

A Qualitative Study of Utah's State Turnaround Program

Cohort One

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A Qualitative Study of Utah’s State Turnaround Program Successes – Cohort One

Analysis in Brief

The first cohort of schools that successfully exited the Utah State Turnaround Program experienced similar factors of success and share similar concerns. A concerted focus on data, positive reinforcement, collaboration, and strong leadership were chief among the factors they attributed to their success. These schools are very proud and empowered by their success, yet have concerns about sustaining the gains made without the additional resources or school leadership that adopts turnaround practices.

At a Glance

Reported Factors for Designation

- Lack of cohesion among staff, isolated teaching
- Student behavioral issues
- Low levels of parent involvement and support
- Apathetic school culture, low expectations of students
- High rates of teacher turnover
- One-off challenges that may have righted themselves the next year, i.e., more than one key teacher leaving in a year, or a drastic change in administration and focus.

Participating Schools	District or Charter
Thomas W. Bacchus Elementary	Granite
Big Water School, K-6	Kane
Bluff Elementary	San Juan
Bonneville Elementary	Ogden
Cedar Valley Elementary	Alpine
C.S. Lewis Academy, K-6	Charter School
Lincoln Elementary	Granite
Mana Academy, K-9	Charter School
Mont Harmon Middle School	Carbon
Monument Valley High School	San Juan
Thomas Jefferson Jr. High School	Granite
Vae View Elementary	Davis

Reported Factors of Success

- **Diving into the data:** Schools adopted the practice of tracking students’ scores on both a micro and macro level, which helped highlight specific gaps and allowed teachers to maximize effective use of time in the classroom.
- **Strong leadership:** If the principal or director wasn’t on board and supportive throughout the process, successful implementation of the proven practices would not have been possible.
- **Positive reinforcement:** Celebrating accomplishments rather than punitive approaches had a transformative effect for both teachers and students.
- **Buy-in:** District and school leadership, teachers, students, and parents had to believe that improvement was possible and accept the challenge to meet the goal.
- **Collaboration:** Instead of silo’s, teachers learned to work together to ensure each student is adequately prepared for their next step.
- **Additional resources:** Schools in turnaround benefited from additional expertise, aides and tutors, training, and funds.

Key Concerns

- **Sustainability:** Success was dependent on leadership with a mission, staff willing to adapt, and extra resources. Without all three, there is worry success won’t be sustained and the hard work will be for naught.
- **Teachers time:** Turnaround required extra time and effort from teachers already feeling overworked. It proved overwhelming to some who left for other jobs without the extra requirements.
- **Consultant value:** Schools felt if the money used to hire the consultant company was instead given to the schools, they could have been able to afford the necessary resources to improve within the given timeframe.

Introduction

The Utah School Turnaround and Leadership Development Act was passed and enacted by the Utah Legislature in 2015 with the aim to identify and provide outside resources to Utah's lowest-performing three percent of schools. Schools were identified to start the program the fall of 2015.

The Turnaround Program provides each school an independent, state-approved turnaround consultant to customize an improvement plan and provide training and support to leadership and staff. To “exit” the turnaround program, schools identified in 2015 were required to improve their grade by at least one letter after the three-year turnaround period. The program also includes a leadership development training

element for school leaders called Leadership and Inquiry for Turnaround (LIFT).¹

The Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute contracted with the Utah State Board of Education to conduct qualitative research with schools who successfully exited the first cohort of the Utah School Turnaround Program. While 18 of the 26 schools in the first cohort successfully exited the Turnaround Program, six were immediately reidentified into a state or federal improvement program. Therefore, 12 schools were included in this study.²

The objective for this research is to better understand each schools' experience with the program, and uncover the common factors of success.

Methodology

The Gardner Institute conducted in-depth interviews with each school's superintendent, any principal involved in the turnaround process, a sample of teachers who were present during the entire turnaround process, district board chair when available, and turnaround consultant.

Three unique questionnaires³ were jointly developed by the Gardner Institute and Utah State Board of Education (USBE) for the following audiences:

- Superintendents, principals, and teachers
- Board chairs
- Turnaround consultants

The Gardner Institute received a contact list from the USBE consisting of each school's superintendent, principal, school board chair, and turnaround consultant. Principals helped the Institute obtain a list of teachers present the entire turnaround process (Fall 2015 to Fall 2018). When teacher lists weren't supplied by principals, USBE assisted in obtaining those records. Superintendents were helpful in sharing contact information for principals that may have begun the turnaround process with a school, but had since left.

The Gardner Institute conducted 70 interviews between May 6-Aug 6, 2019; most over the phone and a handful in person. All interviews were analyzed to produce overall and role-specific summaries.

Limitations

By design, qualitative research findings are not generalizable to all those who have experienced the turnaround process. Instead, they allow for nuance, depth, and personalized context. These findings should be treated as directional in nature.

Each school is not represented equally. The study's goal of three teachers per school was not possible when some schools

had only two that experienced the entire turnaround process. In other cases, up to six teachers participated. Also, attempts made to interview those who experienced the turnaround process in each school were not always successful. As a final effort, those who had not responded to requests were given the option of filling out a questionnaire. Two teachers from the same school chose that option, and they were the only teacher representation from that school.

Because 12 of the 18 schools who successfully exited the first Turnaround Program cohort were included in this study, it is unclear if including the remaining six schools would change the findings. Another possible limitation in this research is excluding the eight schools who were not successful in exiting turnaround in the allotted time, as their experience could possibly inform practices to avoid.

Lastly, the difference in sample size between charter and public schools affects the depth different perspectives bring to the context of each school, as the two charter schools included in this study didn't include a district-level perspective.

Considerations

This report covers experiences of the first cohort of the Turnaround Program. The original legislation was enacted in the 2015 General Session through S.B. 235. Legislation enacted in the 2017 General Session through S.B. 234 significantly amended the program. Considering statute has changed for subsequent cohorts, opinions about certain facets of the original Turnaround Program may not be relevant to future cohorts. These changes can be found in the table below and are referenced throughout the report.

