



Background –

Turning around low-achieving schools in Colorado

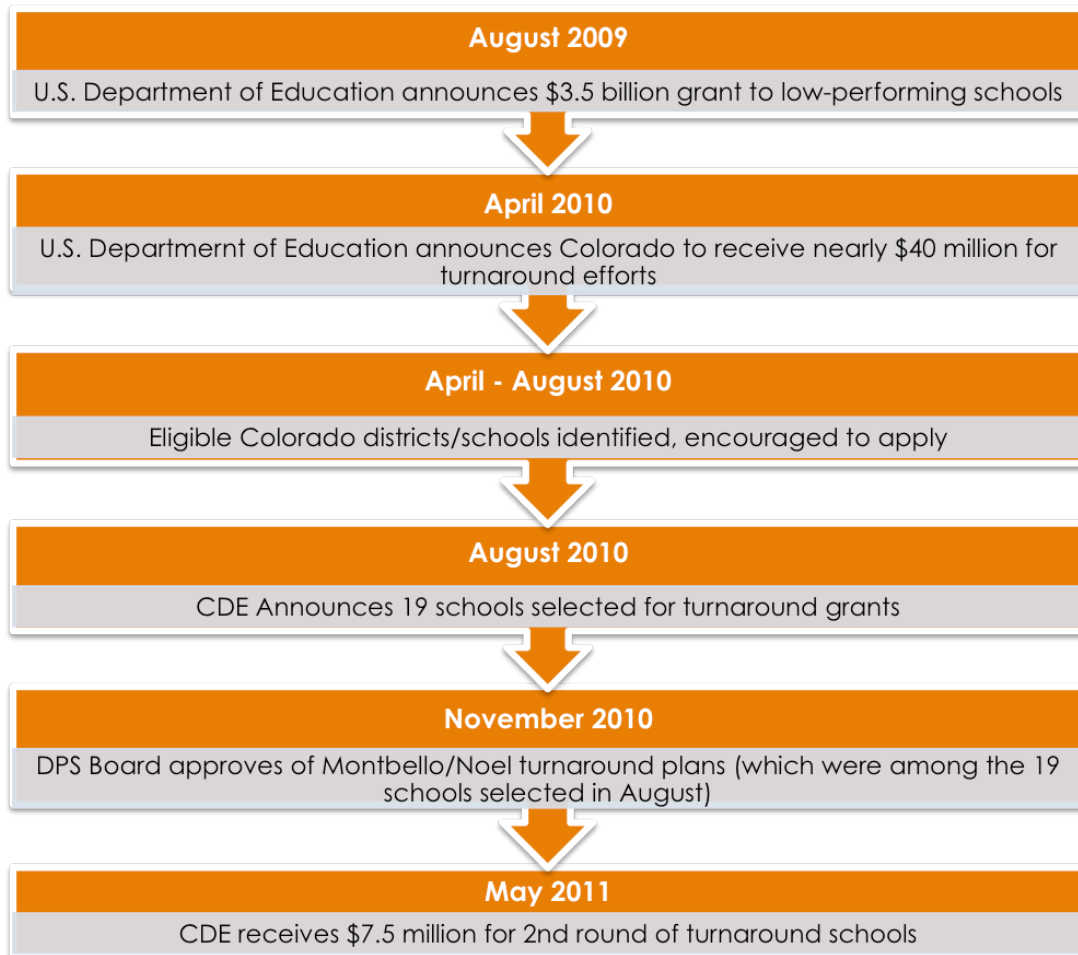
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Introduction

The bottom 5% of public schools in the country have chronic low-achievement and need dramatic change. This is one of the most important issues for our country and our state. There have been a few successes in turnaround efforts, but more often than not, turnarounds aren't working. As Dr. Howard Fuller, former superintendent of schools in Milwaukee, told a Denver audience recently, "The data out there on turnarounds is abysmal." In his words, "It is excruciatingly difficult" to transform a school where its culture and performance are so weak. So it matters to know what Colorado is—and is not—doing, to learn from past mistakes, and to take advantage of over \$40 million in grants from the federal government to tackle this critical issue.



