner will then evaluate each school's plan and recommend any necessary changes before the plan can be approved.

Several of the schools identified as "turnaround" schools under Colorado's state accountability system have also been identified as among the state's persistently lowest-achieving schools under SIG. The schools that are receiving SIG grants and were also identified as turnaround schools under EAA already meet the state's planning requirements by engaging in the state's **Unified Improvement Planning** process, which includes the federal improvement strategies among its list of turnaround options.

There are also 52 schools across the state that have already entered "restructuring" under the NCLB requirements that have been in place since 2001. Many of these schools have already begun implementing one of the NCLB restructuring strategies. These schools, if identified for turnaround under EAA, will have five years to improve under the state system, regardless of when their efforts under NCLB began.

Providing Resources and Support

At the core of the state's accountability system is a tiered system of supports based on schools' and districts' needs and history of performance. Schools in the lowest performance categories qualify for the highest levels of support, including on-site teams from the state who regularly assist schools and districts in analyzing data to identify the root causes of persistent low-performance; external providers to assist in schools' turnaround efforts; and ongoing technical assistance from CDE staff.

Schools that participate in the SIG program also receive significant grant funding to help implement their turnaround plans. However, schools designated for turnaround by the EAA process that are not SIG schools do not receive any funding to implement their plans. Each eligible school that applied for SIG funding received a grant between roughly \$375,000 and \$1,000,000 per year over three years, for a total of up to \$3,000,000 per school. For Colorado schools that chose to implement the turnaround, transformation or restart model, the average grant for the first year of school improvement was approximately \$694,000 per school. These grants will be renewable for each of the next two years, for total average grants of over \$2,000,000 per school.¹⁷ In addition to these financial resources, staff from the Department's Turnaround Office also conduct monthly onsite visits to each SIG school to examine and discuss their progress, and conduct monthly achievement calls with external providers to review benchmark and formative assessment data.



Schools that participate in the SIG program are receiving significant grant funding to help implement their turnaround plans. Schools designated for turnaround by the EAA process that are not SIG schools, however, do not receive any additional funding to implement their plans.

A subset of SIG schools also benefit from Colorado's participation in the Partnership Zone Initiative, a three-year effort to create sustainable and scalable strategies for turning around clusters of low-performing schools. Colorado was one of six states selected by the non-profit group Mass Insight to participate in the initiative, which will direct millions of dollars in private and public funding to school turnarounds nationally.¹⁸ In the coming months, the state will work with Mass Insight to identify districts to pilot Partnership Zones for their low-performing schools.

Expected Results and Timelines for Improvement

Colorado's state department of education has developed an approach to performance monitoring for schools that receive SIG funds and those identified for improvement under the state accountability system. Because the state accountability timelines will start for turnaround schools in 2011, the goal-setting and monitoring processes are most fully developed for SIG schools.

Districts in which schools are receiving SIG funds are required to enter into a memorandum of understanding with CDE to set out goals that each school will be required to meet during its turnaround effort. These MOUs include common performance standards that every turnaround school will be expected to meet within three to five years after beginning its turnaround effort, based on the state's School Performance Framework; as well as school-specific timelines and benchmarks for reaching these goals. Timelines and benchmarks vary by school to account for their baseline data. They are designed to require strong gains in year one, with sustained progress thereafter, rather than "balloon payments" that would allow the school to remain low-performing for three to four years and achieve large gains in year five.

In addition, the CDE Turnaround Office is developing a set of leading indicators to track in schools receiving SIG funds, which includes measures and goals for indicators required under the federal SIG program (the distribution of teachers by performance level on the LEA's evaluation system, dropout rate, participation rate on state assessments, student attendance, teacher attendance, disciplinary incidents, truancy rates, the number of instructional minutes, and students enrolled in AP/IB/dual enrollment classes).¹⁹ CDE staff is also tracking other quantitative indicators to supplement the SIG indicators, such as results on interim assessments, measures of school culture, the percentage of students taught by highly-effective teachers, and other measures of time allocated to learning, as well as qualitative indicators that arise from emerging research about successful turnarounds. The state also plans to develop lagging indicators to track in these schools.

Under the EAA, CDE expects all turnaround schools to show sufficient improvement so that within a year, performance is high enough for the school to move to Priority Improvement status. Thereafter, schools are expected to meet annual targets leading to the state's highest designations by year five. If a school implements its turnaround plan for longer than five consecutive years without showing sufficient improvement, it will be required to restructure or close.

