

# The District Turnaround Office: A comprehensive support structure for struggling schools

August 2010

**SCHOOL  
TURNAROUND GROUP**

**MASS INSIGHT EDUCATION**

An extension of Mass Insight's research on Partnership Zones, the findings in this presentation focus on the creation of a District Turnaround Office as a new internal unit within a Local Educational Agency (LEA).

The District Turnaround Office is a centralized entity that has both the capacity and authority to manage and coordinate all turnaround efforts within an LEA. The model, when fully realized, will lead to a single office with a clear mandate for providing underperforming schools with everything they need to improve student achievement, including attracting and overseeing Lead Partners, providing streamlined access to district services, interpreting and applying state and federal policy, applying for SIG grants and other applicable funding, monitoring results, and assuring accountability.

Recommendations are derived from both existing district structures similar to the DTO model, as well as internal Mass Insight analysis. External research included interviews with key district staff in Chicago, New York, Washington, DC, Los Angeles, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg, NC as well as artifact analysis and synthesis of information gathered from agency websites.

The School Turnaround Group at Mass Insight continues to lead research and development efforts in the turnaround sector both on a national level and for individual state partners. Our national Partnership Zone Initiative is funded by an initial grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, with a partial match from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

# What is turnaround?

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*Experts, including the United States Department of Education, have identified over 5,000 schools nationwide as chronically low performing. To address this problem systemically, State Education Agencies (SEAs) and Local Education Agencies (LEAs) need to implement comprehensive school turnaround efforts that produce dramatic change.*

## Turnaround is

a dramatic and comprehensive intervention in a low-performing school that

a) produces significant gains in achievement within two years;

and

b) readies the school for the longer process of transformation into a high-performance organization

# Why the District Turnaround Office?

***The District Turnaround Office (DTO) is an independent unit within an LEA charged with managing and coordinating the implementation of the district's school turnaround initiatives.***

**Point of departure:** The current failure of districts to serve and support schools

- Most, if not all, urban school districts have failed to demonstrate the ability to support their chronically low-performing schools, leaving hundreds of thousands of children with unacceptably poor educations.
- While school-level reforms are critical, the chances for school turnaround, particularly at scale, are much increased if districts can deliver on their primary role – serving and supporting schools.
- If incremental change won't work at the school-level, it won't work at the systems level either – bold transformation is required in our districts.



**Point of arrival:** An innovative district model that facilitates dramatic school improvement

- Districts must capitalize on the urgency of persistently failing schools to develop an innovative, service-oriented model of school support.
- The DTO achieves this by
  - Streamlining supports from multiple offices rather than creating additional bureaucracy
  - Creating a “club you want to join” for low-performing schools rather than a punitive framework
  - Ensuring that low-performing schools are prioritized in not only talk but also action
  - Protecting school and Lead Partner level authority to deliver results

***The magnitude of the problem means that the responsibility for remedying chronic school failure lies not with individual schools alone, but with the broader system as well.***

- Current role of the Local Educational Agency
- The model District Turnaround Office
- Lessons from emerging turnaround offices
- Guidance on building a District Turnaround Office

# The traditional role of the Local Education Agency (LEA)

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*An LEA (Local Education Agency) is **an agency at the local level** (often a public school district, or a structure encompassing multiple municipalities) which is responsible for **operating and overseeing public schools**.*


## Typical LEA responsibilities include...

- Budgeting and resource allocation
- Recruitment and placement of teaching staff
- Human resources including payroll, benefits and labor relations
- Oversight of curriculum, instruction, and professional development
- Compliance monitoring
- Physical plant and facilities maintenance
- Managing or providing transportation




# LEAs are not currently structured to support turnaround schools

Traditional districts cluster schools geographically



- In an effort to mitigate their size and scope, traditional mid- to large-sized districts typically **cluster schools geographically** into areas or regions reporting to assistant superintendents.
- **This structure is not sufficient for turnaround schools because...**
  - Geographic clustering rather than need-based clustering makes it difficult to share resources and support
  - There is limited alignment between monitoring/compliance function and support for teaching and learning
  - Schools are left on their own to navigate layers of district bureaucracy

District support services are not coordinated



- Exacerbating this problem, district administration tends to be centralized yet balkanized: divisions are often highly siloed with **little opportunity or incentive to coordinate**
- Yet the work of **school turnaround touches all areas of school management**, from curriculum and instruction to facilities to grants management

***School Improvement Grants represent an unprecedented amount of federal money expressly targeted at underperforming schools; yet unless this money (and other attendant resources) is wisely allocated, little improvement may result.***

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# A DTO is a unit of the LEA that both supports low-performing schools and holds them accountable

## Definition

The District Turnaround Office (DTO) is an independent unit within an LEA charged with managing and coordinating the implementation of the district's school turnaround initiatives.

