



Being Bold:

**An assessment of turnaround initiatives
in select school districts and states**

May 2012

Summary

For the better part of the last decade, school districts and states have responded to the federal movement for more accountability with new strategies for school improvement. Prompted by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law, and now with the potential for a share of federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) dollars, many school districts and states have taken it upon themselves to try new efforts to turn around their lowest-performing schools. But too many improvement efforts simply represent new versions of prior failed strategies, and have not gone far enough to significantly turn around chronically low-performing schools at scale.

Leading school districts and states are learning from first generation models and adopting bolder turnaround strategies. Instead of one-off school improvement plans, a trend is taking shape in favor of turnaround zones – focused on changing the **conditions** in which schools operate to allow for greater flexibility and autonomy, building **capacity** through specialized turnaround resources and talent, and **clustering** schools to achieve turnaround at scale.

This framework was first codified in *The Turnaround Challenge*, a 2007 Mass Insight study funded by the Gates Foundation that examined failed turnaround strategies and recommended a bolder, multipronged approach to make gains in student achievement.

“Progressive urban superintendents are taking a more comprehensive approach to school turnaround, and we’re seeing early results where these districts are decentralizing to zones and partners. Our progress report demonstrates a trend, and that’s why we’re hopeful that others will choose a bolder path to improving schools and districts.”

-- William Guenther
CEO and Founder
Mass Insight Education

Strategies That Have Failed

Historically, states and districts have attempted to help low-performing schools by providing “light-touch” strategies that failed over time because they focused on only one aspect of the problem rather than addressing underlying systems and operating conditions.

1. **Layering Multiple, Overlapping School Partner Organizations** — Schools are inundated by organizations providing an array of services that are often poorly aligned, involve multiple assessment frameworks, lack adequate accountability mechanisms, and lead to confusion and additional burdens on a school campus.
2. **Requiring Additional Improvement Plans** — For many schools, writing multiple plans (NCLB, state accountability, district mandates) has become simply an act of compliance; the proliferation of plans leads to a fragmentation of effort, and school leadership must manage the competing accountability frameworks on top of their other work.
3. **Sending in External Improvement Teams** — External expert teams complete a superficial needs assessment of a school and a proposed plan of action, leaving the school site staff to implement their plan without building buy-in among school site staff or improving capacity to address needs.
4. **Creating Additional Categorical Funding Streams** — Many states pass legislation providing restricted categorical funding for particular programs or interventions that restrict schools from aligning resources with needs. School budgeting becomes an allocation balancing act rather than a performance-driven exercise focusing on identified school needs.
5. **Mentoring/Coaching by Retired Administrators and Teachers** — Districts and states often hire retired administrators, teachers, and other experts to help mentor and assist principals and staff at low-performing schools on an ongoing basis but only for a few hours each week or month, which may provide little value to the school.
6. **Creating Large “School Improvement” Offices with Inadequate Authority and Accountability** — Central or regionalized offices charged with helping dozens of low-performing schools are often disconnected from the activities of schools and do not have the capacity to support a large number of schools at once or alter the fundamental conditions under which they work. Thus, their activities become cursory and, at times, burdensome, for schools. The state and district turnaround office can be an integral player in the turnaround strategy but must be constructed with the appropriate authority, capacity, and responsibility.
7. **Relying Solely on School Choice or SES for Schools Not Meeting Adequate Yearly Progress** — NCLB-mandated school choice options and Supplemental Education Services (SES) are often not utilized by students who need them most, and after-school SES providers, while helpful in some cases, are often disconnected from school instructional programs and do little to improve student achievement.

The 3Cs Framework: Conditions

Conditions: There are conditions in place for significant improvements in student outcomes.

1. **Autonomy** — Turnaround schools have the autonomy to design their budgets, staffing model, and instructional practice with approval from the Lead Partner. All district policies are waived.
2. **Funding** — The district implements a comprehensive development strategy for supporting turnaround, including a commitment of at least \$750,000 per school in additional funding and an end of engagement sustainability plan.
3. **Staffing** — In Partnership Zone schools, all staff members re-apply for their positions. The Lead Partner administers a competency-based staff selection process and supervises all staff.
4. **Performance goals** — There are a clear set of annual academic, student support, and operations performance goals for schools and systems by which to measure them. These are aligned to district offices that share responsibility for school-based outcomes.
5. **Working conditions** — A modified collective-bargaining agreement is put in place. If that is not feasible, then the teacher evaluation system is aligned to best practices in increasing student achievement as defined by the Lead Partner.
6. **Time on task** — Students in turnaround schools receive increased time on task designed by the Lead Partner, through extended day/year, revised scheduling, and/or improved behavior management support.
7. **Professional development** — Common planning time and professional development for teachers are significantly increased, both initially as an on-boarding process and on an ongoing basis throughout the academic year.
8. **Facilities and technology** — Turnaround schools are prioritized for existing district funds for facilities and technological upgrades. The district commits to visible physical improvements evident to students, teachers, parents, and the community.