While CDE is committed to monitoring progress in turnaround schools and is empowered to discontinue SIG grants for poor performance, like most states, it is still working to develop a clear process for discontinuing funding if a school fails to meet interim standards prior to year five. Similarly, while the state has authority to intervene in a school under the EAA for persistent low performance prior to year five, it has not yet established criteria or a process to guide these shorter-term decisions.

If a school implements its turnaround plan for longer than five consecutive years without showing sufficient improvement, it will be required to restructure or close.



EARLY LESSONS & CONSIDERATIONS

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.



Colorado has been at the forefront of school reform efforts for some time, and is considered by many to have one of the strongest policy environments nationally to support successful interventions in low-performing schools. With a renewed sense of urgency and unprecedented resources flowing to the state’s struggling schools, it is worth pausing to closely examine the policies that govern the state’s school improvement efforts and consider potential shifts in direction that could improve processes in future years.

Here, we draw from the emerging research about dramatic school improvement and a growing experience base nationally to offer context and future directions for Colorado’s support to struggling schools. Key areas for education and community leaders across the state to consider include the supply pipeline of talented principals and providers to lead turnaround efforts, the rigor of the screening and selection process for districts’ and schools’ turnaround plans, and the monitoring and timelines for improvement that enable quick redirection in turnaround efforts that are not on track.

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.²⁰ With improvement strategies under both federal and state accountability systems that require districts to replace the principal in many turnaround schools, the demand for highly-capable turnaround leaders has greatly increased. In addition, “restart” efforts that engage an external provider to take on full authority for school operations are most likely to be successful with an organization that has a proven educational model and the ability to respond directly to student needs.²¹ In most districts in Colorado as well as nationally, 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 to help schools and districts carry out successful turnarounds.

- **School leaders.** Existing research about leaders who successfully bring about dramatic improvements in failing environments suggests that the tenacity and skills they bring to the job are exceptional. Principals who are able to carry out a true turnaround are likely to be quite different from principals who have succeeded in higher-performing schools.²² So even districts that have large numbers of successful schools are likely to have a supply problem for leaders of their persistently failing schools.

A powerful future role for CDE or its partners to play, therefore, is to support the recruitment, selection and training of turnaround leaders for struggling schools. Strategies include providing specialized selection tools and processes for districts to use in selecting turnaround leaders, sponsoring a “turnaround corps” of leaders who are available to deploy to schools around the state, and establishing or expanding leadership programs to provide specialized training for Colorado leaders to enter turnaround schools. CDE could also help districts assign highly-successful turnaround leaders to roles that enable them to oversee and manage multiple turnaround efforts at once.²³ Hands-on support from CDE staff to assist districts in their own local recruitment and placement strategies could also go a long way.

■ **“Restart” providers.** While Colorado worked actively to assist districts and schools in selecting external partners to help implement turnaround plans, the organizations that responded to and were approved through the state’s selection process are primarily “assistance providers” – groups that work alongside school and district staff on discrete areas of school improvement, such as improving instructional approaches, aligning curricular programs, implementing new technologies or training teachers and staff. None of the providers on the state’s approved list are managing the full operations of schools, the type of arrangement envisioned under the “restart” improvement model in both Colorado and federal law.

This challenge is not unique to Colorado. As the field of restart providers matures nationally, future state Requests for Proposals that specifically target organizations equipped to manage the full operation of schools may be more successful. But there is also a need at the state level to seed the growth of these types of organizations locally. CDE and its partners could, for example, work with existing organizations that incubate new or replicate existing restart providers to grow the supply of these organizations in Colorado. It could also engage in its own efforts to encourage and support highly-successful charter and other school operators to expand into the turnaround space.

Supporting Rigorous Turnaround Strategies

Despite a renewed focus and unprecedented resources dedicated to school turnarounds in recent months, in many states nationwide education leaders have tended to resist radical change, even in schools where previous strategies have fallen flat. Indeed, 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.²⁴ As the data above show, a similar trend is playing out in Colorado.

Decades of research and experience in public education have shown that improvement efforts that focus on incremental improvements – such as curriculum changes, increased funding and professional development – rarely produce compelling successes in schools that struggle to meet students’ needs year after year. The persistently lowest-achieving schools in Colorado will require much more major change. CDE and other state leaders can help foster these dramatic efforts in several ways, such as by engaging in a focused and rigorous review process for schools’ improvement plans in future years, and closely examining each district’s commitment to success.



Despite a renewed focus and unprecedented resources dedicated to school turnarounds in recent months, in many states nationwide education leaders have tended to resist radical change.



The state has a powerful role in working with districts to accommodate turnaround schools with new governance arrangements and increased flexibility.

