School Enhancement: An Alternative to "School Turnaround"

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The School Turnaround Act of 2018 enacted legislation that designated schools as low-performing by state boards of education which requires the submission of school turnaround plans that are to be set in motion with clear timelines for school improvement (ALEC, n.d.). Policymakers often extend assistance to struggling schools, including financial, in an attempt to turnaround the overall effectiveness and performance of the school and its members. Turnaround schools are often defined federally as "chronically low-performing schools," receiving federal and state monies intended to help develop school leaders (Hildreth & Devos, 2018). An early definition of a turnaround school involves a documented, immediate and "sustained change in the performance of an organization" that is often associated with a change in leadership (Rhim et al., 2007, p.4). Across all states, the term "turnaround is used broadly", but the general agreement to what qualifies as a turnaround school is a school that has been consistently low-performing and is in comprehensive intervention to improve learning gains and overall school systems (Kutash et al., 2010). A research center at a Tier 1 research institute strives to support schools in the enhancement process. Project XXX offers school enhancement and support as one of its five components. This program is supported by a $15.6 million 5-year grant from the Supporting Effective Educator Development Program (SEED), U.S. Department of Education, Project APLUS, (2017-2022; U423A170053).

School turnaround is a multifaceted concept. Leithwood et al. (2010) indicated that turnaround is not simply school improvement; rather, turnaround focuses on the most consistently underperforming schools. Actions employed for turnaround are conducted in a short amount of time, including dramatic changes and consequences for failure. Further, turnaround schools are not focused, as general organizational change and improvement would be, on "continuous, incremental improvement over longer time periods," often with existing staff (Rhim et al., 2007, p. 4). Such change may be enough for effective organizations to improve; however, it is not enough for failing organizations that require dramatic changes to become successful (Rhim et al., 2007). Meyers (2021) and Brooks et al. (2017) have promoted additional considerations with an eye toward social justice, equity, and inclusion as a focus for school change. Green (2017) maintained a similar emphasis, noting the need for unity of purpose, equity, and access for all students in a school. Additionally, Green (2020) determined that turnaround schools must also have a clear vision and straightforward mission statements along with uniform instructional goals and objectives.

Authors (2020) have adopted the term School Enhancement, because the term turnaround may have negative connotations. Not only does the term enhancement connote a positive image, it also intimates moving forward instead of stopping and turning around. Others echo this sentiment as well as point out that some schools have historically performed poorly, and they are not turning around but are going forward (Wallace Group, 2010). Yet, it is first necessary to identify what structures are put into place to sustain such change. The purpose of this research is to explore more deeply how a diverse group of experts define turnaround schools and what characteristics promote school enhancement efforts that have policy implications for leading these schools.

Cleaning Ideas from Scholars on Enhancing Schools

Research Context
In 2021, the research team members from a Tier 1 research university conducted a think tank including ten invited scholars from across the nation as well as education practitioners from both urban and rural schools. Each participant was purposefully selected based on their research background or practical experience regarding school turnaround. Scholars included a blend of educational researchers and school superintendents from both rural and urban Texas schools. During a two-hour virtual think tank, 19 leaders and the research team members held deep-dive discussions revolving around the definition of a turnaround school as well as characteristics the participants felt most likely would promote school enhancement.

Methods
The research team conducted a qualitative content analysis (Neundorf, 2017) of the meeting transcript, including the chat transcript, to identify the dominant messages that emerged from the session. The transcript and chat dialogue were cleaned and verified for accuracy, then open-coded using emergent and thematic coding techniques (Saldaña, 2016) by two research members and placed in a coding matrix. The researchers met to discuss their coding to further align the concepts and solidify codes (McPhail et al., 2016). Frequencies were calculated for the implicit and explicit messages presented in the transcripts, and emergent themes were identified based on the most robust messages found in the calculations. They were then organized under the dominant themes inspired by the Root Cause Analysis process conducted by Green (2020).