## Purpose

The role of the DTO is to support failing schools and partner organizations and, at the same time, hold them accountable for student performance.

The DTO creates flexible operating conditions that enable schools to take action (waivers, freedom from regulations, paperwork, compliance, etc.)

## Authority

The DTO requires sufficient management flexibility to undertake the work successfully.

The DTO must be directly linked to and empowered by the district superintendent to implement time-critical initiatives quickly.

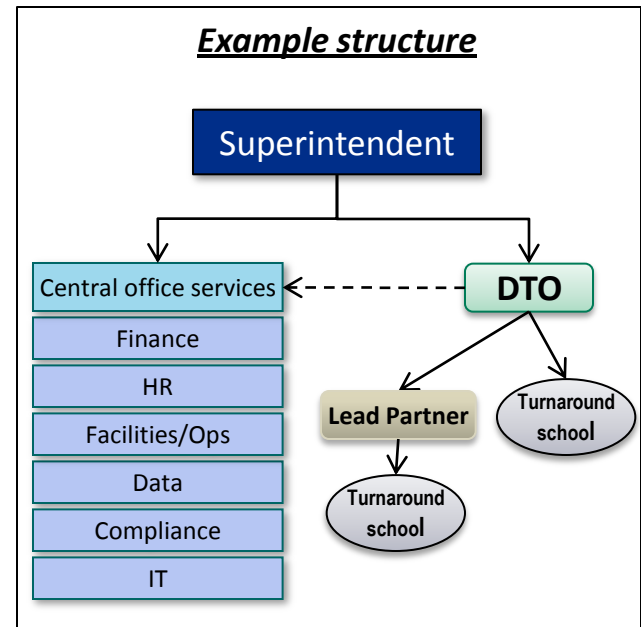
The DTO is directly accountable to the superintendent and also to the schools/partners under its management.

# What is a District Turnaround Office?

## Structure and roles

- The DTO is helmed by an Executive-level administrator who reports directly to the District Superintendent.
- S/he is supported by a small, nimble group of ~2-8 staffers, depending upon the number of turnaround schools.
- Staff support may be distributed by school (each staff member supporting 1-3 schools), or by function (a few staffers offering individual areas of expertise such as coaching or data management).
- DTO staff may be highly embedded in the day-to-day operations of the schools (particularly in the absence of a Lead Partner).
- DTO has direct responsibility for turnaround schools and coordinates the provision of additional central office services to those schools.

## *Example structure*



## Funding

- A DTO requires a significant upfront commitment from the district in the form of administrator salaries, which may be supplemented by state or federal funds.
- Approximate initial cost is \$1 million dollars in mid-to large-sized districts; less for smaller.
- Individual schools under DTO management do not necessarily receive substantially more funding than other district schools; rather, rapid, high-priority delivery of administrative support and other existing district services.
- School Improvement Grants (SIG) present an opportunity to provide additional resources to low-performing schools and the district structures that directly support them. The SIG application and management process should be under the DTO.

# A DTO should fulfill five core functions (1 of 2)

## 1 Attracting and Supporting Partners

*“Our goal is to be organized to support schools, and to support the Network Partners that support our schools. We hope to give them **the tools, resources, and training they need to be innovative**, and to try clarify what autonomies schools have and ensure they have them in practice rather than simply in theory.”* - Monique Epps, LAUSD iDesign

- Creating a partner-friendly context which assures operators will receive the flexibility needed to affect school-level change
- Matching schools to appropriate models or partners including by serving as a source of information and decision making body to align schools with improvement strategies/partners
- Selecting Lead Partner(s) to work in particular district contexts (in some cases, working from a state-vetted a list of potential partners)
- Drafting Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) to govern the terms of the partnership
- Evaluating, renegotiating, and amending MOUs as needed