■ **Strategies for dramatic change.** CDE outlined a specific process by which to evaluate districts' first round of SIG applications, but ultimately approved every application with mostly minor modifications. It is yet to be seen, of course, whether every applicant indeed has the capacity to support and carry out the turnaround plan they proposed. In the future – for turnaround plans under both SIG and the EAA – it will be critical for state leaders to carefully examine schools' and districts' proposed plans to ensure that each is appropriate given the causes of failure at the school, and rigorous enough to offer students a realistic chance of success within a very short timeframe. The turnaround strategies required under SIG and the EAA are designed to bring about the type of major restructuring needed in persistently low-achieving schools. But they are likely to be carried out at the school level only if state leaders hold district and school leaders firmly to their requirements.

■ **District capacity.** Districts' capacity to support schools' turnaround efforts was a specific criterion upon which SIG decisions were based. In practice, however, it is not clear the degree to which districts will be required to implement new governance arrangements for their schools, or to provide crucial autonomies that enable schools to implement new approaches to meet students' needs.

In chronically failing organizations, the changes required to turn performance around can be substantial. Experience with dramatic improvement efforts in Colorado and other states suggests the importance of increased flexibility over school-level operations to carry out the turnaround – including authority to hire and fire school staff, change the schedule of the school day and year, and align resources in support of the turnaround plan.²⁵ Many of these changes conflict with standard district policies, and it can require significant effort to deviate for a single school or group of schools.

The state therefore has a powerful role in working with districts to accommodate turnaround schools with new governance arrangements and increased flexibility. For future rounds of SIG applications, which may offer as much as \$7.5 million in additional grants to struggling schools, CDE leaders may adopt a more selective approach, awarding funds only to those districts that demonstrate the capacity and willingness to implement these new structures. The state may also need to create additional incentives for districts to implement strategies that include these types of changes, including the turnaround and restart options under SIG and the innovation, reorganization and external management options under the EAA. Helping to build the supply of leaders and external providers, as described above, may make these options more feasible. An express state priority on dramatic change, together with a scoring system that prioritizes more dramatic options where appropriate, could also help ensure that improvement efforts are more aggressive.

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.²⁶ 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 – as CDE is planning to do in SIG schools. Even more important, however, is a commitment to act on the data that those indicators reveal.

Under the EAA, Colorado's state board has authority to intervene in a school at any point up to and including year five of its improvement effort if it fails to show sufficient progress toward state performance standards. In addition, CDE has authority to discontinue SIG funds to any school that is not meeting or on track to meet its performance goals. These are powerful tools. If a school's turnaround plan is insufficiently rigorous to address student needs, implementation does not adhere to the plan that the state has approved, or the plan simply is not working. Colorado's state leaders should intervene early to retry major change or set the effort back on track. Retry options include closing the school down and reassigning students to higher-performing schools in the district, replacing the school's leader or external partner, or working with the district to retry major change such as with a charter management organization or other school operator.²⁷ Here, too, state efforts to build the supply of leaders and external providers may make rapid retry more feasible.

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. The state's focus on and support for these types of changes has been strong, both in policy and in practice. 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. We hope the data and context presented here will provide a valuable tool to aid in their work.

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.



Appendix A: Schools Identified for Intervention under the 2009 SIG Program and Colorado's EAA in 2010