Table 1. Changes to Turnaround Program Statute

	Cohort 1	Cohort 2 +
Identification Criteria	Single-year of low performance	Two consecutive years of low performance
Exit Criteria	Increase at least one letter grade	No longer meet the criteria for which the school was identified
Turnaround Consultant Contracting & Cost	State-managed contract; costs not capped	LEA-managed contract; contract costs capped
Distribution of Funds	No funds allocated to LEAs or schools	Funds allocated to LEAs to contract with turnaround consultant and may be allocated for other interventions
School Turnaround Plan Development	Turnaround consultant conducted the root cause analysis	Independent party conducts the root cause analysis
Pay for Success for Turnaround Consultants	Turnaround consultants receive 50% of fees up-front and 50% of fees if the school successfully exits	LEAs may include pay for success provisions in contract (not required)
Pay for Success for Educators	Educators receive bonuses if the school successfully exits on a sliding scale according to the amount of improvement	Replaced by Teacher Recruitment and Retention Program, enabling schools to access funds up-front

As statute has since been changed to require two years of school performance data instead of one, the number of schools eligible for turnaround designation was drastically reduced (from 26 in the first cohort to 5 in the next). Studying the successful schools in the first cohort allows a larger sample size

from which to pull common factors that led to a successful exit.

This report should be considered alongside a vast body of research on the factors for a successful school turnaround utilized by USBE and other states.⁴

Overall Turnaround Factors

The first cohort of schools that successfully exited the Utah State Turnaround Program experienced similar factors for designation, factors of success, and also share similar concerns. Verbatim comments from participants are found throughout this report as examples of the shared sentiment expressed.

Factors for Designation

According to participants, the first cohort met Turnaround Program criteria for various reasons. Most common among them was:

- Lack of cohesion among staff, isolated teaching
- Student behavioral issues
- Low levels of parent involvement and support
- Apathetic school culture, low expectations of students
- High rates of teacher turnover
- One-off challenges that may have righted themselves the next year, i.e., more than one key teacher leaving in a year, or a drastic change in administration and focus.

Factors of Success

Common themes of success quickly emerged. Every school studied experienced most of these common factors because they directly relate to research-based practices implemented by their turnaround expert and staff were willing to put in the hard work to ensure improvement.

Data-Informed Instruction

The first major finding is the power of analyzing and utilizing student performance data individually and across grade cohort. Schools adopted the practice of tracking students' scores on a more minute level; not just tracking unit test scores, but also analyzing scores from assignment to assignment. This highlighted specific gaps to focus on from an individual level, the entire grade cohort, and the entire school; uncovering an overall story and allowing teachers to maximize effective use of time in the classroom and on an individual student basis.

"We've become a data-driven culture. We're more focused now with how to use it. We're more intentional!"

In most cases, students themselves were encouraged to track their own scores and data, sometimes managing their own 'databook.' This resulted in students taking ownership in their learning; some turning it into a competitive sport with themselves and others.

"[Data] helps me know where I'm going, the kids know where I'm going and they know how they're going to get there."

Strong Leadership

Turnaround success was heavily dependent on positive, infectious, and supportive leadership. If the principal couldn't convey the value and importance of the hard work required to improve and convince teachers they'd have the necessary support, teachers had a harder time buying into the process and extra time commitment. It was often noted that the leader "set the stage."

The turnaround process often implemented a leadership team made up of school administration and teachers. The leadership team worked closely with the turnaround consultant to act as a conduit to all staff, and ensured programs being implemented were a good fit for the school and supported by their colleagues. Leadership teams also served to empower the teachers serving in them, with many saying it led to a sense of "ownership" over the problem and the plan to fix it. Some were found to be natural leaders, and subsequently rose to administration positions.

"I think part of the success was building leadership capacity among staff. Certain teachers that led the way in their prospective PLC's⁵ learned more than they needed to in that natural leaders emerged and many of them have since moved into administration positions."

Power of Positive Reinforcement

Often referred to by participants as PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports) and described as a practice of celebrating accomplishments instead of punitive approaches, positive reinforcement had a transformative effect for both teachers and students. Technically, PBIS "supports schools, districts, and states to build systems capacity for implementing a multi-tiered approach to social, emotional, and behavior support."⁶

Some schools designated into the Turnaround Program are in lower socioeconomic areas (see Appendix C) where parent involvement is limited. This can result in disruptive student behavioral issues, and thus higher teacher turnover. PBIS was especially effective in these schools. However, consistency of this program is key; if implemented half-heartedly or not prioritized by a new administration, behavioral problems are likely to resurface.

One notable interview of a district-level professional explained how students blossomed under this approach by citing a quote from author Wayne Dyer,

"When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change." This was the case for both our students and the teachers."

"I do think we focus too much on test scores, we forget

about those relationships. When you build those relationships and kids know that you care about them, they will bend over backwards for you."

The turnaround consultants also used positive reinforcement when coaching teachers and administrators. Teachers appreciated the approach especially when getting feedback after in-classroom observations.

"They didn't come in and bash, they came to observe and told you what you were good at."

Buy-In from Everyone

It was often mentioned success wouldn't have been possible if everyone involved wasn't completely behind the plan and willing to put in the work. In fact, in some cases, resistant teachers were encouraged, or ultimately made the decision, to leave rather than adopt the changes being made.

"If you have 1-2 teachers not invested, it is hard to get the results you need."

Buy-in was easier if students were included in the process and turnaround was made a school-wide challenge. Positive energy increased school-wide as scores improved.

The turnaround process was shown to positively affect entire communities. Parents became more involved and invested due to specific programs implemented during the turnaround process like Academic Parent-Teacher Teams (APTT) and home visits. These efforts gave parents the tools to be encouraging and supportive at home. It also improved the school's reputation throughout the community.

Collaboration

"We support each other and that means all of the students are all of our students."

Another valuable tool implemented were Professional Learning Communities (PLC's) that "meet regularly to share expertise and work collaboratively to improve teaching skills and academic performance of students."⁷ PLC's implemented during turnaround encouraged teachers to lesson plan with the student's academic path in mind, so multiple grades worked together to ensure students were adequately prepared for their next step. Similar to leadership teams, these collaborative meetings fostered a sense of community with a mission, effectively eliminating siloed teaching.

"We are working tirelessly to improve our PLC efficiencies and working with other grade levels to prioritize

curriculum standards. Simply, the staff is working towards becoming one functioning unit and that benefits the students tenfold.”

“Being successful in our own room wasn’t good enough.”

“[PLC’s result in] a different perspective when you are writing a test, understanding the whole school and not just your grade or subject.”

“The environment before was teachers closed in their classrooms. Now there is a greater focus on state standard alignment and also being more willing and likely to reach out to other teachers and open to different curriculum approaches.”