## 2 Coordinating School Support

*“My office represents the priority schools, so I can pick up the phone and the transportation supervisor, the human resources staff, anyone – **they call me back within five minutes...** We get things done at a faster pace.”*

*-Darius Adamson, Charlotte- Mecklenburg Achievement Zone*

- Liaising with other district offices to clear path to promised autonomies for schools
- Streamlining operational and back office support services
- Creating clear lines of communication within the district to ensure school leaders can apply resources effectively
- Reducing or eliminating redundancies and unneeded interference from the district, state, and other partners

# A DTO should fulfill five core functions (2 of 2)

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## Fostering Human Capital

*“There’s no substitute for talent at the school level. The team is paramount. But there’s a lot you can do [in a DTO] to support that.”*

*–Cleo Aquino, Chicago Office of School Turnaround*

- Attracting talent from both inside and outside of the district by crafting incentives and favorable conditions (e.g., allowing principals to build their own teams)
- Helping bridge Lead Partner and district hiring practices
- Liaising with other partners working on developing human capital (e.g., New Leaders for New Schools, The New Teacher Project etc.)
- Supporting the creation of modified collective bargaining agreements

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## Monitoring and Oversight

*“My role is to hold schools accountable, but there is a balance involved...I also have to provide cover for my schools to take risks, and to understand that real change takes time.”*

*–Darius Adamson, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Achievement Zone*

- Collecting, analyzing, and disseminating data, including by issuing school report cards and designing progress metrics (working with the accountability office)
- Developing systems of reciprocal accountability, e.g., hold facilities, transportation, budget office accountable for how well they support turnaround schools/partners
- Interpreting policy, including state compliance mandates and collective bargaining requirements
- Assuring transparency and access for key stakeholders

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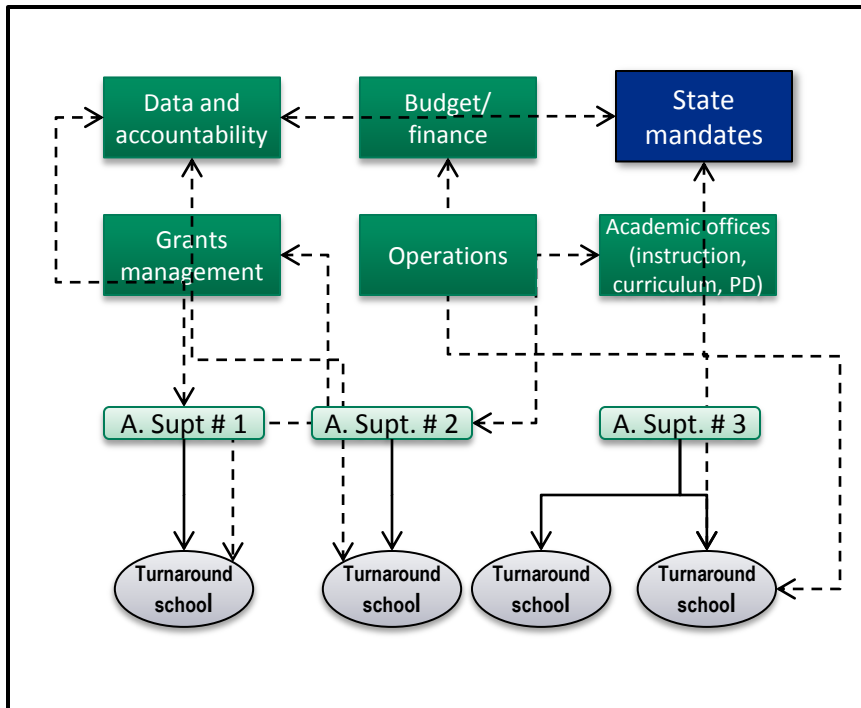
## Securing Resources

- Liaising with other state and district offices (e.g., grants management) to be sure turnaround schools receive priority
- Pursuing outside funding opportunities (possibly in conjunction with Lead Partners)