What is a Turnaround School?
The first question posed to our think tank participants was "How would you define a turnaround school?" While generally similar themes emerged around this definition, the participants' views also reflected nuance regarding what a turnaround school is and what it may involve. The varying perspectives give cause to consider multi-faceted definitions of school enhancement. Table 1 provides the explicit definitions personally given by each participant in the think tank.

Table 1

Defining School Turnaround: Varying Perspectives

Scholar	Definition
Dr. Coby Meyers	A turnaround school is a school that moves from being organizationally and operationally, poorly functioning to one that maximizes its resources and creates a coherent vision that operations move toward advancing.
Dr. Adrian Johnson	A turnaround school is a public school or charter school system that is perceived to refocus and redirect their work to improve student performance.
Dr. Reginald Green	A turnaround school is a school where the faculty and staff that identified the current conditions of the school have set a vision for the future of the school and are in the process of removing any roadblocks and discrepancies between the current condition.
Dr. Delic Lloyd	A turnaround school is a school that's willing to change present practices in order to access their vision of excellence.
Dr. Patricia Reeves	A turnaround school is a school that has the motivation and the capacity to continuously renew itself in ways that adapt to the needs of students, and achieve equity of opportunity and outcomes for all students.
Dr. Thyrun Hurst	A turnaround school is a school that is focused on change in order to maximize learning for students and adults.
Dr. Geovanny Ponce	A turnaround school is a school with no vision. It is confused, and the systems are all broken.
Dr. Stu Musick	If the school themselves have said, 'Hey, we are a turnaround school. We're part of the school improvement model, and we're making the changes and are willing to make those changes, to start heading in the right direction and to do what it takes to make that school improvement."
Dr. Kenneth Leithwood	A school that needs to be turned around is one who is under-performing on most measures that we consider desirable and well below whatever the average performance might be in relation to some reasonable comparator.
Dr. Karen McIntush	[A turnaround/enhanced school] is one in which the staff, the leadership and the community are willing to take a really deep look at themselves and conduct an analysis of their practices. This is best accomplished via the external team root cause analysis in which they find practices critically important to change and enhance the school, redress the vision and mission, create a campus improvement plan that is actually a real document, a living document, that can be used, employed, and continuously revisited to help turn their schools around or enhance their schools.

Upon further analysis, similar themes emerged across the definitions. The most frequently repeated among them, stated explicitly and implicitly, was the process of identifying a need and advancing in a positive direction. Nine of the ten participants agreed

that turnaround schools are "school system[s] that … refocus and redirect their work to improve" (Johnson) overall performance and function with specific focus on "maximiz[ing] learning for students and adults" (Hurst). In essence, the participants agreed that school turnaround involved identifying areas in need of enhancement by changing processes and procedures.

Conceptualizing School Enhancement

The vast majority of the discussions revolved around the characteristics that define effective school enhancement, among which four major themes stood out: leadership, unity of purpose, root cause analysis, and capacity building. Participants agreed that various aspects of school leadership were vital for enhancing schools and moving toward positive outcomes. Discussions of leadership resulted in the following sub-themes: (a) effective, (b) equitable, (c) instructional (d) organizational, and (e) systems. Secondly, unity of purpose is important as it involves leaders clearly articulating the mission and vision of the school. The use of an external root cause analysis (RCA) also appeared in the discussions as an enhancement tool. An RCA helps school leaders understand the issues a school is facing and prioritize how to address them. Lastly, capacity building was agreed upon by the participants as crucial for moving all members of the school team forward by equipping them with the skills needed to effectively perform their jobs. Table 2 provides an overview of themes and the frequencies of each throughout the think tank conversation.