District	Schools		District	Schools	
Adams	Adams City High	■	Ignacio	Ignacio Intermediate	■
	Hanson PreK-8	■ ■		Jefferson	Alameda High
	Alsup Elementary	■	Julesburg		Insight School Of CO at Julesburg
	Rose Hill Elementary	■		Karval	Karval Online Education
Adams-Arapahoe	Arkansas Elementary	■	Mapleton		Clayton Partnership
	Fletcher Primary	■		Highland Montessori	■
Alamosa	Alamosa Open	■	Mesa	Clifton Elementary	■
Arriba-Flagler	Flagler Elementary	■		R-5 High	■
	Boulder Valley	Arapahoe Ridge High	■	Montezuma-Cortez	Kemper Elementary
Brighton		Northeast Elementary	■		Mountain Boces
Center	Haskin Elementary	■ ■	Mountain Valley	Mountain Valley Middle	
	Colorado Springs	Carver Elementary		■	Park County
Monroe Elementary		■	Pritchett	Pritchett Middle	
Jack Swigert Aerospace Academy		■		Pueblo	Bessemer Elementary
Crowley	Crowley County Online Academy	■	Lemuel Pitts Middle		■
	Deer Trail	Deer Trail Junior-Senior High	■	Bradford Elementary	■
Denver		Cheltenham Elementary	■	Pitts Middle	■
	Montbello High	■ ■	Central High	■	
	Ford Elementary	■	Risley Middle	■	
	Noel Middle	■ ■	Freed Middle	■ ■	
	Greenlee Elementary	■	Roncalli Middle	■	
	North High	■	Irving Elementary	■	
	Gilpin Elementary	■	Spann Elementary	■	
	Northeast Academy Charter	■	James H. Risley Middle	■	
	Henry World School Grades 6-8	■	Youth & Family Acad. Charter	■ ■	
	Oakland Elementary	■	Keating Continuing Education	■	
	Kunsmiller Creative Arts Academy	■	Rocky Ford	Jefferson Intermediate	■
	Online High	■		Sheridan	Fort Logan Elementary
	Lake Middle	■	South Conejos		Antonito Junior High
	P.S.1 Charter	■		St. Vrain	Central Elementary
	Life Skills Center of Denver	■	Spangler Elementary		■
	Phillips Elementary	■	Frederick Elementary		■
	Manny Martinez Middle	■	Vilas	V.I.L.A.S. Online School	■
	Rishel Middle	■ ■		Weld	Gilcrest Elementary School
	Mc Glone Elementary	■	West End		Nucla Junior/Senior High
	Skyland High	■		Westminster	Fairview Elementary
Douglas	Colorado Cyber	■	M. Scott Carpenter Middle		■
	Hope On-Line	■	Francis M. Day Elementary		■
Falcon	Patriot Learning Center	■	Mesa Elementary		■
Garfield	Kaplan Academy Of Colorado	■	Josephine Hodgkins Elementary		■
Greeley	John Evans Middle	■	Sherrelwood Elementary	■	
	Gunnison Watershed	Gunnison Valley	■		
Holyoke		Holyoke Junior High	■		