# The DTO is a fundamentally different way of structuring a district to support schools

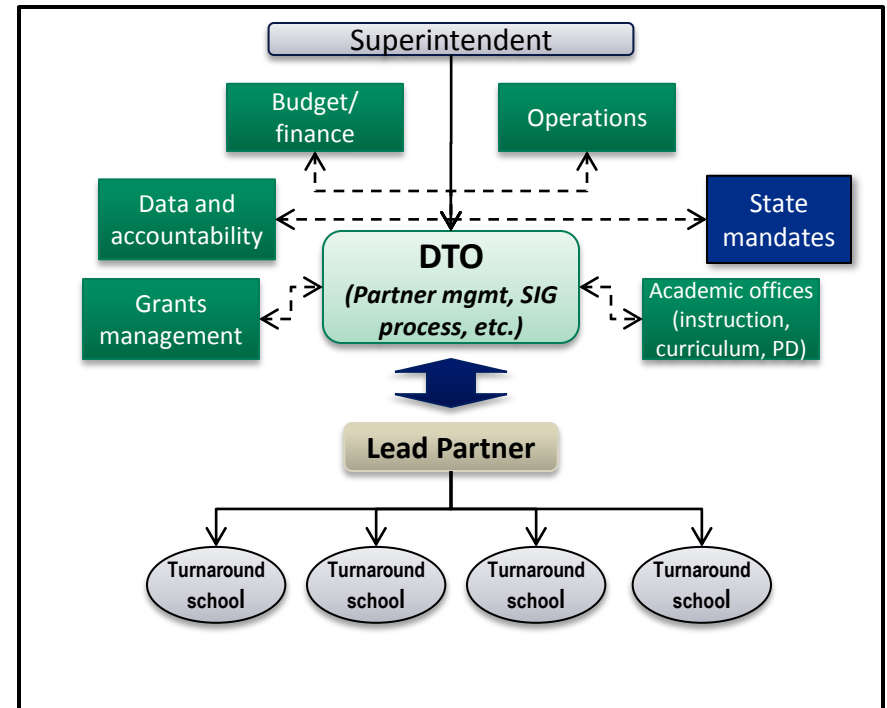
## Traditional support for low-performing schools

*Low-performing schools clustered with high-performing schools, receive uncoordinated supports from various offices*



## New DTO structure

*DTO has accountability for all low-performing schools and coordinates supports from various offices and/or provides it directly*



***Multiple, overlapping initiatives and services at the district level currently overwhelm schools. The District Turnaround Office streamlines both instructional and operational support to the school leader and/or Lead Partner.***