Table 2

Characteristics for Successful School Enhancement

Theme	Sub-themes	Explicit	Implicit	Quote
	Total Count	21	10	
	Effective Leadership	4	2	It's leadership. Strong effective leadership that will make everything else happen (Ponce)
Leadership	Equitable Leadership	4	1	And there are aspects of equitable leadership, or equity-centered leadership at the District level, that also, I think, is really relevant to think about in terms of how you provide resources, personnel, and set up structures for sustainment. (Meyers)
	Instructional Leadership	6	1	When you come with an authentic instructional leader, and then you start changing everything that you believed to be the right thing, that's when really [things start to happen] (Ponce)
	Organizational Leadership	3	6	Making sure that the campus principals, and the teams that are in place in leadership positions, administrative positions. [That there] are the right people to get that job done. (Musik)

Systems Leadership	4	0	And over the last 5 to 10 years, we've transitioned a lot away from talking about school turnaround leaders. And, instead, talking about systems leadership. And for us, we spend a lot of time working with district leaders before we ever start working with the school principals that we anticipate turning around, improving, and enhancing school. And a lot of that is about getting district personnel to reconsider their roles. (Meyers)	
Capacity Building	6	1	Having a liberating effect on school principals and staff and allows them to be able to think about where and how they're using their capacity and where and how they might have untapped capacity (Reeves)	
Root Cause Analysis	1	5	...the way we help schools empower themselves, to determine where their strengths are, where their growth edges are, and what the most urgent needs are, will help the school retain that focus of control and build efficacy in how they respond to everybody who comes to their doors, wanting to help them make those important changes, and achieve different and better results for all kids. But without that internal process where they get to identify what are the strengths that they're already using… (Reeves)	
Unity of Purpose	5	8	... to take a look and place those items that they are assigned and critically important to change the school to enhance the school and to develop the vision and mission in a better way. (Leithwood)	

Leadership

Throughout the Think Tank Discussion, leadership was the most robust category identified with successful school turnaround; 100% of the participants referenced leadership in some capacity. This may be in part due to the complex role of a quality leader, as five leadership sub-themes also emerged from the discussion. These included effective leadership, equitable leadership, instructional leadership, organizational leadership, and systems leadership.

The key idea that permeated throughout participant responses was that effective leaders evoke positive change. Effective leadership was mentioned as necessary in that it "will make everything else happen" because effective leaders "start affecting [the school] culture" (Ponce). It was also mentioned that when a school has an effective leader, "a lot of these other things are going to be taken care of at a pretty high level because you have good people

in the schools" (Meyers). Dr. Ponce recalled working in two schools in the turnaround process. He noted how the problems "were really easy to fix. But, because we didn't have effective leadership, [it] didn't happen." In other words, once effective leadership was put into place, the school enhancement process progressed.

Think Tank participants further discussed the other leadership attributes needed. The sub-themes of equity, instruction, organization, and systems were clearly expressed ideas in the conversation on leadership. Dr. Meyers stressed the importance of equity-centered leadership, specifically at the district level. Advancing this idea, school leaders must think in terms of "how you provide resources, personnel, and set up structures for sustainment." Sustainability is important, as schools often "go backwards … sustainability is key" (Maza). Leaders must also possess instructional leadership. Dr. Ponce pointed out that "when you come with an authentic instructional leader, you start changing everything that [they] believed to be the right thing; that's when [things start to happen]." Additionally, leaders must be effective at organizational management. When reflecting upon the turnaround process, Dr. Leithwood recognized that the change process begins with a more "central form of leadership that gets the turnaround process going." He also acknowledged that this organizational leadership should "eventually be distributed much more broadly" so that all aspects of the school are functioning effectively. Finally, think tank participants also mentioned that systems leadership is essential to achieving high levels of learning (Hurst). One participant stated that leaders must, "have a process for setting priorities and

taking ownership" (Reeves), and "[the] leader [must be] able to come in and put systems and procedures in place" (Hurst). Establishing strong systems provides a solid foundation for the stakeholder participation school enhancement requires.