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Public Impact has been fortunate to work with staff from the Colorado Department of Education on the design and implementation of many aspects of the state's overall approach to low-performing schools. This report draws in part from that experience, as well as extensive review of public documents and interviews with CDE staff.
- ² See Appendix A for a list of schools identified under SIG, EAA, or both. Eight of these schools were designated for intervention under both the federal SIG Program and the EAA. As described in greater detail below, the federal designation pertained to the first round of SIG funding (fiscal year 2009), with intervention beginning during the 2010-11 school year. The state designation occurred during a 2010-11 process that will lead to interventions in 2011-12.
- ³ Center on Education Policy (2009). *Improving Low-Performing Schools: Lessons from Five Years of Studying School Restructuring Under No Child Left Behind*. Washington, DC: Author; Manwaring, R. (2010). *Restructuring 'Restructuring': Improving Interventions for Low-Performing Schools and Districts*. Washington, DC: Education Sector. Available: <http://www.educationsector.org/sites/default/files/publications/Restructuring.pdf>; data from the CO Department of Education, 2010.
- ⁴ For a detailed overview and full text of the legislation, see the CDE website: <http://www.cde.state.co.us/scripts/reforms/detail.asp?itemid=623952>.
- ⁵ The same is true for districts, which receive an accreditation rating from the state based on their schools' overall performance. Because this report is focused specifically on school turnarounds, we do not explore Colorado's district accountability policies here. More information is available, however, from CDE: <http://www.schoolview.org/PerformanceFrameworks.asp>.
- ⁶ Alternative Education Campuses (AECs), which serve special needs or high risk student populations, were exempted if they met one or more of the following criteria: 1) school purpose is dropout re-engagement and 100% of enrolled students are identified as dropouts, 2) school is temporary and designed to transition students back to their home school, or 3) school is not a diploma-granting institution. Schools were also required to have 20 or more students receiving valid student growth percentiles between 2007 and 2009 in each content area.
- ⁷ A parallel assessment, the CSAPA, is given to students with qualifying cognitive disabilities. On the CSAPA, performance levels are Inconclusive, Exploring, Emerging, Developing, and Novice. The top two categories are considered grade-appropriate proficiency.
- ⁸ CDE calculated graduation rates by dividing the number of students receiving a diploma by the total number of students finishing eighth grade four years earlier, accounting for transfers in and out.
- ⁹ Colorado Department of Education. (2010, February). *School Improvement Grants Application*, pp. 22-34. Available: <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/summary/coapp.pdf>.
- ¹⁰ Districts can submit additional performance data for the board to consider, to help reach an agreed-upon performance designation for each school. In 2010, a handful of districts contested the original performance designation, leading the department ultimately to revisit performance designations for 28 schools, approving requests to reconsider from 21 of these, and denying requests from the other seven. See *Documentation of District Requests to Reconsider District Accreditation and School Plan Type Assignments* (December 6, 2010). Available: <http://www.schoolview.org/documents/SummaryofStatusofFinalPlanAssignmentsforEMHSchools.pdf>.
- ¹¹ Our calculations consider each campus (elementary, middle, high) a separate school. So, for example, Monarch K-8 School is classified as two schools: one elementary and one middle. Discovery Canyon Campus School is classified as three schools: one elementary, one middle, and one high. For the full list of schools used in our calculations, see *CDE School Plan Type Assignments* (revised 12/9/10). Available: <http://www.schoolview.org/documents/FinalCDERecommendationsforSchoolPlan-Type120910.xls>.
- ¹² See Colorado's 2010 School Improvement Grant Application, pp. 45-46, available at: <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/summary/coapp.pdf>.
- ¹³ See CDE, *District Accountability Handbook*, Version 1.6 (Sept. 13, 2010), pp. 54, 56, available at: <http://schoolview.org/documents/DistrictAccountabilityHandbook.pdf> (last accessed December 1, 2010). The process for reviewing district plans plays out on a similar timeline. See p. 46-47.
- ¹⁴ A full list of approved turnaround providers for 2009-10 can be found on the CDE website: http://www.cde.state.co.us/turnaround/cde_turnaroundplan_approved_providers.htm#ce.
- ¹⁵ Three school closures received grants ranging from \$13,729 to \$32,491.
- ¹⁶ For more information, see CDE press release (August 2010). Available: <http://www.cde.state.co.us/communications/download/PDF/20100831schoolturnaroundschools.pdf>.
- ¹⁷ Schools undergoing closure received smaller one-time grants, ranging from \$13,000 to \$32,500 with an average of \$26,000 in 2010.
- ¹⁸ For more information about the Partnership Zone Initiative in Colorado, see <http://www.cde.state.co.us/communications/download/PDF/20100202massinsight.pdf>. More information about the Partnership Zone model is available through Mass Insight's School Turnaround Group, http://www.massinsight.org/stg/services/partnership_zone/.
- ¹⁹ United States Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, *Guidance on School Improvement Grants Under Section 1003(g) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* (revised June 29, 2010). Available: <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/sigguidance05242010.pdf>.
- ²⁰ Herman, R., Dawson, P., Dee, T., Greene, J., Maynard, R., and Redding S. (2008). *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools* (IES Practice Guide, *What Works Clearinghouse*, NCEE 2008-4020). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance. Available: http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/Turnaround_pg_04181.pdf; Hassel, E.A. & Hassel, B.C. (Winter 2009). "The Big U-Turn: How to Bring Schools from the Brink of Failure to Stellar Success." *Education Next*, Vol 9 No 1. Available: <http://educationnext.org/the-big-urn/>.
- ²¹ Hassel, E.A. & Hassel, B.C. (2006). *Starting Fresh in Low-Performing Schools: A New Option for District Leaders Under NCLB*. Washington, DC: National Association of Charter School Authorizers. Available: http://www.qualitycharters.org/images/stories/Starting_Fresh_Series.pdf.
- ²² Kowal, J., Hassel, E.A. & Hassel, B.C. (September 2009). *Successful School Turnarounds: Seven Steps for District Leaders*. Washington, DC: Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement. Available: <http://www.centerforsri.org/files/CenterIssueBriefSept09.pdf>.
- ²³ See, e.g., Hassel, E.A. & Hassel, B.C. (2010). *3X for All: Extending the Reach of Education's Best*. Chapel Hill, NC: Public Impact. Available: http://publicimpact.com/images/stories/3x_for_all_2010-final.pdf.
- ²⁴ Maxwell, L. (July 29, 2010). "Least-Disruptive Turnaround Model Proving Popular." *EdWeek*. Available: http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2010/07/29/37sig_h29.html?tkn=NXNFRJvoPaw1NWs75P23+GX9vBRDHbhEptWo&cmp=clp-edweek.
- ²⁵ Mass Insight (2008). *The Turnaround Challenge: Why America's Best Opportunity to Dramatically Improve Student Achievement Lies in our Worst-Performing Schools*. Boston, MA: Author. Available: http://www.massinsight.org/publications/turnaround/51/file/1/pubs/2010/04/15/TheTurnaroundChallenge_MainReport.pdf; Kowal, Hassel & Hassel (2009); Hassel & Hassel (2006).
- ²⁶ Public Impact (2009) citing Beer & Nohria (2000).
- ²⁷ Public Impact (2010). *Try, Try Again: How to Triple the Number of Fixed Failing Schools Without Getting Any Better at Fixing Schools*. Chapel Hill: Author. Available: http://publicimpact.com/publications/Public_Impact_Try_Try_Again_Slide_August_2009.pdf.



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