



Critical Success Factors in Charter School Turnaround **Great MN Schools’ Criteria to Support Charter School Turnaround Efforts**

What follows is a definition and set of success factors that are applied as evaluative criteria by Great MN Schools in deciding whether to support a charter school turnaround effort. This document complements the related document, “Critical Success Factors in Charter School Restart”.

Definition of Turnaround. School turnaround involves making substantive changes at an existing school to improve student outcomes. The original definition for a school turnaround comes from the 2009 federal guidance for school improvement grants and indicates that a turnaround includes hiring a new school leader and simultaneously hiring 50% or more of the staff new to the school. Given that the school improvement grants have run out, there is not a federally mandated definition of turnaround; however, it is useful to define turnaround in contrast to other intervention approaches to gain clarity about the unique conditions for success. For this reason, Great MN Schools defines turnaround as a substantive change in the leadership and staffing of a school program that is generally aligned to the federal definition above. While restart always involves bringing in a new school operator to oversee the core elements of the academic program, turnaround may or may not involve bringing in a third party to provide elements of the academic program.

Which Intervention Approach is Best? While there are many variables to explore when deciding on a specific school improvement strategy, the table below summarizes some of the differentiating considerations among closure, restart and turnaround.

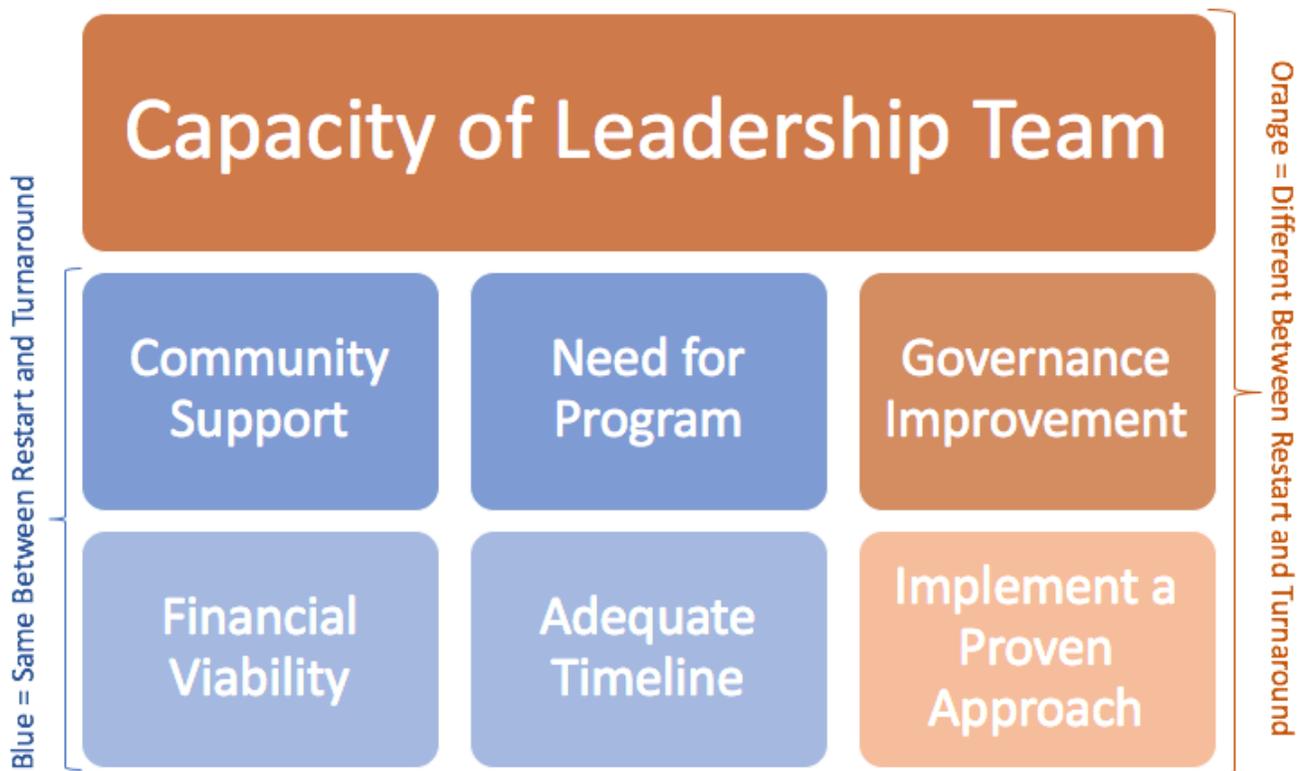
Characteristic of Existing School	Closure	Restart	Turnaround
Multiple years of low performance (e.g. 3+ years)	X	X	X
Consistent enrollment demand		X	X
Lack of high-performing nearby schools		X	X
Some aspect of academic performance positive			X

As the table illustrates, all three intervention strategies are worth considering for a school that has multiple years of low performance, which is typically measured by its



percentile performance in comparison to schools statewide on academic achievement. Turnaround is more appropriate than full scale restart in situations where some aspect of academic performance is positive or mixed in recent history; this may be true even though overall performance is comparatively low (e.g., in the lowest quartile statewide).

Seven Critical Success Factors. Based on available research and guidance in the field, Great MN Schools has identified certain success factors that predict successful charter turnaround efforts. These critical success factors will be used to guide investment decisions for Great MN Schools. A graphic representation of the factors is as follows:



The graphic is shaded blue to indicate factors that are similar between restart and turnaround; for example, both require strong community support. The graphic is shaded orange in areas where a successful turnaround effort requires substantially unique conditions in comparison to restart. The rest of the document explains these success factors and provides examples of how a turnaround initiative can demonstrate the conditions for success.