Think tank participants mentioned leadership explicitly 47 times. They also implicitly referred to the qualities of a good leader several other times. For example, various participants pointed out the role of leaders in creating growth, sustaining progress, creating and sustaining a unity of purpose, and building their staff's capacity. Leaders are the biggest key to providing the greatest enhancements to schools. (McIntush)

Unity of Purpose

In addition to leadership, many of the scholars clearly articulated Unity of Purpose as a major theme. Unity of purpose involves the entire leadership team, faculty, and staff explicitly stating and committing to the mission, vision, and core values of the school. Four participants explicitly referenced vision as a key change agent for school enhancement, generally agreeing that a school must "maximize its resources and create a coherent vision so that operations move toward advancing" (Meyers). The mission, vision, and core values should also be evident in any school improvement plans and should drive all change initiatives. Key to ensuring a unity of purpose exists, leaders must use the tools available to them to establish unity within the school community. One specific method is through the use of a campus improvement plan, "a real document, a living document, that they can use and employ to help turn their schools around or to enhance their schools" (McIntush). Such a tool allows schools to really "take a look and place those items that they are assigned as critically important to change the school, to enhance the school and to develop the vision and mission in a better way" (McIntush). Campus improvement plans are important documents for

clearly articulating the goals and objectives to achieve school enhancement.

Root Cause Analysis (RCA)

The initial step in making change is to identify that change is needed and discover the root cause of the issues. A root cause analysis (RCA) serves to identify causes and proactively work toward school improvement. While the think tank participants did not always explicitly state the words "Root Cause Analysis," they did implicitly validate the need for a RCA. "Unless you understand what condition the school is in right now, I don't see how you can focus on making a change in any one aspect and be accurate in the process" (Green). The process of how leaders best position their schools for positive change was seen as a vital component to school enhancement. Dr. Reeves passionately described important aspects of this process.

> The way we help schools empower themselves to determine where their strengths are, where their growth edges are, and what the most urgent needs are, will help the school retain that locus of control and build efficacy in how they respond to everybody who comes to their doors, wanting to help them make those important changes and achieve different and better results for all kids. But without that internal process, where they get to identify what are the strengths that they're already using, the capacities they need help developing. The process by which they set priorities, they become, again, soon, out of bandwidth, because they're being

pointed in so many different directions with so many agendas telling them all the things they have to do differently all at the same time.

Additionally, Dr. Meyers mentioned the importance of asking, "What are the issues here that we need to actually focus on addressing?" Likewise, Dr. Hurst recalled that as a new superintendent, he talked to his staff and employed other methods to understand the issues that needed to be addressed. Specifically, he wanted to know

> What's not working? What should I not touch? What do I need to touch immediately? I went through those regular processes that we all go through as leaders when we go into a facility or new role, but I quickly found that every aspect of the school needed to be touched in some way. (Hurst)

Additionally, Dr. Leithwood mentioned the importance of using a deep analysis method like a RCA to understand a school's underlying issues. "They [school leaders] really need to stop for a minute and be sure they understand what the problem is. I don't think I could agree that there's some sort of template for turning school around in the absence of diagnosing what the problem is to begin with." Participants recognized the importance of analyzing all aspects of the school to promote the enhancement process.

Capacity Building

Many of the think tank members also mentioned a need for building capacity. For example, when asked to select two terms that were most important to school enhancement, Dr. Hurst stated "I will look at how do you build [a] teacher's capacity?" Likewise, Dr. Ponce cited building capacity as second only to leadership in naming the two items necessary for enhancing schools. He stated, " I believe that the second one is to build capacity in our faculty, staff, and everybody in that learning community." Dr. Reeves concurred that

capacity building was one of the top two necessary items needed for enhancing schools.

Building capacity is a process. Dr. Ponce noted that "professional development is better at building capacity for teachers and staff." Capacity building also involves making decisions on what changes will need to be made. Dr. Reeves suggested that leaders should start "...with those strengths. It tends to have a very liberating effect on school principals and staff and allows them to be able to think about where and how they're using their capacity and where and how they might have untapped capacity." Building capacity of school personnel was seen as vital to school enhancement throughout the discussions.