The 3Cs Framework: Capacity

Capacity: Investments are made in Lead Partners, schools and districts to sustain success.

1. **Lead Partner** - A Lead Partner is identified or created. The Lead Partner is either a nonprofit or discreet district unit dedicated to turnaround. It reports directly to the Superintendent's Office, and provides all academic and non-academic student services to a cluster of turnaround schools.
2. **Aligned partnerships** - Based on an audit of current partnerships, the Lead Partner aligns all service providers and other supporting partners with the school's goals, ensuring that all partners are on performance contracts.
3. **Planning** - Each school develops a turnaround plan reflecting national best practices designed by the Lead Partner and aligned to measurable annual performance goals.
4. **Talent** - The Lead Partner develops significant recruiting and human resources capacity to prepare it for the responsibility of making critical staffing decisions for the turnaround schools.
5. **School management** - The key responsibilities of the Lead Partner include: ensuring that the autonomies of turnaround schools are honored by the district, providing ongoing oversight and feedback to school leadership, and delivering core academic and non-academic student services.
6. **Autonomy** - Turnaround schools have the autonomy to design their budgets, staffing model and instructional practice with approval from the Lead Partner. All district policies are waived.

The 3Cs: Capacity and the Roles of a Lead Partner

1

Accountability

Sign a three-to five-year performance contract for student achievement with the district or state.

2

Authority

Assume authority for decision-making on school staffing (as well as time, money, and programs).

3

Comprehensive Services

Provide core academic and student support services directly or by aligning the services of other program and support partners.

4

School Presence

Maintain an embedded, consistent, and intense relationship with each school (i.e., five days per week).

The 3Cs Framework: Clustering

Clustering: Schools are clustered to increase capacity and scalability.

1. **Clusters** - The district creates a vertical cluster around a high school and its feeders in the Partnership Zone. School leaders report directly to the Lead Partner.
2. **Long-term impact** - District planning reflects lessons learned in Partnership Zone clusters.

The 3Cs: Who's Aligned, and How Much?

The following chart compares recent district models and demonstrates their alignment with Mass Insight Education's principles for effective turnaround.



Significant alignment



Partial alignment



Not aligned

| Model | Conditions | Capacity | Clustering |
|---|------------|----------|------------|
| Baltimore, MD Innovation Schools | | | |
| Chicago, IL Office of School Improvement, Academy for Urban School Leadership | | | |
| New York, NY Empowerment Zone | | | |
| Philadelphia, PA Renaissance Schools | | | |
| Charlotte-Mecklenburg, NC Project L.I.F.T. * | | | |
| Providence, RI Innovation Zone <i>(Mass Insight partner) *</i> | | | |
| Syracuse, NY iZone <i>(Mass Insight partner) *</i> | | | |

** Second generation (younger) district models are indicated by an asterisk and listed in the blue bands.*

The 3Cs: Who's Aligned, and How Much?

The following chart provides additional detail for first-generation district turnaround models and where they align with Mass Insight's principles for effective turnaround: conditions, capacity, and clustering.

| Model | Alignment |
|---|--|
| Baltimore, MD Innovation Schools | The city uses a mix of charter operators and turnaround providers to manage individual schools. Some providers have multiple schools, but there is little intentional clustering by operators. |
| Chicago, IL Office of School Improvement, Academy for Urban School Leadership | AUSL and OSI have clear management authority - and charter-like autonomy - over a subset of Chicago's turnaround schools. Schools are not currently clustered into vertical feeder patterns. |
| New York, NY Empowerment Zone | Individual schools had the opportunity to petition for in-district autonomies, although flexibility was often encumbered by existing district structures. Both independent groups and teams of educators could apply for empowerment. |
| Philadelphia, PA Renaissance Schools | The district partners with charter management organizations and other local organizations to run turnaround schools with charter-like autonomy. While partners can run multiple schools, the district is not yet organized in feeder patterns. |

The 3Cs: Who's Aligned, and How Much?

