

The Disruptive School Reform With No Benefits



Like many ideas that don't really work, it has an appealing simplicity: When a school's test scores are consistently low, replace the staff and start anew. It's similar to what a new owner might do after acquiring a struggling business.

As did multiple other states, Tennessee adopted this [approach](#) in a (successful) bid to win federal Race to the Top funds. Tennessee's *First to the Top Act* of 2010 led the state to implement interventions for the schools with the lowest test scores in the state. The law included an Achievement School District (ASD) intervention and an Innovation Zone (iZone) intervention. The ASD reform transfers to the state the governance of schools with low test scores. The schools are then "re-started" with new staff, typically under the auspices of charter school management organizations. The iZone reform is similar except that it leaves schools under the control of their districts, adding support from an intradistrict network assisted by district staff.

In an [article](#) published in February in the peer-refereed *American Educational Research Journal*, [Lam Pham](#) of North Carolina State University, NEPC Fellow [Sean Corcoran](#) of Vanderbilt University, [Gary Henry](#) of the University of Delaware, and [Ron Zimmer](#) of the University of Kentucky used the benefit of the passage of time to take a deep dive into the long-term outcomes of these dramatic reforms. They focused on students who attended ASD or iZone middle schools, using subsequent high school outcomes such as attendance rates, chronic absenteeism, test scores, disciplinary outcomes, dropouts, and graduation.

The researchers used statistical methods to create a comparison group drawn from schools

that, for all intents and purposes, were nearly identical to a given ASD or iZone school, but had test scores a hair too high to be targeted by a set of reforms that focused on the bottom five percent of schools as measured by test scores.

What did the researchers find?

For the most part, nothing.

Overall, the results of students who attended similar schools that did not undergo the reforms were nearly identical to the results of those whose schools were “re-started.” In the cases in which the researchers did find differences, they were negligible but also negative—with students in non-reform schools obtaining slightly better outcomes.

Prior studies that have focused on longer-term outcomes have found that these so-called “turnaround” models have found some small to moderate positive effects on test scores but not necessarily on other outcomes. Researchers have identified more robust positive outcomes associated with the introduction of the Recovery School District in New Orleans—which entailed restructuring and reinvestments in an entire district in the wake of a major hurricane that changed the structure and makeup of the city itself—a situation that is not necessarily generalizable to others.

“[O]ur results suggest that future reform models should put more thought into interventions that support persistent improvements,” Pham, Corcoran, Henry, and Zimmer write. They suggest that “more comprehensive supports at the system level, including supporting students’ social-emotional learning, investing in wraparound services, and soliciting support from the local community around the school may be needed for improved outcomes to persist.”

Despite the growing evidence that school turnarounds create major disruptions to communities and schools without leading to the needed improvements for students, states and districts continue to embrace these reforms: Denver Public Schools [unveiled](#) its latest version of this type of reform just last week.

NEPC Resources on School Reform and Restructuring

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