“[A major factor was] requiring us to change our attitudes and perspective from individual to culture and community; working with each other, the community and administration to improve the whole instead of the individual.”

Insights by Role

Principals

An overwhelming majority of participants cited principals or directors as one of the roles most crucial for success. Therefore, their insights and feedback are particularly valuable.

Principal Tools for Success

The ‘Why’

The turnaround designation initially came as a shock to some schools. That alone was enough to inspire staff of some of those schools to “do whatever it takes.” Principals of other schools realized they faced the challenge of implementing what was referred to as a “growth mindset,” an opportunity to take advantage of the additional resources and expertise while believing ambitious goals are attainable, and convincing teachers what hard work could accomplish. The ‘why’ for the turnaround process is the long term benefit to students and the community.

“We have that positive vibe going out, that our kids can and we’re going to help them do it. There’s no more of this ‘our kids can’t.’ I haven’t heard that in years. Not since [our new principal] showed up.”

The growth mindset came with expectations that, in some cases, teachers didn’t subscribe to. It was common for those teachers to either be replaced or leave on their own. In fact, for one school, it required replacing 26 out of 32 teachers during the turnaround process.

Additional Resources

While only specifically mentioned by a few participants, it is clear the extra resources infused into these schools from various sources - whether for experts with research-based strategies and technology, coaches and tutors, funding a library to stimulate reading, or increasing computer access for students – played a major role.

Caveat

A few of the schools in this cohort were confident that because of unique circumstances, moving targets for a successful exit, or plans already in place, they would have achieved a better grade in the same timeframe without intervention.

“We’d be working hard anyway if we weren’t in turnaround. We weren’t satisfied with test scores, we knew our kids could do better.”

A few even suggested that if the money given to turnaround consultants was instead given to the struggling schools, they could have easily improved their grade on their own.

We Are In It Together

The next tool in many of the principals’ toolbelts was sharing accountability by building leadership capacity among staff. This was usually achieved via establishing leadership teams and Professional Learning Communities (PLC’s) as part of the turnaround process. This promoted collaboration and kept teachers accountable to each other for the success of each student.

This teamwork atmosphere often trickled throughout the school, engaging students and all school staff. One teacher said,

“The principal made sure everyone in the school was a part of this. Even the custodian is part of the celebration committee and helps mentor kids.”

Cheerlead

The additional responsibility and time was overwhelming and took its toll on everyone. The principal often saw his or her role as a support system; one principal made sure teachers received a professional day, another worked with the consultant to schedule professional development requirements that worked better for staff schedules, other principals led school-wide campaigns to inspire a ‘can-do’ spirit from everyone. One principal said,

“It’s important to make sure we’re sitting at the tables with them, staying after school with them until the last teacher leaves, being here before they come in the morning. That’s the most important piece.”

Principal Feedback

Consider Variability

Avoid a cookie-cutter approach by closely considering the characteristics of each school to better cater solutions and expertise for their specific needs.⁸

Reconsider Funding Method

Adapt the amount of money to each school's needs.⁹ A couple of the smaller schools mentioned they received too much money, one stating it was a misuse of taxpayer dollars. *"We could have gotten by with an eighth of what we were given."* Or, they acclimated to the extra help they can no longer afford.

Professional Development

Feedback from those that attended Leadership and Inquiry for Turnaround (LIFT) meetings was mixed. Some principals mentioned the trainings began assuming principals were part of the problem, when they might have just been appointed to the school. LIFT subsequently changed that approach. Other feedback suggested LIFT needs to be valuable enough to warrant being taken out of the school for the day, with ideas like catering trainings based on each school's particular needs. Others would have liked more practical, hands-on help rather than a theoretical approach. Many principals appreciated getting to know and learning from their peers from other schools and districts.¹⁰

To the District

The extra resources schools received while in turnaround most likely helped provide extra bodies or technology. Principals would like the district to understand their financial requirements to remain successful once turnaround resources disappear.

District involvement differed per school, usually depending on district population or geographical size. Opinion also differed per principal on whether they'd prefer more or less district involvement.

Teachers

Teachers were often cited as one of the roles most crucial for success. Since they were the most oft-interviewed role, this section is mostly told through their own voices.

Turnaround is Hard

Teachers caution of the extra time required during the turnaround process. The additional time commitment can be overwhelming and lead some to leave for another school rather than commit to the extra work. Those that stayed described the effects,

"If you are feeling run down you are not teaching your best."

"It was hard on our own families. I was spending every Sunday on school work."

Teachers also noticed negative effects of being pulled out of the classroom for trainings and professional development.

"We saw a benefit to the trainings, but it was difficult to be outside of the classroom. I knew parents felt the same way. Behavior problems would arise due to us being pulled from our class."

Teachers wonder if that amount of work is sustainable without extra resources.

"If you want to prevent schools from needing private company interventions, which is not cheap, schools need further support."

"It would be nice to see an "after turnaround fund" to help us slowly transition out. Losing \$200k is major."

"Right now, we feel like we are struggling a bit. I wish it didn't all get taken away. I wish there was a little provided right now. It is a constant process because we are always getting new kids and teachers."

It is Rewarding

The hard work, however, was rewarding. The vast majority of teacher participants are very proud of the skills they have learned and implemented in the classroom. The positive results served to empower both teachers and students and fostered a united community.

"Now with the staff that went through the whole process, they see the value. Kids see the value; they go home and say 'teachers actually care about us.'"

"I would be willing to go into a new turnaround school and try it again to see if I could learn more things to help my kids. I feel like I want to call every student I've taught the past twenty years and apologize; I am such a better teacher now."

Sustainability

Teachers worry that if programs aren't codified, key staff turnover may not prioritize the new practices or ensure new teachers are taught them, and all the hard work was for naught.

"As the staff changes, I realize that not all were trained like we were during those years. Will that make a difference? I think it will if they do not have the same teaching strategies and dedication."

"[The turnaround consultant] just disappeared. We need a soft transition especially if there is an administration change."

Teachers think every school should implement the same programs and practices, regardless of how the school ranks.

"Every school needs to go into turnaround. Even those 'A' schools would learn new tricks."

Lastly, teachers reported challenges in catering instruction based on student need.

"This year, I had 28 students that spoke 10 different languages, and only one aide for 20 minutes a day. But I am expected to give each student the education they deserve and need to prepare them for the upcoming grade level and eventually college."

"Some students come to school not knowing what a pencil is, or how to hold a book."