The following chart provides additional detail for second-generation district turnaround models and where they align with Mass Insight's principles for effective turnaround: conditions, capacity, and clustering.

| Model | Alignment |
|---|--|
| Charlotte-Mecklenburg, NC Project L.I.F.T. * | Project LIFT operates a West Charlotte high school and all of its feeder schools. The principals of the nine schools report to the executive director of Project LIFT, a 501(c)3 nonprofit operating in the district. In turn, the executive director reports to the superintendent. A group of local funders came together to incubate Project LIFT, using a blend of local talent and outside expertise. |
| Providence, RI Innovation Zone (<i>Mass Insight partner</i>) * | Providence has created an Innovation Zone for the schools that have been identified by the state as chronically underperforming. Three different "Lead Partner" entities manage Innovation Zone schools: a district unit (Office of Transformation and Innovation); an independent provider (Cambium/NAEP); and a new local nonprofit organization (United Providence!), a joint venture between the school district and the Providence Teachers Union). |
| Syracuse, NY iZone (<i>Mass Insight partner</i>) * | The city is creating an Innovation Zone around its northwest quadrant, including the Fowler high school and its feeder schools. Those schools will have flexible operating conditions, will be managed by a new district operating unit, and will be an entry-point for broader district reform. |

States Adopting Turnaround and Zones

States should adopt a spectrum of interventions that creates the right sanctions (sticks) and incentives (carrots) that support district- and school-level improvement. A critical component of the intervention toolkit is the "Recovery District," a state entity that takes fiscal and operational control of one or more failing schools. A handful of states have developed such a structure. This framework, alongside a district-led strategy to improve from inside, creates the urgency and conditions for turnaround to happen at scale.

| State | Initiative | Year Underway |
|-------------|---------------------------------|---------------|
| Louisiana | Recovery School District | 2003 |
| Michigan | Education Achievement Authority | 2011 |
| Tennessee | Achievement School District | 2011 |
| Connecticut | Commissioner's Network | 2012 |

Change Must Be Sustained

Bold reform requires a long-term commitment. Early results from the federal SIG program suggest that many schools are making gains, but others have yet to demonstrate any measurable improvement.

Although funding may focus on achieving significant gains during the first two to three years, the equally important result is sustaining improvements beyond the initial turnaround. All the successful models demonstrate a sustained commitment over time, recognizing that strong support systems must be in place to allow for reforms to take root. These models are changing conditions, building capacity, and developing clusters to support their turnaround efforts.

The national focus on improving chronically underperforming schools is not going away. States and districts will still have access to federal school improvement resources, and the ESEA waiver process has created a long-term structural framework that will drive states to focus on their “priority” schools every year. A smarter, more strategic response is just getting underway.

A Self-Evaluation for School Leaders

- Are federal and state government agencies rejecting SIG applications that feature more of the same turnaround-light approaches that have been failing for years ?
- Are states using their funding to empower districts to change staffing policies, including collective bargaining, and to give turnaround school leaders and Lead Partners true autonomy over hiring, firing, budgeting, and culture?
- Are Lead Partners required to sign three-to five-year performance contracts with accountability for student achievement – and in return provided with control over staffing, program, time and money?
- Are the goals aggressive enough? What are partners being held accountable for in years 1, 2 and 3?
- Is the Lead Partner embedded, with a five-day-a-week presence in the schools? Are the Supporting Partners providing professional development or coaching programs?
- Are states requiring or incentivizing a high school-feeder cluster strategy with SIG funds ... instead of just giving one-off grants to individual schools?
- How will states and districts know if they are successful? How will the public hold them accountable for keeping their promises? Are these promises even public?

