Title: Identifying Potentially Successful Approaches to Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools

Chair: Rebecca Herman, American Institutes for Research
rherman@air.org

Section: Moving to Scale – first choice; Research Methods – second choice

Symposium Justification:

The U.S. Department of Education (ED), though the Race to the Top initiative and the School Improvement Grants program, is promoting efforts to turn around the performance of students in the nation’s lowest performing schools. Overall, the literature on school turnaround is limited. Critical questions that are not yet fully addressed in the current literature include the following: (1) how do we consistently identify the schools that most need to turn around and determine when they have achieved full turnaround success, and (2) which policies, programs, and practices (PPPs) are associated with school turnaround?

The research papers included in this symposium submission were all conducted under The Turning Around Low-Performing Schools (TALPS) study, a three-year study for ED’s Institute of Education Sciences, conducted by American Institutes for Research and its partners. This project addressed these questions in two substudies. The first substudy focuses on developing methods and criteria for identifying chronically low-performing schools and turnaround schools. The second substudy focuses on exploring policies, programs, and practices associated with school turnaround. This symposium includes four papers.

The first paper investigates the strategies for empirically identifying chronically low-performing (CLP) and turnaround (TA) schools with the following research question:

RQ1: What proportion of CLP schools display the following performance trajectories over time: quick, dramatic improvement (TA schools); weak net improvement (MI schools); or negatively sloped performance trajectories (NI schools)?

The following three papers included in this symposium submission are drawn from the project’s second substudy, in which we explored factors distinguishing schools that we had identified (above) as having turned around from similar schools that did not. We analyzed extant administrative data and conducted principal surveys and case studies in three states to address the following research questions (each question corresponds to a paper, i.e., RQ2 corresponds to the second included paper, etc.):

RQ2. How did the PPPs and combinations of PPPs that schools experienced or adopted differ across TA, MI, and NI schools, and across elementary and middle schools?
RQ3. To what extent were TA, MI, and NI schools characterized by changes in staff (e.g., new principal, amount of teacher turnover, entry of high-value-added teachers, exit of low-value-added teachers)?

RQ4. What differences existed between TA and NI schools in the way they implemented the policies, programs, and practices that were intended to improve their outcomes?

This project represents an important contribution to the research literature, and is relevant for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. First, this rigorous study is a timely contribution to the body of knowledge, drawing on complementary methodologies to address a range of pressing, current questions. Second, the study investigates performance among CLP schools in three states, representing the broadest study in the literature on school turnaround with similar depth across sites. Finally, and most importantly, this is the first study to investigate policies, programs, and practices in both successful (i.e., TA) and unsuccessful CLP schools; prior studies in the literature do not analyze similar unsuccessful schools to assess differences in practices that may be unique to successful TA schools.