Communicate

Teachers would have liked the expectations and plan communicated to them from the outset. Some didn't find out why they were designated until much later, and because teachers felt blindsided with all the hard work, some left because they didn't yet see the worth. Those who stayed are very happy to be a better educator due to what they learned during the Turnaround Program. A communication effort to help teachers see the value in the extra work they are about to put in might discourage turnover.

Leadership

In addition to the hard work of teachers, success depended on leadership. Most teachers mentioned leadership as a critical role to success. They felt inspiration, partnership, and support from their principal. Successful schools had a principal who implemented a 'growth mindset' and conveyed the 'why.'

"[Our new principal came in and said,] 'We're going to change the way people see this school.'"

Turnaround consultant

Teachers had mostly positive experiences with their consultants and believe success wouldn't have been possible without them. However, while some consultants were hands on, others reported consultants that were absent or rude. One consultant was both to different schools. Most were liked, but some were resented and teachers were relieved when turnaround was over. A few teachers would have liked better communication about the process from the beginning.

"We liked them so much we brought them back to help with professional development."

"Until I sat and put it on paper, I didn't realize how big of an impact they were for us – more than I realized. This year we do not have them in the school and you can see the difference. We are struggling with some discipline and academics because we stopped doing some of those things we were trained to do. We are going back to it next year."

"I didn't know what they wanted from us, but we really wanted to help! If we were told what the end would look like that would have been huge."

"The amount the government was paying them, they better be pretty darn awesome."

District

Since some districts already had varying plans in place for these struggling schools, they mostly viewed the outside help as a partnership. However, some were confident they could have implemented interventions necessary for success had they received a portion of the funds that went to the consultants.

More so than the other roles, feedback from the district level included Turnaround Program aspects that have since changed from the first cohort, such as the nature of the grading system and basing designation on just one year of data (See Table 1). Due to abnormal circumstances, some participants reported that designated schools would have improved their grade within a year without any intervention.

District leaders preferred level of involvement differed, with some preferring more oversight, some hoping for more detailed reports and meetings, and others wanting more of a partnership to best understand the schools resource needs.

"Resources, support, and systems need to be tightly aligned. The district doesn't need to write those plans, but we need involvement and to be a support."

One superintendent believes the less involvement the better to avoid a top-down approach. Another embraced the turnaround process which led to a district-wide ripple effect where "everyone is on fire."

Some cautioned that the problems these schools face are due to conditions that will perpetually require additional resources and interventions, like socio-economic status of the area. One district leader described the issue as a chronic disease, not a treatable one, in that the conditions that contributed to the school being designated did not disappear.

"You can't take away the "treatment," the extra support and resources, and expect the underlying conditions not to have an effect again."

Another had a similar sentiment,

"You can do things to change teacher mobility, but it's hard in a three-year process to change the socioeconomics of a neighborhood."

A few suggested the shock of being designated is enough to kick a school into gear, so it may be worthwhile to implement a warning status as a precautionary measure.

"A warning status may accomplish the same results without the stigma."¹¹

All district leaders are aware that principals set the stage for success. In one instance, the district replaced the principal mid-way through because they disagreed with the plan and thus staff cohesion suffered. A couple other schools required more inspirational leadership to see the program through.

Turnaround Consultant

While we were able to talk to all consultants, the number of consultants is still only four, with one who oversaw seven out of the 12 schools studied. Therefore, summarizing their different experiences is more challenging than other roles interviewed as one consultants' feedback reflects more varied experience than the others.

All agreed that success trickles down from the top with buy-in from leadership. One noted, "if someone isn't teachable, it's toxic, especially from leadership." Another mentioned that consultants' challenges don't exist in helping students with hard subjects like science, or the ability to impart teaching and learning skills; instead, challenges arise from inconsistent implementation of practices of which consultants heavily rely on leadership.

The consultants then rely on the leadership teams they help establish - including teachers - that collaborate on a strategic plan and its implementation.

"We didn't do things TO the schools we did things WITH them."

"We don't write the plan for them. That leadership [team] writes the plan. We facilitate the leadership writing the plan, then leadership goes to rest of the faculty."

"No change would have been possible without the ownership and hard work of the classroom teachers. We saw so many cool things happen in the classrooms of veteran teachers, new teachers, and everyone in between."

"Our work number one is about relationships. We're asking them to do challenging things when they are already feeling beaten down."

Success spread throughout the schools' communities. A consultant that partnered with multiple schools observed the schools that generated the highest growth also more thoroughly implemented engagement strategies like home visits or APTT as part of the improvement process.

They cautioned that success is sustainable through an involved school district.

"We rely on the district to carry on after we're gone by implementing principals that will carry on the work and buy in to the vision."

"When the school district worked closely with us as outside partners and the school – we saw sustainable improvements in both the system and results."

Related, one consultant noticed that administration changes often come with a new vision that "want to put their own stamp on the school" and thus implement different practices. In order to sustain success, practices that are working need to be codified. This consultant has watched a new administrator at a particular school deprioritize the successful methods put in place, and is receiving calls from the teachers for help.

"You can turn things around but you can only sustain it if they are willing to maintain the successful practices."

As previously stated, some schools were resistant to losing the support these consultants provided, and are thus still working with their turnaround company to ensure the sustainability of their success. Most turnaround consultants interviewed felt invested in these schools and mentioned a continued partnership with a few of them to ensure the school has sustainable success.

"In several of the schools, we have a limited ongoing partnership to further employ a strategy of gradual release. We see value in a longer tail of tapering to ensure implementation has adequate scale, depth, and breadth."

School Board Chair

Only three school board chairs were interviewed, but they covered more than three schools from the first cohort of the Turnaround Program.

These interviews provided a very broad perspective. Generally, they would have liked to have been more informed about the first cohort.

It is now in statute that the board chair must be included in a committee that is more actively involved in the entire process, like being involved in choosing the consultant and attending regular meetings.

A board chair from one of the bigger districts mentioned school board involvement has expanded since the first cohort. Therefore, they were better equipped to speak to later cohorts than the first one.

Particular feedback regarding the process includes:

- Designate and inform schools earlier, so that an entire year can be utilized rather than starting halfway through the school year.
- Perspective on these schools has to be long term, not just improving one grade letter, but sustaining turnaround success.

Key Concerns

Sustainability

As conveyed, the staff of students of these 12 schools worked hard and succeeded in exiting the Turnaround Program. Now that the experts and their resources have left, will the improvements be sustained?