Appendix

First Generation Turnaround Zones: District/School Results

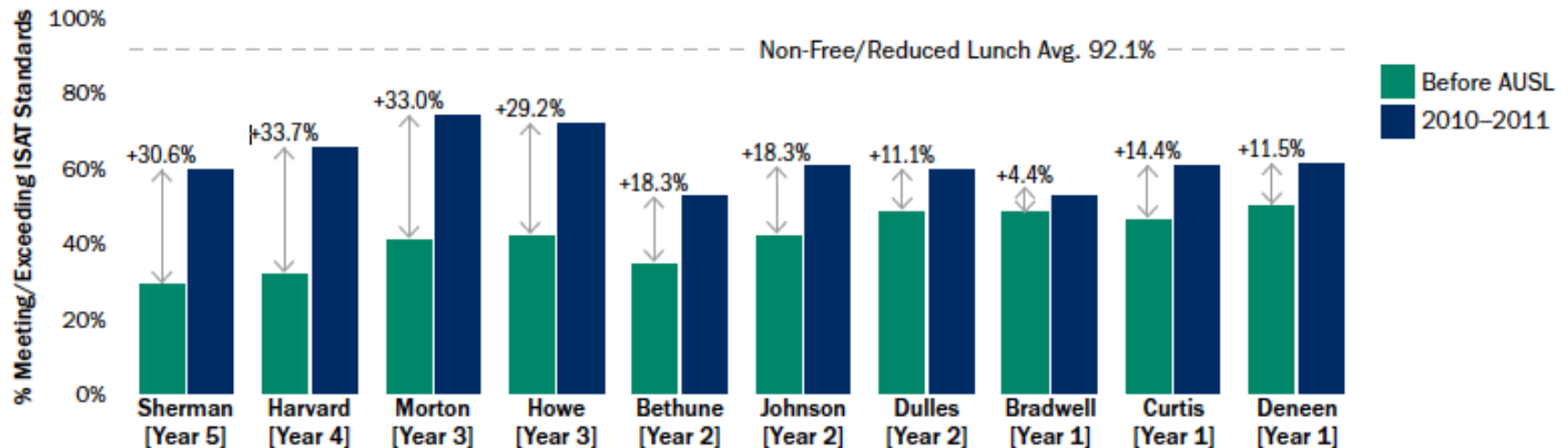
Chicago

The Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL) in Chicago has had double-digit achievement gains.

TURNAROUND ELEMENTARY PERFORMANCE

ISAT COMPOSITE: MEETING/EXCEEDING STANDARDS

Comparison: Before AUSL to Present



Source: Chicago Public Schools REA

Notes: Data excludes English language learner (ELL) students

Chicago: Emerging Results

Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL)

- Ten elementary schools; two high schools
- Replaced school staff, leadership, and governance
- Four elementary schools have been under AUSL for three or more years and have made gains in ISAT reading scores ranging from 17.3 percent to 25.7 percent (e.g., Morton ES: from 39.6 percent to 62.3 percent proficient in reading over three years)
- Dramatic academic gains in AUSL high schools remain to be seen

Chicago Public Schools' Office of School Improvement (OSI)

- Two elementary schools; three high schools (one new as of 2011–12 school year)
- Replaced school staff and leadership
- Two elementary schools have made smaller gains in ISAT reading scores compared to AUSL's schools; Langford increased from 48.9 percent to 55.8 percent over three years; Fulton increased from 37.3 percent to 42.7 percent over three years
- Reduced dropout rate in two high schools by an average of 7.6 percent and increased attendance rate by 16 percent after first year of turnaround

Sources: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research: *Marisa de la Torre, Elaine Allensworth, Sanja Jagesic, James Sebastian, and Michael Salmonowicz*; American Institutes for Research: *Coby Meyers and R. Dean Gerdeman*

Chicago: University of Chicago Consortium Study

Requirements:

- Strong leadership focused on
 - improving school climate and instruction;
 - strengthening partnerships across school communities;
 - monitoring instruction;
 - addressing discipline; and
 - building distributed leadership among teachers in the school.
- Consistent focus on improving instruction by having staff collaborate around data to analyze school policies and learning conditions
- Quick wins that target critical but immediately addressable problems, including student discipline and safety, conflict in the school community, and school beautification
- Committed staff, dedicated to school improvement through collaboration