National policy

Since the late 1990's public education in America has committed billions of dollars to turn around low-performing schools. Numerous approaches have been tried: restructuring; changing principals, staff, and/or curriculum; school closure.... Late in Bill Clinton's administration and during much of George W. Bush's term (1998-2006) the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration awarded 7,000 low-achieving schools funds. One study of a sample group found only about 15% of the schools made dramatic gains, and that of these, fewer than 1/3 sustained those gains.

A new initiative, the School Improvement Grant (SIG), began in 2007, and then received a major boost in 2009 under President Barack Obama. The U.S. Education Department committed \$3.5 billion—all as part of the much larger American Recovery and Reinvestment Act—to turn around hundreds of the nation’s lowest-achieving schools. Grants were to be awarded to states based on the proportional share of funds they received for their Title I schools (schools serving a population where at least 40% of the student enrollment came from low-income families). States would in turn award subgrants to schools and districts that applied for the funds and showed “the greatest commitment to serve their Title I schools identified for improvement, corrective action or restructuring ...” (press release by Education Department, Aug. 26, 2009). U.S. Secretary of Education Arnie Duncan stated: “Our goal is to turn around the 5,000 lowest-performing schools over the next five years.”

Four models

According to the U.S. Department of Education, “When school districts applied to (their) state for the funds they were required to indicate they would implement one of the following four models in their persistently lowest achieving schools.”

Turnaround model: Replace the principal, screen existing staff, and rehire no more than half the teachers; adopt a new governance structure; and improve the school through curriculum reform, professional development, extended learning time, and other strategies.
Restart Model: Convert a school or close it and re-open it as a charter school or under an education management organization.
School Closure: Close the school and send the students to higher-achieving schools in the district
Transformation Model: Replace the principal and improve the school through comprehensive curriculum reform, professional development extended learning time, and other strategies.

In Colorado

2010 - Colorado receives nearly \$40 million for turnaround efforts

In April of 2010 Colorado learned that it would receive nearly \$40 million to turn around its persistently lowest achieving schools through the School Improvement Grant program. “Turning around our worst performing schools is difficult for everyone,” Secretary of Education Duncan said, “but it is critical that we show the courage to do the right thing by kids.” The Education Department used a formula to determine that Colorado would get \$39,731,239.

A number of Colorado districts and schools began to study this federal grant and to consider applying, for at this very time the state was beginning to identify its lowest-performing schools.

In 2009 the Colorado legislature passed and Gov. Ritter signed SB 163, the Education Accountability Act. This gave the state the authority to assign accreditation ratings to its 2,080 schools. They were put in one of four categories. In its first year report, released in November 2010, CDE assigned most (83%) of the state's schools to its two highest categories. However, 147 schools (11%) were identified as Priority Improvement, and 83 schools (4%) were assigned the lowest rating, Turnaround status. These two bottom groups were required to file improvement plans and were given until 2017 to improve or face closure.

DPS had the largest number of schools—44—charged with Priority Improvement or Turnaround plans. Pueblo 60 had 15 schools in these bottom two categories, Westminster 12, and Colorado Springs 10. But in total, only six Colorado districts applied for the funds. When the grant was announced, 15 of the 19 schools winning the federal dollars were from DPS and Pueblo.

Grant announced to 19 Colorado schools over three years

The state required districts to conduct detailed reviews of every eligible school for which they intended to apply for SIG funding. A team from the state conducted reviews, spent “one to two days at the school site to examine its curriculum, assessment systems, instruction, school culture, professional development offerings, and the leadership’s capacity and planning,” and “summarized the school’s main challenges in reports provided to district and school staff. Based on the findings of the state’s support team, districts then selected an intervention model for each school from among the federal options – turnaround, restart, transformation or closure...” They needed to complete an application presenting their turnaround plan. (From Public Impact’s report for the Donnell-Kay Foundation, “School Turnarounds in Colorado,” Jan. 2011.)

The state also invited external providers who could work with schools to help with turnaround efforts to submit Requests for Proposals. Public Impact’s report noted: “Ultimately, the turnaround partners on the state-approved list tend to provide assistance services, rather than whole-school governance for turnaround schools. Some districts and schools chose not to work with turnaround partners at all.” Some of the so-called “turnaround” efforts were far more modest in scope, related—it seems—to their ability to choose providers whose focus might simply be, for example, to help improve the math program.