As administration inevitably revolves and teachers leave and are replaced, there is concern the hard work and time put into improving the schools grade will be for naught. The grade improved because leadership adopted and conveyed a clear mission, and every teacher and student put in extra time and effort to adopt new practices. As a few of these schools have learned, if these practices aren't the priority of changing leadership or taught to every new teacher, momentum gained can be lost. Additionally, the buy-in from the students, teachers, and community creates a positive school culture within and without the school that should be nurtured. Taxpayer money spent to turn schools around is only worthwhile if the changes are adopted long term.

More than one study participant mentioned how it is necessary that the changes made become "institutional memory." *"It became a habit."*

Another concern is the loss of infused resources used to hire classroom aides or resources like reading clinics, home visits, and technology. Teachers worry that losing resources will make it harder to maintain the gains achieved.

"One of the biggest factors [of success] was due to funding, we got additional intervention support. Having more bodies was a huge help. Now we've gone from four interventionists to three, and now this year we're down to one. So they push all this money and we are successful because of that, then they say 'great, now do it on your own.' It will not be sustained."

"Once we were out of turnaround, our leadership team dissolved. It was, 'Oh we don't have to do it anymore!' We also got rid of the reading program already."

Sustainability concerns are echoed by the turnaround consultants, who stress that district support is crucial for each schools' continued success,

"We rely on the district to carry on after we're gone by implementing principles that will carry on the work and buy in to the vision."

A principal concurred,

"It has to come from within the district. The sustainability vision is how the district handles it in house."

Staff Consistency

Sustaining success is directly related to retaining well-trained and committed staff. According to many participants, the hard work turnaround required tended to weed out teachers not willing or able to meet new requirements, and empowered and energized the teachers who remained and saw results. Some schools were able to see the difference consistent staff made; students felt invested in, a positive culture prevailed, and the new practices became ingrained pedagogy.

Sharing stories of the rewarding nature of the turnaround process (see "Teachers" section under "Insights by Role" for more detail) from this first cohort with teachers facing a turnaround designation might discourage attrition and encourage staff consistency.

Teachers Time

The Turnaround Program implements practices and requires expertise that teachers must take extra time to adopt and learn. A few of the concerns expressed:

- Teachers already feel overworked. The Turnaround Program requires even more of their time, and the demands are compounded for teachers where there is low parent support and student behavioral issues.
- Without adequate compensation for extra work, teachers would often leave for another school.
- Professional development and other training could take teachers out of the classroom, which could have a negative effect on students.

Turnaround Consultant Value

It is evident the research-based practices put in place by turnaround consultants were valuable. However, some schools insisted the funding given to consultant companies could have been effectively used by individual schools for teacher aides, tutors, technology, and training. They maintain additional funding at the school level could have improved the school's grade without the consultant.

This report addresses mostly positive experiences with turnaround consultants whose approach and expertise was welcomed and greatly appreciated. Nonetheless, some participants expressed concerns.

In some cases, participants felt the turnaround company assigned to their school tried to implement a one-size-fits-all approach rather than collaborate with the school and their particular circumstances, like demographics or unique reasons

for designation.¹² While most schools found their consultants to be collaborative and flexible, others experienced the opposite.

“Without a leader in our school fighting for customization, the plan wouldn't have been as effective.”

A few schools were able to switch turnaround companies, or their company was replaced. In one case, the company the school picked was replaced by another that district leadership preferred for consistency across the district. In two cases, the company was replaced halfway through the process, and those schools experienced frustration with what felt like frequently changing priorities and focus.

All participants from one school found the consultant to be rude and absent, where other schools found the same consultant to be helpful and present.

Conclusion

The schools studied had different turnaround consultants, yet all shared similar factors of success. Effective use of data, strong and inspiring leadership, buy-in from all involved, positive reinforcement methods to address behavioral issues, and collaborating to ensure student success were essential for exiting the Turnaround Program. The extra resources afforded to turnaround schools also played a critical role; without them, schools worry about sustaining their success long term.

Overwhelmingly, participants want the state to consider needed sustainability measures that ensure these successful practices do not get deprioritized with new leadership or teacher turnover. Without continued support or codifying successful practices, the factors that led schools to the Turnaround Program are likely to reemerge.

Because quantitative metrics are in place to measure scores and improvement, the Gardner Institute recommends further qualitative research to better understand experiences with practices put in place. Future qualitative research could include studying schools from the first cohort that were either unsuccessful in exiting after the three-year timeframe or were re-designated into other improvement programs after a successful exit. This would allow for a better understanding of the contexts by which research-based practices can fall short. Another research opportunity would be studying the successful schools from cohort two to compare to this report as some of the concerns and feedback reported here have since been addressed.

Endnotes

- 1 The Utah State Board of Education has contracted with the Utah Education Policy Center to provide this training.
- 2 Status details of all cohort one schools can be found in Appendix B.
- 3 Questionnaires can be found in Appendix A.
- 4 USBE utilizes a framework called the Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement developed by WestEd in partnership with other states and leaders. The framework is based on what has been learned from research on turnaround and contains a lengthy appendix of formative research. https://centeron-schoolturnaround.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/CST_Four-Domains-Framework-Final.pdf
- 5 PLC's, or Professional Learning Communities, are described under the header "Collaboration."
- 6 <https://www.pbis.org/>
- 7 <https://www.edglossary.org/professional-learning-community/>
- 8 A change in statute requiring an independent party to conduct the root cause analysis, which informs the development of the school improvement plan, may address this issue for future cohorts (see Table 1).
- 9 A change in statute capping the cost for contracted services from a turnaround consultant may address this issue for future cohorts (see Table 1).
- 10 LIFT training providers are continually revising their approach based on participant feedback.
- 11 A change in statute requiring two consecutive years of low performance prior to identification enables a warning year for future cohorts (See Table 1).
- 12 A change in statute requiring an independent party to conduct the root cause analysis, which informs the development of the school improvement plan, may address this issue for future cohorts.