Future Exploration of School Enhancement

The think tank of scholars on school enhancement provided helpful commentary about and insight into what is needed to improve schools. Time limitations prevented deeper exploration into broader concepts brought up during the discussion, many of which deserve future investigation. For instance, all participants repeatedly mentioned the need for "great leaders," yet time to discuss specific recommendations for supporting leaders in building that capacity to be great was lacking. Additionally, many participants referred to the importance of addressing issues within the "systems." Schools are made up of many systems within them that are often evaluated through a RCA under a turnaround initiative. More detailed explanations require a discussion that takes a deeper dive into those systems and how they are connected to enhancing schools. Furthermore, when a school is deemed in turnaround by a state agency, participants agreed that "by the time you complete all that paperwork and say the same thing in 3 or 4 different ways, time has passed...critical time has passed where you could have continued to work on turnaround" (Loyd). Therefore, discussion on how best to manage and support schools through official turnaround mandates is also warranted. Lastly, several explicitly stated keywords were mentioned numerous times throughout the think tank meeting (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Exploring Frequently Cited Topics in the School Enhancement Think Tank
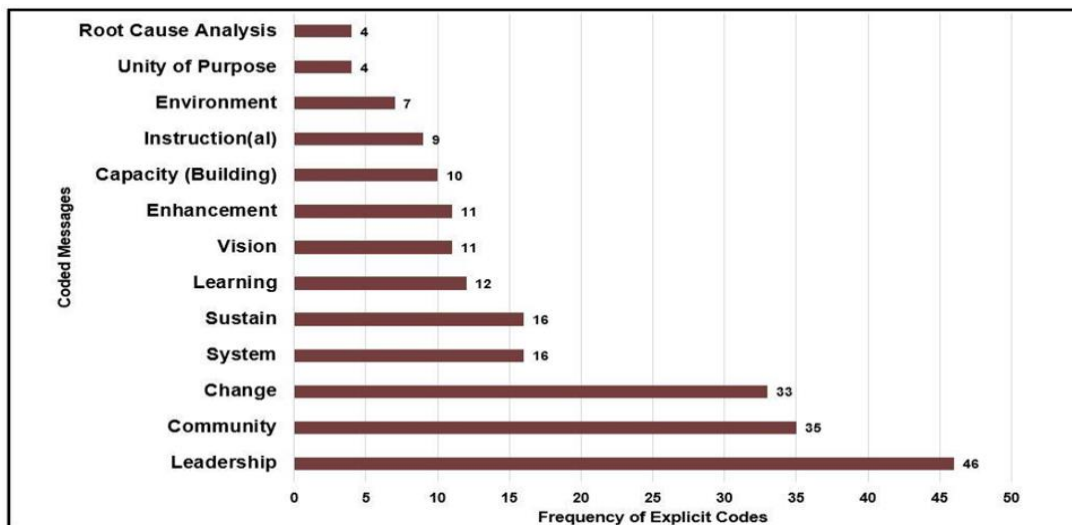
Note: Counts are for explicit words appearing in the transcript. The combination of explicit and implicit mentions comprised the overall dominant themes.

Implications for Policy

From the think tank analysis, the research team identified implications for policy for school enhancement. To illustrate the implications, Figure 2 provides an overview of the policy implications extracted from the think tank finding.

Figure 2

Policy Implications for School Enhancement

Note. Five Themes and Sub-Themes of Policy Implications for Urban School Enhancement

Policy Implication 1: Nurture Unity of Purpose across the School Community

School enhancement is a multifaceted construct as explained by the scholars in this topic exploration. Yet, much is to be gained when considering the policy implications of this study's findings. Leaders drive the school forward with their deliberate actions demonstrating adherence to vision, mission, and core values. A policy related to unity among the school community should be promoted by the school leader via integrating the mission, vision, and core values with everything the school does. Such a policy creates a sense of community and shared ownership of a school system's actions. This sense of community also expands beyond the school walls to parents and other stakeholders outside the school.