1. Capacity of Leadership Team

Per the definition above, Great MN Schools expects there to be change at the school leader level as part of a charter turnaround effort; leadership change is an important component of a successful school turnaround. Additionally, at least 50% of the teaching staff should change in a turnaround initiative. To ensure that only high capacity staff remain through the transition, a proposed turnaround initiative should address the following:

- Clarity that the incoming school leader or contracted organization will make final decisions about which staff to retain
- Positive classroom-level student outcomes as a driving component of teacher-level retention decisions
- A rigorous interview and screening process that evaluates staff capacity from the lens of the incoming school leader
- Evidence of investment in new proven professional development programs that were not previously attempted and that align to specific teacher needs

To effectively navigate the complex change of school turnaround, the incoming team must also demonstrate capacity in several of the ways outlined below:

- The track record of the proposed new leader or contracted organization in achieving strong outcomes with similar students, and ideally, experience in a prior school turnaround
- A clear hiring plan with additional lead time to first evaluate existing teachers who wish to apply to stay and then expand hiring to the general public in plenty of time to attract strong talent
- Evidence or research to substantiate claims that the educational program is appropriate and effective with the specific students to be served

In addition to considering these attributes of the proposed team or organization that will lead the restart, Great MN Schools will seek to understand the overall due diligence process that was used to select the turnaround leader or contracted organization.



2. Community Support

Parents and community members provide a vital role in our schools and it is critically important that they support the incoming team of educators and the selection of this team. Parent engagement and a strong parent-school partnership can have a strong positive impact on student outcomes. Evidence of community support can look like:

- Signed petitions, letters or emails of support from current parents and community members
- Intent to enroll forms
- Notes, attendance and agendas from meetings where parents discussed their desires for the turnaround school and voiced support for the proposed new leader and program
- Evidence of clear communications that have been sent to all parents at the existing school and open invitations to these families to discuss future changes

There is not a set process to engage families but rather an expectation that this engagement occurs and that a majority of families are supportive of the intended change.

3. Need for Program

For a turnaround to succeed, there must be a clear need for a continued school program in the specific location and serving the current students at the school. Without a clear and ongoing need for the school, parents and families are likely to leave the school and enroll elsewhere in the midst of the transition which in turn jeopardizes the viability of the restarted school. Ongoing need can be demonstrated by:

- Evidence that families cannot easily access alternate higher performing schools and information about the barriers to access
- Evidence that the school's target population is particularly unique and not currently served well by other schools

Given the existence of several high-quality schools in the Minneapolis area that are not yet full, it will be important for proposed turnarounds to demonstrate ongoing need as a critical success factor.



4. Governance Improvement

A school turnaround does not necessarily require an immediate change in the membership of the board of directors for a charter school. However, Great MN Schools expects the board to acknowledge and embrace the need for improvement at the governance level as well as the school program level. Commitment to improved governance can include:

- Clarity and commitment among board members to embrace an authentic school turnaround process
- Board evaluation process to identify any existing skill gaps at the governance levels, which could be facilitated by a third party consultant or organization
- New oversight tools that focus on monitoring student outcomes, aligned to the performance expectations of the charter authorizer and state of Minnesota (e.g., new board data dashboard of student interim and summative results)
- Evidence of board-initiated conversations with the broader school community (staff, parents and students) about the current performance of the school and the urgent need for fundamental changes that will better serve students
- Clarity about the division of duties and decision rights between the board and the future school leader

It is critical that the board of directors embraces the need for significant change and does not attempt to prescribe aspects of the program or the approach to human capital.

5. Financial Viability

For turnaround to work, the existing and future school must be financially viable. Financial viability is predicated on these factors:

- Sustained history of student enrollment and an alignment between the existing enrollment and future projections for enrollment
- Existing balance sheet assets (e.g., cash, investments, furniture, fixtures & equipment) that will be put in service of the future program
- Access to a quality facility at reasonable terms
- Financial projections for the new program that are not overly dependent on private philanthropy, particularly after the first two to three years of the restart effort



Financial viability is connected to the success factor, “Need for Program”.

6. Adequate Timeline

Experience both locally and nationally supports the observation that schools need an adequate amount of time to plan for a proposed turnaround, while also thoughtfully engaging families and students in the planning process. Per national research, an ideal timeline will include several elements:

- Minimum 12 month total lead time before the new program is rolled out
- 2-3 months of due diligence, whereby the charter board identifies a strong leader or contracted organization with the appropriate skills, credentials and track record to operate a quality charter school; this process can partially overlap with the community engagement steps noted in the next bullet
- 3-4 months of community engagement and dialogue between the existing families and proposed operator, before the operator is officially confirmed; this time should be utilized for families to understand more about the proposed program and for the operator to learn more about students’ unique needs
- 7+ months of transition time, after a school operator has been officially confirmed and selected to plan and hire for the upcoming school year (e.g., from January to July prior to school opening in August)

In general, the restart planning process should start a year prior to the proposed opening date under the new operator.

7. Implement a Proven Approach

By definition, a turnaround should include a substantive change to the program and delivery of instruction. Turnaround is not another step in continuous improvement, but rather a real shift in the leadership, staffing and program of the school. For turnaround to work, it must be grounded in a proven track record of success. A turnaround plan must address:

- All elements of the core program that will change and the research to suggest that these are effective as well as performance data of schools with similar programs
- Clarity on the rationale for the selection of the new program
- Affirmations that the incoming new leader will have full hiring authority

Great MN Schools would like to acknowledge EdPlex for drafting and preparing this document.