In August of 2010 Commissioner of Education Dwight Jones announced grants for turnaround efforts at 19 Colorado schools. “This is the first step in the launch of a three-year process to improve Colorado’s chronically low-performing schools,” Jones said. Small grants were made to three schools to assist their closure. The other 16 schools received, on average, about \$2.3 million over three years, or over \$700,000 per year, to support their improvement plans. Nine schools would implement the transformation model; six the turnaround model; and Lake in DPS chose to restart under a contract with an external operator. Of the 19 schools, 9 are in DPS, 6 in Pueblo City, and one each in Adams 14, Center, Mesa County Valley, and Sheridan.

It was said that the grants “were allocated on a competitive basis to eligible schools....” However, it is worth noting: all of the districts and schools that applied were awarded grants.

School Improvement Grants Awarded to 19 schools – 2010-2013

School Name	District Name	Location	Amount Awarded 2010-13	Model Selected
MONTBELLO HIGH SCHOOL	SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 1 IN THE COUNTY OF DENVER AND STATE OF COLORADO	DENVER, CO	\$3,388,350	Transformation
NORTH HIGH SCHOOL		DENVER, CO	\$3,106,922	Transformation
NOEL MIDDLE SCHOOL		DENVER, CO	\$2,776,580	Transformation
LAKE MIDDLE SCHOOL		DENVER, CO	\$2,083,232	Restart & Turnaround
GILPIN K-8 SCHOOL		DENVER, CO	\$1,260,033	Turnaround
GREENLEE K-8 SCHOOL		DENVER, CO	\$2,256,517	Turnaround
PHILIPS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		DENVER, CO	\$36,413	Closure
SKYLAND COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOL		DENVER, CO	\$35,790	Closure
RISHEL MIDDLE SCHOOL		DENVER, CO	\$15,387	Closure
CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL	PUEBLO, SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 60, IN THE COUNTY OF PUEBLO	PUEBLO, CO	\$2,799,228	Transformation
RONCALLI MIDDLE SCHOOL		PUEBLO, CO	\$2,212,131	Transformation
LEMUEL PITTS MIDDLE SCHOOL		PUEBLO, CO	\$2,159,601	Turnaround
JAMES H RISLEY MIDDLE SCHOOL		PUEBLO, CO	\$2,103,975	Turnaround
FREED MIDDLE SCHOOL		PUEBLO, CO	\$2,063,811	Turnaround
YOUTH & FAMILY ACADEMY CHARTER		PUEBLO, CO	\$1,578,681	Transformation
HASKIN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	CENTER CONSOLIDATED SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 26 JT.	CENTER, CO	\$1,666,515	Transformation
CLIFTON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	MESA COUNTY VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 51	CLIFTON, CO	\$2,598,111	Transformation
FORT LOGAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	SHERIDAN SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 2	ENGLEWOOD, CO	\$2,388,570	Turnaround
HANSON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	SCHOOL DISTRICT N. 14 IN THE COUNTY OF ADAMS	COMMERCE CITY, CO	\$2,010,180	Transformation

Amount awarded to these schools in first year, 2010-11 – Over \$12 million

Denver – Would it be different this time?

Denver's struggles to redesign or close low-performing schools –back in the 1990's at Ashley, Columbine, Del Pueblo, and Fairview; through much of the past decade at Cole and Rishel middle schools and North, West, and Montbello high schools; and most dramatically with the closing and restart of Manual High—raised the question of what had been learned, and how this time it would be different. One oddity of the grant is that the application included vague plans for how to spend over \$6 million for Montbello High and Rachel Noel, even though it was well understood at the time that the Far Northeast Plan was still being discussed and articulated. It was not approved by

the Denver school board until November 2010, three months after the grant was announced. One positive: it appeared that much had been learned about engaging the community (A+ Denver was involved) and that in determining to transition Montbello High into three smaller programs, and Rachel Noel into two, there was a greater willingness to create new programs rather than tinker with the old structure.