Appendix A: Questionnaires

Successful Turnaround Schools Questionnaire – Schools and District

1. Tell me about yourself: what is your area of expertise, or role in the school? How long have you been serving in your current role? *Before and after the turnaround process, if applicable.*
2. Let's go back a few years before the turnaround process began.
 - a. From your perspective, why was XXX school a low-performing school?
 - b. What did you think needed to be done to improve the schools performance?
 - c. Did you agree with the findings of the root cause analysis/needs assessment?
 - d. Did you agree with the school improvement plan?
3. What, if any, was your specific role in the turnaround process?
4. Who, or what roles do you think were instrumental in the turnaround process?
 - a. Things to listen for (and potentially probe):
 - i. Parents?
 - ii. Teachers? Other school staff?
 - iii. Principal?
 - iv. Contracted turnaround expert?
 - v. School District?
 - vi. State Board of Education?
5. What factors do you think ultimately led to a successful turnaround of XXX school?
 - a. Things to listen for (and potentially probe):
 - i. School principal and teachers
 - ii. Staff turnover
 - iii. Recruitment and retention of high quality/effective educators and leader
 - iv. Professional development
6. Looking back at the whole process beginning to end, what is your feedback?
 - a. Probes:
 - i. What would you do next time?
 - ii. Could anything be improved?
 - iii. What would you want to tell yourself when the process began?
 - iv. What would you tell schools beginning the process now?
 - v. What would you want the State Superintendent to know about the process?
7. Are these changes sustainable?
8. Anything else you'd like to share?

Optional:

1. Describe the environment/morale/mood in XXX school before and since the turnaround.
2. What about feedback you may have heard from colleagues?

Successful Turnaround Schools Questionnaire – Turnaround Expert

1. Tell me about yourself: what is your background, area of expertise? Do you have previous experience in a turnaround process? In what capacity?
 - a. Probe: What types of schools do you work with most often? (elem, middle, high, traditional/charter)
 - b. Probe: How many years have you been involved in supporting low-performing schools?

2. Walk me through your process when working with a turnaround school, from beginning to end.
 - a. If it wasn't mentioned, probe:
 - i. What were your responsibilities as listed in your contract?
 - ii. How and to whom were you held accountable for the work you do?
 - iii. What is your specific process in determining the root cause analysis?
 - iv. Did the school agree with the findings of the root cause analysis/needs assessment?
 1. Did this differ between teachers and administration?
 - v. What is your process in developing a school improvement plan?
 - vi. Did the school or district already have an intervention plan implemented?
 1. If so, did you work with the school's already implemented intervention plan?
 - vii. How are plans tailored to each school's specific needs?
 - viii. What questions or concerns did the schools have with your proposed school improvement plan?
 1. Did this differ between teachers and administration?
 - ix. How often did you visit each school?
 - x. How were you initially received by school staff? Did that change?
 - xi. Describe your relationship with the teachers, and
 1. Principal?
 2. LEA?

3. In your opinion, how did the process go? Did it go well? What were the obstacles to be overcome? What course corrections were necessary?

4. Who, or what roles do you think were instrumental in the turnaround process?
 - a. Things to listen for (and potentially probe):
 - i. Parents?
 - ii. Teachers? Other school staff?
 - iii. Students?
 - iv. Principal?
 - v. Contracted turnaround expert?
 - vi. School District?
 - vii. Local board involvement/support?
 - viii. State Board of Education?
 - ix. State Charter Board?

5. What factors do you think ultimately led to a successful turnaround of XXX school?
 - a. Things to listen for (and potentially probe):
 - i. School principal and teachers
 - ii. Staff turnover
 - iii. Recruitment and retention of high quality/effective educators and leader
 - iv. Professional development

6. Looking back at the whole process beginning to end, could anything be improved?
 - a. Probes:
 - i. What would you do next time?
 - ii. What would you tell schools beginning the process now?
7. What would you want the State Superintendent and legislature to know about the process?
8. In your opinion, will the changes implemented and improvements made in XXXX school be sustainable? Why or why not? If not, how can they be made to be more sustainable?
9. Anything else you'd like to share?

Successful Turnaround Schools Questionnaire – Board Chair

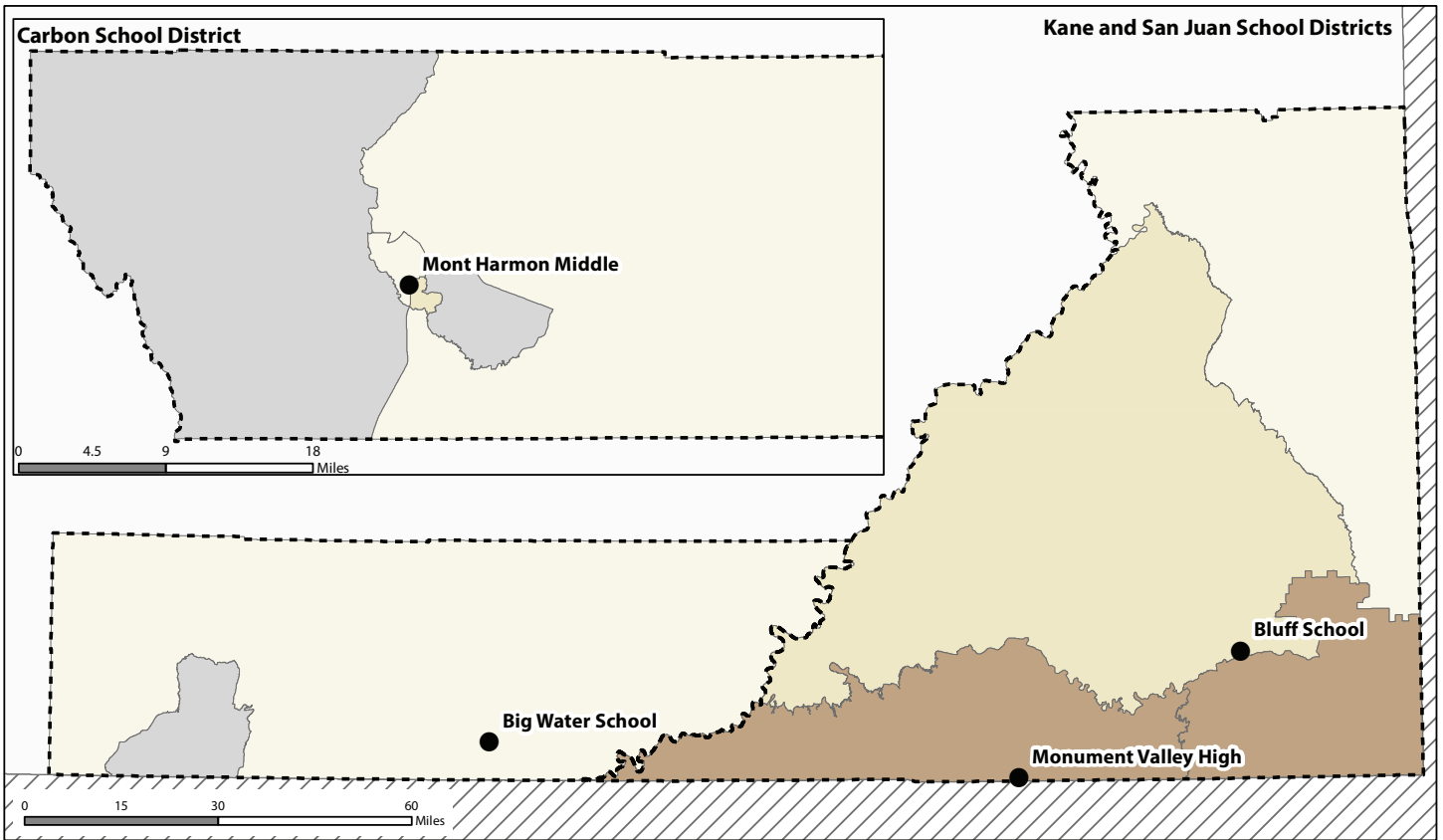
1. Tell me about yourself: what is your background, area of expertise? What led you to the board?
2. When did you first hear XXXX was designated a turnaround school?
3. Was it a surprise to learn that XXXX was designated a turnaround school?
4. How would you describe the local school board's role in the turnaround process?
 - a. *Probe:* Did you know board involvement was required in state statute?
 - b. *Probe:* Describe if and how you received information regarding the school's progress through the turnaround process.
 - c. *Probe:* Is there a difference between what the interviewee thinks the local school board's role should be and what it actually was?
 - d. *Probe:* Who is or should be accountable for improving the performance of XXX school?
5. Did you see the school's improvement plan?
 - a. If yes, were you given the opportunity to ask questions and ultimately approve it?
6. What factors do you think ultimately led to a successful turnaround of XXX school?
 - a. Things to listen for (and potentially probe):
 - i. School principal and teachers
 - ii. Staff turnover
 - iii. Recruitment and retention of high quality/effective educators and leader
 - iv. Professional development
7. Looking back, what is your feedback for the turnaround process as a whole?
 - a. Could anything be improved?
 - b. What would you want the State Superintendent and legislature to know about the process?
8. Anything else you'd like to share?