# The DTO makes significant changes to the way the district central office supports needy schools

## Traditional district central office

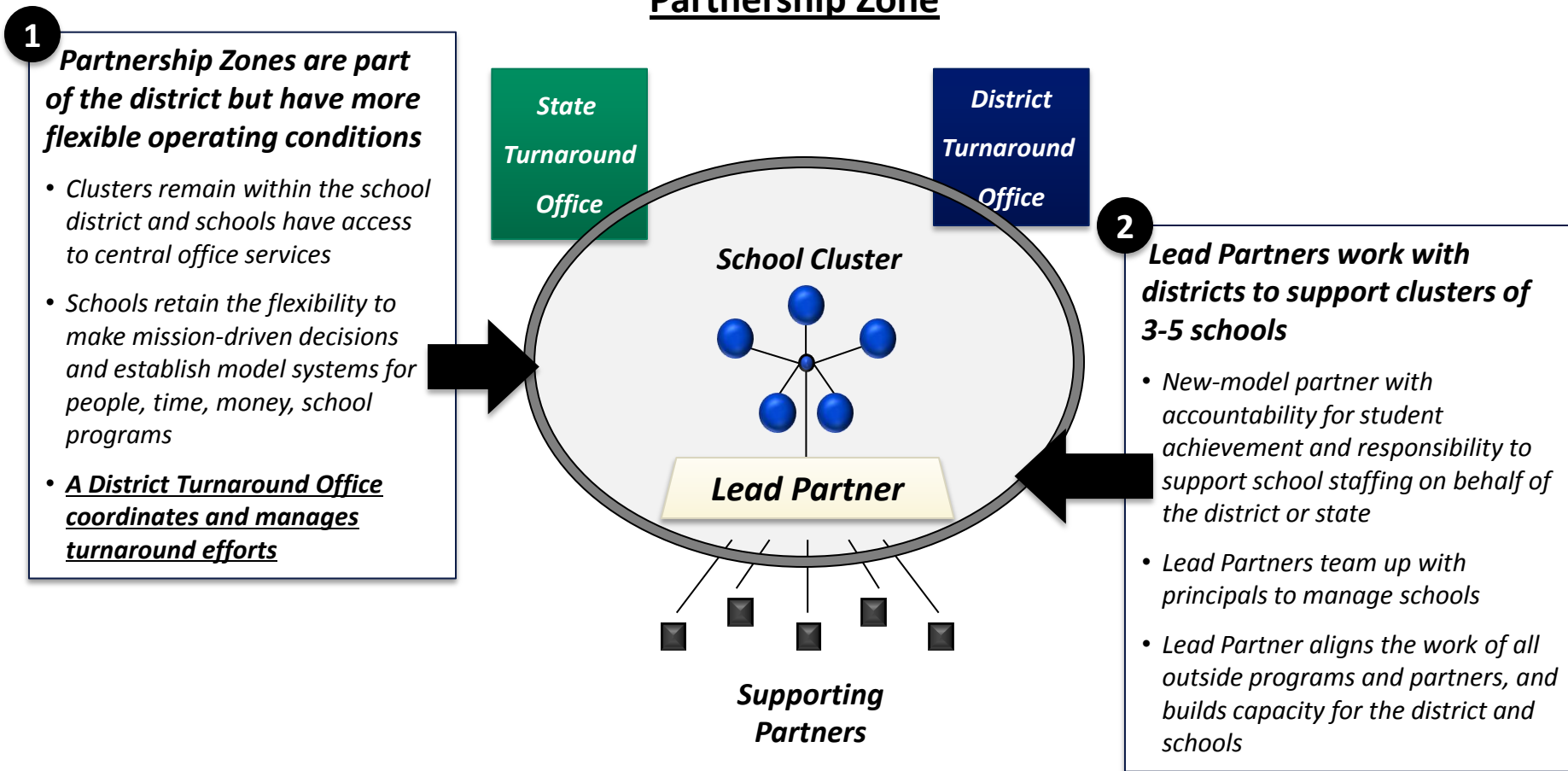
- School leadership and/or Lead Partner must juggle multiple points of contact with district and state offices
- Area superintendents provide technical assistance but do not hold schools accountable for improvement
- District central office is compliance oriented
- Low-performing schools are lumped in with other schools in geographic clusters
- Low-performing schools receive the same services as all schools despite having greater and different needs
- Federal grants are managed as a separate compliance-based, administrative unit