Results of Year One

To date, neither CDE—nor the six school districts involved—have issued reports on how effective this first year has been, when over \$12 million was to be spent. A piece in Education News Colorado in August- <http://www.ednewscolorado.org/2011/08/08/22676-after-a-year-turnaround-schools-performance-lackluster>-looked at CSAP achievement scores in the DPS and Pueblo schools – comparing 2010 to 2011—and found little good news. Denver's Assistant Superintendent for Post-Secondary Readiness Antwan Wilson responded to that criticism with his own post. He stated: "... contrary to what a recent EdNews suggests, there are some strong initial signs of progress." In a reply to Wilson, A+ Denver Executive Director Van Schoales raised the issue of the need for greater transparency. In contrast to what he saw with previous DPS efforts at Manual, West, and North, Schoales wrote: "I am really hoping for a better set of plans for monitoring and evaluating this work given all that we now know about school turnaround failure and success." (Both posts are at <http://www.ednewscolorado.org/2011/08/15/22942-dps-turnaround-effort-shows-strong-initial-progress>.)

Many low-achieving schools wish to emphasize their Growth scores. But the Observed Growth in reading, writing, and math in 2010-11 in Colorado's turnaround schools offers few signs of any dramatic improvement in this first year of this \$39.7 million federal initiative. Growth exceeded 50% 12 times out of 24 categories in the DPS schools (see bold below); it exceeded 50% only 4 times out of 30 categories in the other districts. CDE's School View website reveals what may be even more troubling—the gap between the Observed Growth and the Adequate Growth needed "to reach or maintain proficiency." Below you see these two scores for the DPS schools. Even with "above average" growth of 66 (Math) at Gilpin, only 30% of Gilpin's fifth graders achieved proficiency, and most others are not gaining fast enough to become proficient in math—unless more dramatic change takes place in their education.

District/school	Reading	Writing	Math	District/school	Reading	Writing	Math
DPS	Observed Growth/ Adequate Growth			Pueblo 60	Observed Growth		
Gilpin	44/63	52/69	66/81	Central High	42	40	36
Greenlee	36/57	46/62	37/62	Freed Middle	27	32	30
Lake Middle	53/70	59/84	53/95	Pitts Middle	32	37	22
Lake Intern't'l	35/64	45/71	60/80	Risley Middle	23	27	23
WDP at Lake	63/64	74/68	88/81	Roncali Middle	32	31	35
Rachel Noel	44/68	49/79	34/84	Youth & Family Ac.	47	48	32
Montebello	50/84	50/97	57/99	Sheridan	Observed Growth-2011		
North	54/67	49/94	51/99	Fort Logan Elementary	38	31	47

				Center	Observed Growth- 2011		
Adams 14	Observed Growth- 2011			Haskin Elementary	43	47	54
Hanson Elem.	37	34	37	Mesa County	Observed Growth- 2011		
				Clifton Elementary	58	57	77

Those growth scores invite a number of questions

1. Closure and starting a new school - better results?

What does the state, and what do DPS and the other districts, make of the evidence that only two of the 16 or so schools involved in the first year of this grant year made above average growth in reading, writing, and math—Clifton Elementary in Mesa County and West Denver Prep at Lake? Furthermore, that West Denver Prep at Denver earned a Distinguished rating on Denver's School Performance Framework (SPF), while the other DPS schools receiving SIG funds all fell short of "Meets Expectations" on the SPF? Will this lead districts to consider more closures and re-openings based on school models that have proven successful elsewhere, rather than the usual process that has not, and apparently is not, providing the dramatic change students need? This question invites a closer look at what happened at Lake this past year.

Lake - district school vs. charter school? Or turnaround vs. a new start?

The turnaround plan at Lake Middle School roiled the community and split the school board at the time, so the first-year outcome for the new 6th graders there is worth a closer look. Between 2006 and 2009 DPS says it committed over \$600,000 to Lake, including a \$500,000 School Innovation Grant to help with the transition to become an International Baccalaureate (IB) school. But the results were poor; in 2010, the year prior to the federal SIG grant, Lake was rated a school Accredited on Priority Watch (the second lowest category) on Denver's SPF. The principal was replaced and the person who had been the IB coordinator at Brown Elementary took over.