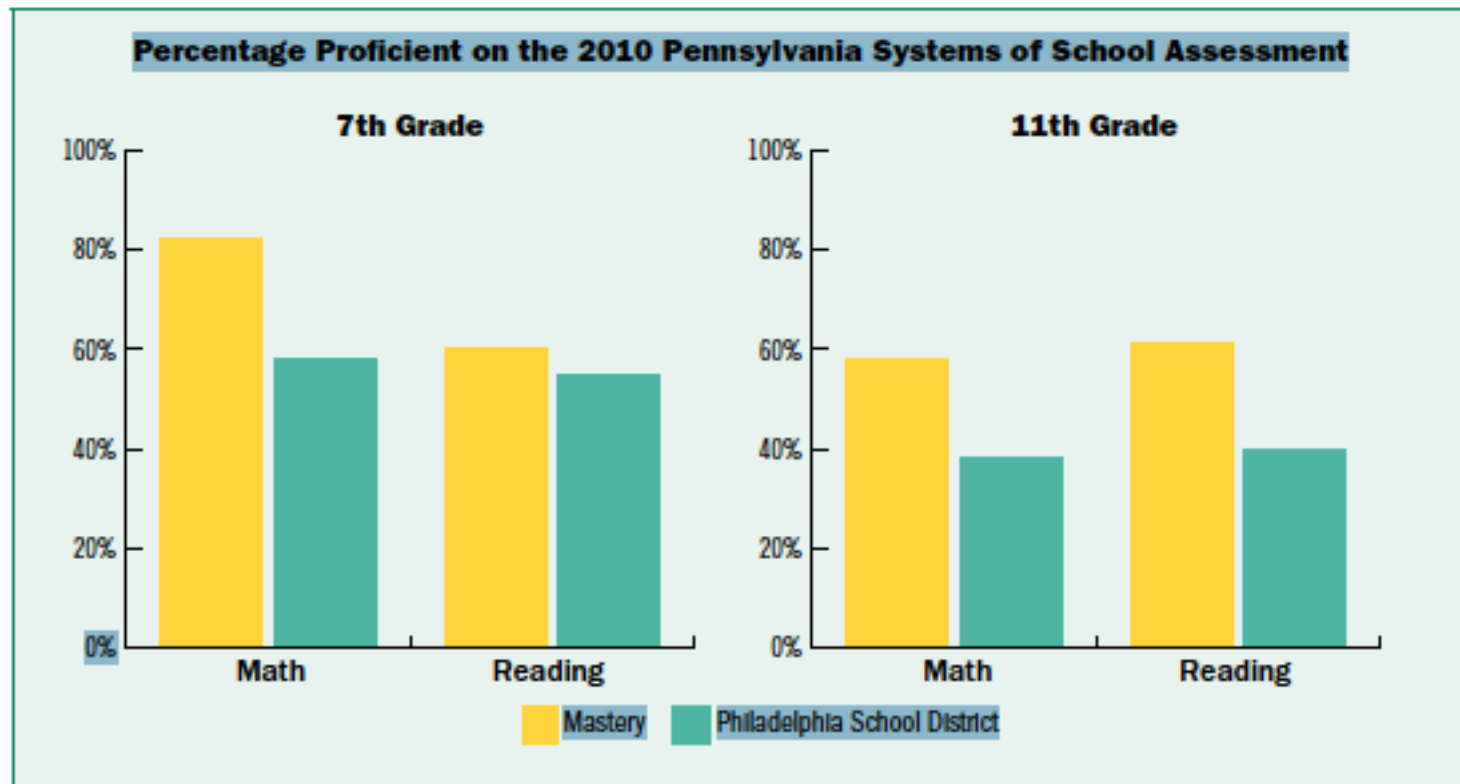
*"Is it enough change?
That's a matter for debate.
Is it significant change,
given the trajectory of
turnaround schools
compared to other schools
at the bottom?
Absolutely."*

- Tim Knowles, director of the
University of Chicago's Urban
Education Institute (cited from
EdWeek)

Citation: Torre, M. et. al. (2012). Turning Around Low-Performing Schools in Chicago. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research.

Philadelphia: Mastery Charter Schools

Students at Mastery Charter Schools in Philadelphia are outperforming traditional district counterparts by 20+ percentage points in multiple grades and subjects.