Appendix B: Turnaround Program Cohort One Status

School	2018 Total Points Earned	2015 Points Earned	Total Points Possible	Percentage	2015 Grade	2018 Grade	Percent in Point Change	Change?	Not Re-Identified (Turnaround Study Subjects)
Cedar Valley	278	203	600	46.3%	D	C	27%	Exited	X
Mont Harmon Middle	470	204	600	78.3%	D	A	57%	Exited	X
Vae View	279	197	600	46.5%	D	C	29%	Exited	X
Thomas W. Bacchus	252	200	600	42.0%	D	C	21%	Exited	X
Lincoln	259	185	600	43.2%	D	C	29%	Exited	X
Thomas Jefferson Jr High	239	199	600	39.8%	D	C	17%	Exited	X
Big Water	202	171	600	33.7%	F	D	15%	Exited	X
Bluff	218	166	600	36.3%	F	D	24%	Exited	X
Monument Valley High	394	261	900	43.8%	F	C	34%	Exited	X
Bonneville	301	167	600	50.2%	F	C	45%	Exited	X
C.S. Lewis Academy	302	190	600	50.3%	D	C	37%	Exited	X
Mana Academy	293	138	600	48.8%	F	C	53%	Exited	X
Oquirrh Hills	160	197	600	26.7%	D	F	-23%	Failed to exit	
Midvale	178	214	600	29.7%	D	F	-20%	Failed to exit	
Redwood	191	190	600	31.8%	D	D	1%	Qualified for extension	
Woodrow Wilson	224	178	600	37.3%	D	D	21%	Qualified for extension	
Whitehorse High	313	271	900	34.8%	F	F	13%	Qualified for extension	
Entheos Academy Magna	190	186	600	31.7%	D	D	2%	Qualified for extension	
Utah Connections Academy	323	308	900	35.9%	F	F	5%	Qualified for extension	
Pioneer High School for the Performing Arts	326	287	900	36.2%	F	F	12%	Qualified for extension	
Granger	248	178	600	41.3%	D	C	28%	Exited	
Roosevelt	181	163	600	30.2%	F	D	10%	Exited	
South Kearns	290	195	600	48.3%	D	C	33%	Exited	
West Lake Jr High	360	200	600	60.0%	D	B	44%	Exited	
Tse'Bii'Nidziszgai	196	124	600	32.7%	F	D	37%	Exited	
Dual Immersion Academy	225	152	600	37.5%	F	D	32%	Exited	

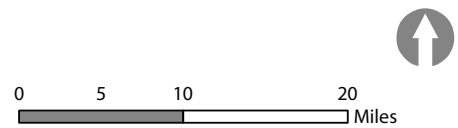
Appendix C: Share of Population Below 100 Percent of Poverty Level by School District