The 2010 turnaround plan allowed 7th and 8th graders to continue in the school (Lake Middle), it opened a new, revised International Baccalaureate program for the 6th grade (Lake International), and the West Denver Prep program was allowed to start its third DPS middle school program in the building (WDP at Lake), beginning with 85 sixth graders. The SIG grant for Lake's turnaround is nearly \$2.1 million; of that, \$619,609 was for year one activity, most of which was directed at the Lake International and Lake Middle school programs. The WDP program received \$198,000 this past year.

CSAP results in 2011 reveal some progress. Both Lake International and the Lake Middle School are Accredited on Watch in Denver's latest School Performance Framework, a step up from being Accredited on Priority Watch in 2010. But West Denver Prep's new program at Lake earned it a Distinguished rating. Furthermore, look at the Observed Growth (previous page), and note the 28-29 point gap for 6th graders IN THE SAME BUILDING. Below is a comparison of how Lake's 6th graders did in 2010-11 on CSAP:

Lake - (Sixth grade) – CSAP – Percent Proficient & Advanced – Prior to turnaround (2009 and 2010) and first year results (2011) of the new Lake IB and of the new West Denver Prep charter.

		2009	2010	2011
READING	Lake International	28	38	36
		Previous Lake IB program	Previous Lake IB program	New Lake IB program
	WDP at Lake	-	-	50
				First year of program
WRITING	Lake International	20	24	32
	WDP at Lake	-	-	50
MATH	Lake International	20	33	46
	WDP at Lake	-	-	64

2. Withhold funds until districts and schools indicate lessons learned?

If the result from year one seem “lackluster” should CDE hold back on distributing year two funds until the districts and schools involved produce reports indicating what they have learned from their first year and what they plan to do differently in year two? Does CDE (and/or the U.S. Department of Education) have the ability to cut off funds for year two and/or year three if and when it finds an effort not moving forward successfully?

3. Monitoring and transparency

What kind of monitoring are the U.S. Department of Education, the Colorado Department of Education, and the school districts involved doing with this School Improvement Grant?

- a. Will there be public reports evaluating the effectiveness of the first-year efforts? How is CDE and how are the school districts involved learning from successes and mistakes? Are the schools coming together to share lessons learned? Will these lessons reach the new group of schools applying?
- b. Will there be public reports showing how the money has been spent in Colorado? (Some question the largesse of these grants, \$2 - \$3 million going to several schools, and wonder if these schools and their principals are likely to spend all this money wisely. Even a decade ago the federal Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration grants averaged less than \$250,000 over three years.)

Round Two – another \$7.5 million

4. Timing of grants – should Colorado request a waiver?

Last May CDE announced it had received \$7.5 million to support a second round of turnaround schools; CDE says it will announce its new three-year grants in October. How does a school welcome a grant that might require a change in its leadership and the removal of half the staff, particularly when it gets the money in the fall? The timing of the federal grants can pose problems. Announcing the first year grants in August 2010 made it difficult for schools to rethink their leadership and redesign issues just as the year began. Delaware and Tennessee were able to get waivers to alter the timing of this grant. Colorado might wish to do the same so that the funds go out at the most opportune time.

5. Will Round 2 of the School Improvement Grant in Colorado be “competitive?”

Making grants to all those who applied hardly made Colorado's effort in 2010 seem "competitive." A close look at what happened in DPS and Pueblo City with the SIG application reveals little enthusiasm for—or clarity regarding—several of these restructuring plans. The principal of Youth & Family Academy in Pueblo signed the application "with reservations"; since then his school has divorced itself from the external provider the district chose to work with—Global Partnership Schools (GPS). Can't we, like several states, raise the bar, and approve a smaller percentage of applicants?

6. Monitoring, evaluating external providers – e.g. Global Partnership Schools

In year one CDE gave approval to various external providers the schools and districts could work with; there are no such restrictions with the second round. Why? Is there sufficient guidance and control as to which groups are selected? We saw cases in year one where the external partner's role was so limited that it was clear the school was not looking for outside help to restructure in any significant way. Is that OK? One partnership especially deserves a review: Even when CDE did "approve" of external providers in Round One, it was troubling to find that roughly half of the \$12.6 million awarded to Pueblo City schools would be paid out to its partner, the Global Partnership Schools. Now, in light of the poor results—in terms of achievement AND growth—in the five Pueblo schools GPS worked with this past year, CDE and Pueblo 60 need to justify why this partnership should continue.