Philadelphia: Renaissance Schools

Thirteen schools were included in the first year of Philadelphia's Renaissance Schools Initiative (2010–11):

- Direct-run Promise Academies: four K–8 elementary schools and two high schools
- Charter school operators (Mastery, Young Scholars, ASPIRA, Universal) on contract with the district: seven K–8 elementary schools

Year One: Promising Academic Growth

- On average, the percentage of students at each Renaissance elementary school scoring proficient or above on the Math PSSA increased from 30 percent in 2010 to 44 percent in 2011
- On average, the percentage of students at each Renaissance elementary school scoring proficient or above on the Reading PSSA increased from 24 percent in 2010 to 32 percent in 2011

High School Challenge

- As with the Chicago study, Research for Action's analysis of Renaissance high school test scores showed no observable changes after year 1

Sources: Philadelphia's Renaissance Schools Initiative: 18 Month Interim Report; Research for Action: *Eva Gold, Ph.D.*; *Michael H. Norton*; *Deborah Good, M.S.W.*; *Stephanie Levin, Ph.D.*

Philadelphia: Research for Action Study

Philadelphia's Renaissance Schools Initiative emphasizes both autonomy and accountability:

- 1) The Promise Academies received extra resources and attention from the district, which placed them in the spotlight and generated greater public interest in their progress.
- 2) The teachers' union supported the Renaissance Schools Initiative by signing a collective bargaining agreement that was consistent with the principles of the reform effort.
- 3) Principals and teachers felt part of "something big."
- 4) Principals built their own teams of teachers through site selection.
- 5) Principals built systems that promoted and reinforced teacher learning and growth.
- 6) Data and student work were used to assess learning and make instructional decisions.
- 7) Principals and teachers exercised professional judgment to adapt the curriculum.

Citation: Gold, E., et. al. (2012). Philadelphia's Renaissance Schools Initiative: 18 Month Interim Report. Philadelphia, PA: Research for Action.

Los Angeles: Green Dot Schools

Partnership with LAUSD

With the Los Angeles Unified School District's (LAUSD's) Board of Education's approval, the Locke Transformation Project marked the first time an outside organization was granted authority to operate an existing district school. Green Dot took over Alain Leroy Locke High School in 2007 and transformed it into eight, small college preparatory academies committed to becoming high-performing high schools. Green Dot has since transformed two additional middle schools.

Green Dot's Results

Research conducted on Green Dot's Locke Transformation Project compared Green Dot students to a similar group. Green Dot students were more likely to:

- persist in school over time;
- take and pass key 9th, 10th, and 11th grade college preparatory courses;
- take and pass a total of eight or more key college preparatory courses;
- score higher on the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE) on their first attempt;
- pass the English Language section of the CAHSEE on their first attempt; and
- pass both the English Language and mathematics sections of the CAHSEE by the end of 11th grade.

Additionally, for students who remained at their schools for four years, the Green Dot graduation rate was 24 percentage points higher than that for the comparison group. Further, the college readiness rate was 34 percentage points higher for Green Dot graduates than for comparison group graduates.

Source: University of California, Los Angeles, National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST). Evaluation of Green Dot's Locke Transformation Project: Findings for Cohort 1 and 2 Students, May 2012

Baltimore: Innovation High Schools

Innovation High Schools

- Baltimore City Schools led a reform effort in 2001 to redesign, transform, and revitalize Baltimore's neighborhood high schools. This reform created six new small, independent schools. Two of the six created schools converted to charter schools. Two more converted to transformation schools. Each Innovation High School is operated by a nonprofit governing board with the authority to oversee the implementation of the school's approved model.
- On average, students in Innovation High Schools scored between 14 and 30 points higher on HSA tests (on a scale from 240 to 650 where passing scores are 396 for English and 412 for Algebra) and attended school between 9 and 22 percent more days (16 and 40 days, respectively) than students in comprehensive, neighborhood, and "other" schools.
- Innovation High Schools are given autonomy in hiring staff and selecting and implementing curriculum. Student enrollment in innovation schools is, and always has been, based on student interest.
- Innovation High Schools enrolled more academically successful students than other non-selective high schools in the city and successfully retained those students at higher rates than other school types over the initial years of high school.

Sources: <http://www.baltimorecityschools.org> and [*The Urban Institute, Baltimore City's High School Reform Initiative: Schools, Students, and Outcomes, 2007.*](#)

About Mass Insight Education

About Mass Insight Education: Mass Insight Education, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Boston, MA, was founded in 1997. Its launch reflected the high priority that business, government, and education leaders placed at that time on the success of Massachusetts' nascent standards-based reform drive, set in motion by the passage of the Education Reform Act of 1993.

About the School Turnaround Group: The School Turnaround Group (STG) is a division of Mass Insight Education, a national nonprofit dedicated to closing the achievement gap by turning around our country's lowest-performing schools. The STG partners with school districts and state education agencies to redesign how they support their lowest-performing schools.

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