2013–2017, 5 Year American Community Survey Estimates

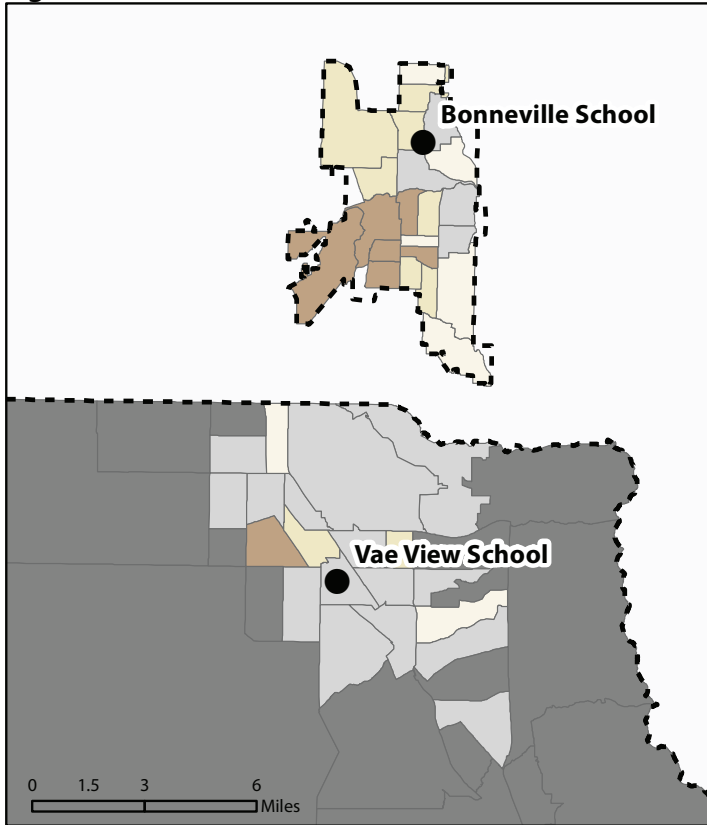


Legend

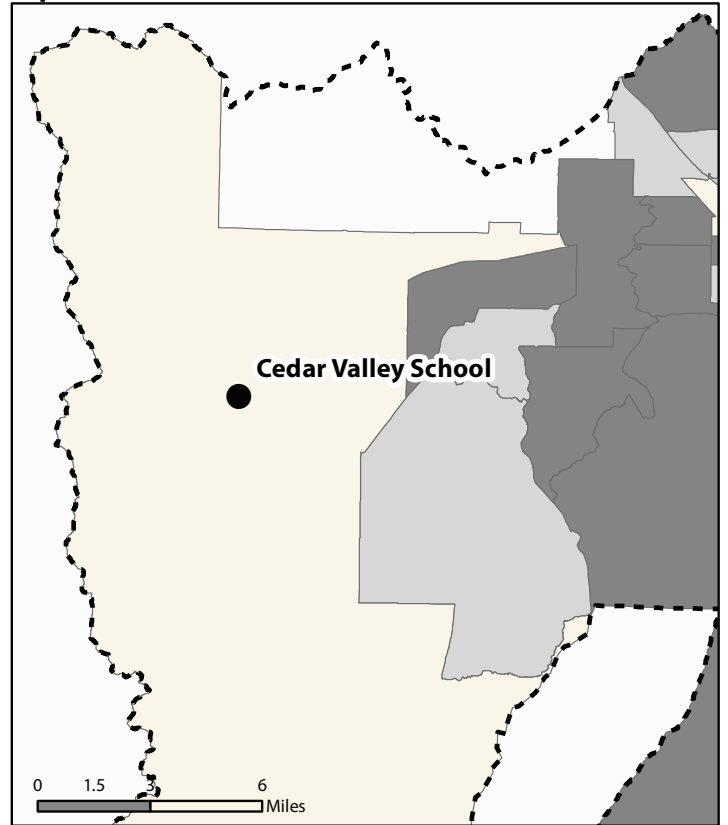
- 0.6% - 5.8%
- 5.9% - 11%
- 11.1% - 18.7%
- 18.8% - 29.9%
- 30% - 49.1%
- Turnaround Schools
- School Districts



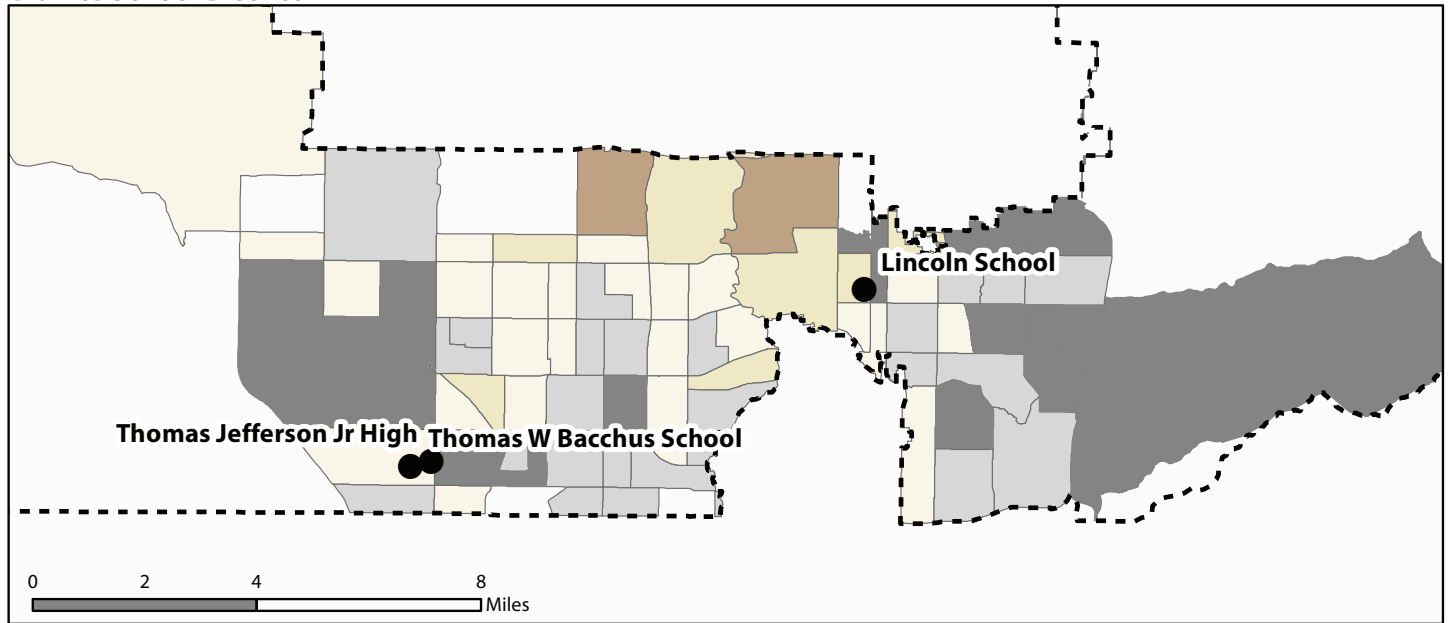
Ogden and Davis School District



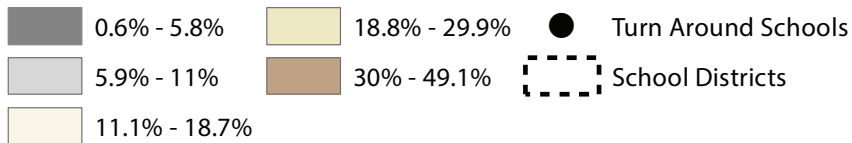
Alpine School District



Granite School District



Legend



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