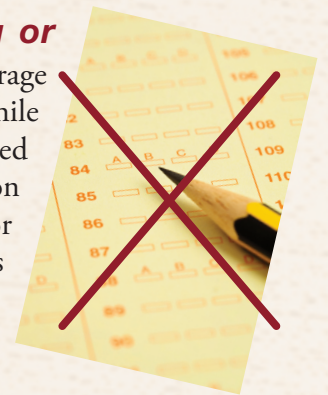


# The Inconvenient Truths About Turning Around Schools

The prevalent but fundamentally flawed narrative around “fixing” troubled schools goes something like this: *“Low student test scores tell us which schools are underperforming. These schools fail because of weak leadership, low expectations among teachers, and inefficient use of resources. The only way to fix these schools is to ‘transform’ them by bringing in new teachers and leaders, or, should that fail, close them down.”* Hewing to this faulty narrative, so-called turnaround efforts—as codified in federal Race to the Top and No Child Left Behind legislation—have failed to produce the promised gains for students and for schools.

## Hard truths about achievement

**X** **Test scores alone cannot tell us which schools are failing or why.** Many disadvantaged students may lag in reading and math, but on average they entered kindergarten up to two years behind their better-off peers. Thus, while their poor test scores may be due partly to weak instruction or an unaligned curriculum, they reflect more the family- and community-based influences on educational attainment. Such factors include frequent residential moves, poor nutrition and health, and emotional problems, all of which limit a child’s capacity to learn. The bottom line is that, just as with schools serving affluent children, some schools serving low-income students add real value, while others add much less value.



**X** **Schools that serve low-income students living in troubled circumstances face particular obstacles to effective teaching, leadership, and resource use.** The high rates of student mobility and absenteeism common in schools serving such children impede learning by limiting instructional effectiveness and parental engagement and by increasing administrative burdens. Physical and mental health problems prevalent in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty, such as asthma, tooth decay, nutritional deficiencies, and stress, limit students’ ability to focus on their school work. A severe lack of community resources in these neighborhoods compounds these problems. High-stakes pressure to boost students’ test scores further hinders schools’ ability to recruit and retain strong leaders and teachers.

**X** **Piecemeal strategies to “turn around” and close schools do not work and may do harm.** Chicago’s Renaissance 21 schools—laboratories for mayoral takeover, “transformation,” and school-closure strategies—experienced little significant improvement over comparison schools in the first few years of the initiative. And students from schools closed under the initiative did worse, on average, in their new schools, while their neighborhoods lost rare resources and sources of stability. Future studies may show more improvement, but so far there is no solid evidence of the efficacy of such strategies in Chicago or elsewhere. In fact, any new “fixes” may further lessen trust and community and staff engagement in troubled schools already destabilized by past waves of reform.

A strategy that relies on fixing schools by bringing in “better” teachers and principals ignores these hard truths. *Schools whose teachers and leaders face the daunting challenges posed by isolated and under-resourced neighborhoods are not the primary cause of children’s poor educational outcomes.* Strategies that misidentify the causes of poor educational performance will continue to alienate good teachers, discourage students and parents, narrow the curriculum, and encourage gaming of test results. Smart policy, one not relying on “miracles,” requires a broader, bolder approach to education that addresses the factors that influence learning both in and outside of school walls.



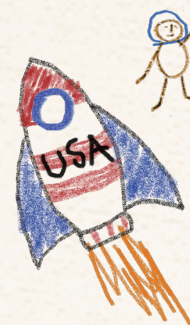
## **Elements of a broader, bolder approach to turning around schools**

### **✓ Stop mislabeling low-income schools as failing and use relevant measures.**

Distinguish stable schools in functioning low-income neighborhoods from those serving children from extremely poor, isolated neighborhoods. Measure actual learning gains in a broad curriculum rather than the percentage of students who meet proficiency levels on basic math and reading tests. Assess a range of cognitive, behavioral, and health outcomes to ensure that schools are focused on meeting disadvantaged students’ complex needs, and that students are developing broad academic foundations and critical life skills.

### **✓ Use holistic strategies to recruit and retain strong leaders and skilled teachers.**

Take a systemic approach to improving the quality of instruction, creating teams of effective teachers, and identifying successful principals. Invest in and engage parents and teachers in designing reform, rather than “dropping it in” from above and saddling already burdened schools with additional superfluous demands. The strategy must acknowledge the additional challenges faced by teachers whose students are disadvantaged, and ensure that financial and other resources are available to help schools address those challenges.



### **✓ Channel broader community resources into addressing problems at their root.**

As they improve within-school instruction, staffing, and leadership, states and school districts must also target external resources and coordinate their delivery to ensure that low-income students eat a healthy breakfast; access basic health care, including dental and mental health supports; and obtain tutoring, mentoring, and other enriching alternatives to television and dangerous streets. Afterschool and summer programs provide students with expanded learning opportunities, access to caring adults, and a safe place to learn while their parents work. Schools and communities must also offer viable, appealing ways for parents to engage and learn with their children.

**Coherent, comprehensive strategies that focus on and address the needs of the whole school and its community are necessary.** Realistic expectations help: Lasting change takes time, and the more challenges the school faces, the longer change will take.