Policy Implication 2: Build Capacity of Faculty and Staff

Effective leadership cannot be understated. Strong effective leadership will make everything else happen (Ponce), including a clear understanding of the leadership team, campus faculty, and support staff's capacity. A strong leadership capacity-building policy is recommended. The placement of people based on their capability to enhance an area of the school is foundational to improvement. Once placed, the policy needs to include requisites of school leaders ensuring the faculty and staff are equipped with the necessary skills and dispositions to enhance the school. Leadership teams must ensure they are leading and guiding the school in a positive direction, whether through coaching, mentorship, or requisite training. Additionally, administrative teams must equip their teacher leaders to support and train the teachers around them. Leaders must reflectively evaluate the capacity of all faculty

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and staff, seek to enhance areas needed growth, and capitalize on existing strengths.

Policy Implication 3: Establish Strong Instructional Leadership

Capacity building policy is also linked to the policy requiring the establishment of strong instructional leadership, a highly important administrative behavior. In this policy for turning around schools/enhancing schools, there should be language that urges leaders to identify instructional strengths and weaknesses among the faculty and ensure that people are in positions where they can be most effective. Identifying strengths helps faculty members use their talents to train other teachers who need capacity-building. It is important to build capacity through professional development, direct observation, and authentic feedback (Ponce). Therefore, as part of this policy, leaders must seek out effective professional development opportunities for enhancing faculty members of concern. A strong instructional leader maintains a classroom presence, communicates with other leaders and coaches, and diligently seeks out quality, research-based professional development to address instructional gaps among the faculty. Once progress, under this policy, has been made, one additional component to the policy should be that the leader must develop a plan to maintain the progress and optimize the system with which the progress was made (Maza).

Policy Implication 4: Engage in an External Root Cause Analysis in the School Enhancement Process

Policy for school enhancement must be intentional with processes leaders use to identify opportunities for school enhancement. For example, decisions must be data-driven and viewed from a variety of lenses and perspectives. The RCA method has proven to identify underlying issues (Green, 2020), and we recommend that RCAs should involve an external RCA, along with an internal RCA. By identifying specific and focused areas of concern, efforts can be deliberate and time efficiently spent on those targeted areas. In particular, schools targeted by a state agency should heed the guidance in this report. Conducting an external RCA aids campus administrators by focusing their attention on specifically identified areas, thus providing an in-depth look at school systems. RCAs help leaders avoid exhausting time and resources in less critical areas. Additionally, an RCA provides an outside perspective that can identify areas not otherwise evident to school insiders.

Policy Implication 5: Ensure that School Enhancement is a Continuous Process that is Sustainable

Policy should require school enhancement to be in a continuous process of moving forward and one that is sustainable. The think tank scholars recognized the need for sustainability in school enhancement. Also, it is essential that leaders establish systems that function well beyond any individual in any particular role (Meyers). This means that the focal point of this continual process should be to maintain the components within the system that ensure the initial enhancement and progress. Therefore, leaders must continually re-evaluate efforts used to enhance the school, identifying what is working and what is not. Additionally, as faculty or staff change, leaders should revisit the need to ensure all stakeholders are aligned with the vision and mission. Finally, leaders need to ensure all systems are communicated clearly and identify opportunities for capacity-building among new faculty. Each of the themes and sub-themes discussed in this brief must be

prominent at all times among leaders, especially as changes occur from year-to-year.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the think tank of scholars provided insightful commentary about what is needed to improve schools. We suggest that these insights should be considered as implications for policy development and implementation for school enhancement or turning around schools; these policies are specifically related to leadership.

The think tank session began with the participants defining turnaround schools from varying perspectives, which created a diverse and multi-dimensional definition of school enhancement. Additionally, when articulating their thoughts about the essential characteristics of school enhancement, four major themes emerged. Those themes were leadership, unity of purpose, root cause analysis, and capacity building. The discussions among participants created a holistic perspective for the essential practices and policies required to ensure the success of turnaround schools. Further elaboration on these topics is warranted to inform policy for school leaders as they implement important actions for the enhancement in their schools.

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