## New DTO structure

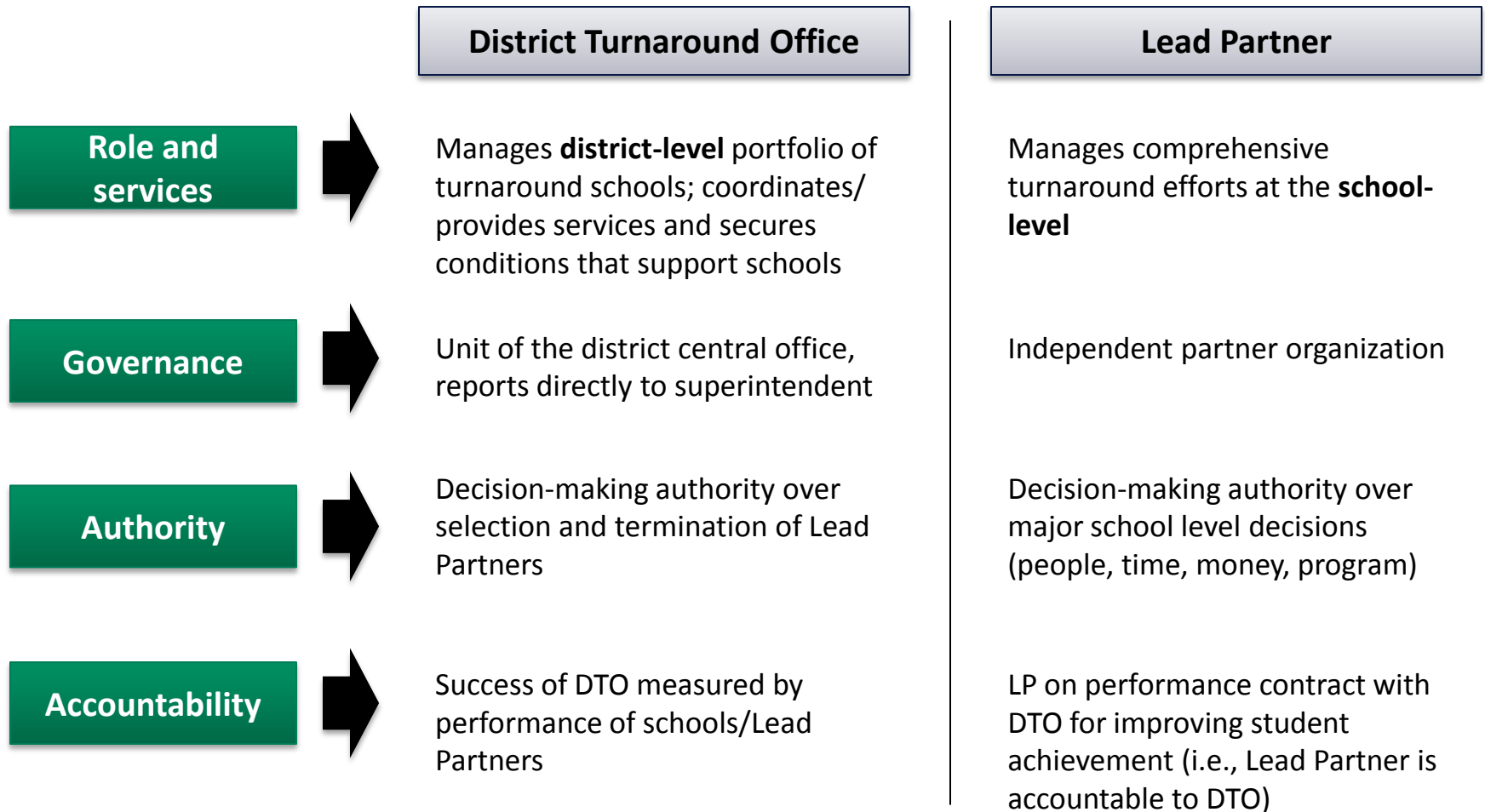
- A single office coordinates all school improvement efforts so that schools receive simplified, streamlined support
- Managing office, DTO, holds school staff/partners accountable for dramatic improvement in schools **and** measures own success based on school performance
- District central office is service oriented
- Low-performing schools are clustered together under the single DTO
- Low-performing schools are given greater resources faster; services are tailored to the specific needs of turnaround
- School Improvement Grants, both application and implementation, are managed by DTO as an integrated mechanism for school improvement

# Mass Insight's Partnership Zone model creates a centralized District Turnaround Office to unite and coordinate turnaround initiatives



Note: For more information on the Partnership Zone framework, visit our website: <http://www.massinsight.org/stg/research/>

# In the Partnership Zone framework, the Lead Partner and DTO work together to streamline support to schools



*In the absence of a Lead Partner, the DTO may end up taking on some of the Lead Partner responsibilities (e.g., more direct support and technical assistance at the school-level)*

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# Several districts have already developed DTO-like structures


























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- Although the District Turnaround Office model has yet to be fully implemented in the field, several mid- to large-sized districts have evolved offices which perform some or all of a DTO's five core functions
- This report considers five district models (Chicago, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Los Angeles, New York, and the District of Columbia) to highlight the benefits and the potential challenges of assembling a DTO
- Districts profiled vary considerably in overall turnaround approach; some (Charlotte-Mecklenburg) are directly managing all turnaround efforts, some (Los Angeles, D.C.) are collaborating with partner organizations, and some are pursuing a portfolio strategy which incorporates several different models (Chicago, NYC)
- However, all profiled districts are carefully considering how to best support turnaround at the district level through a dedicated organizational unit

***“If you’ve done the right hiring, you’ve got principals in these schools who were going to get [turnaround] done anyway. But the right district support can help them get it done at a much, much quicker pace.”***

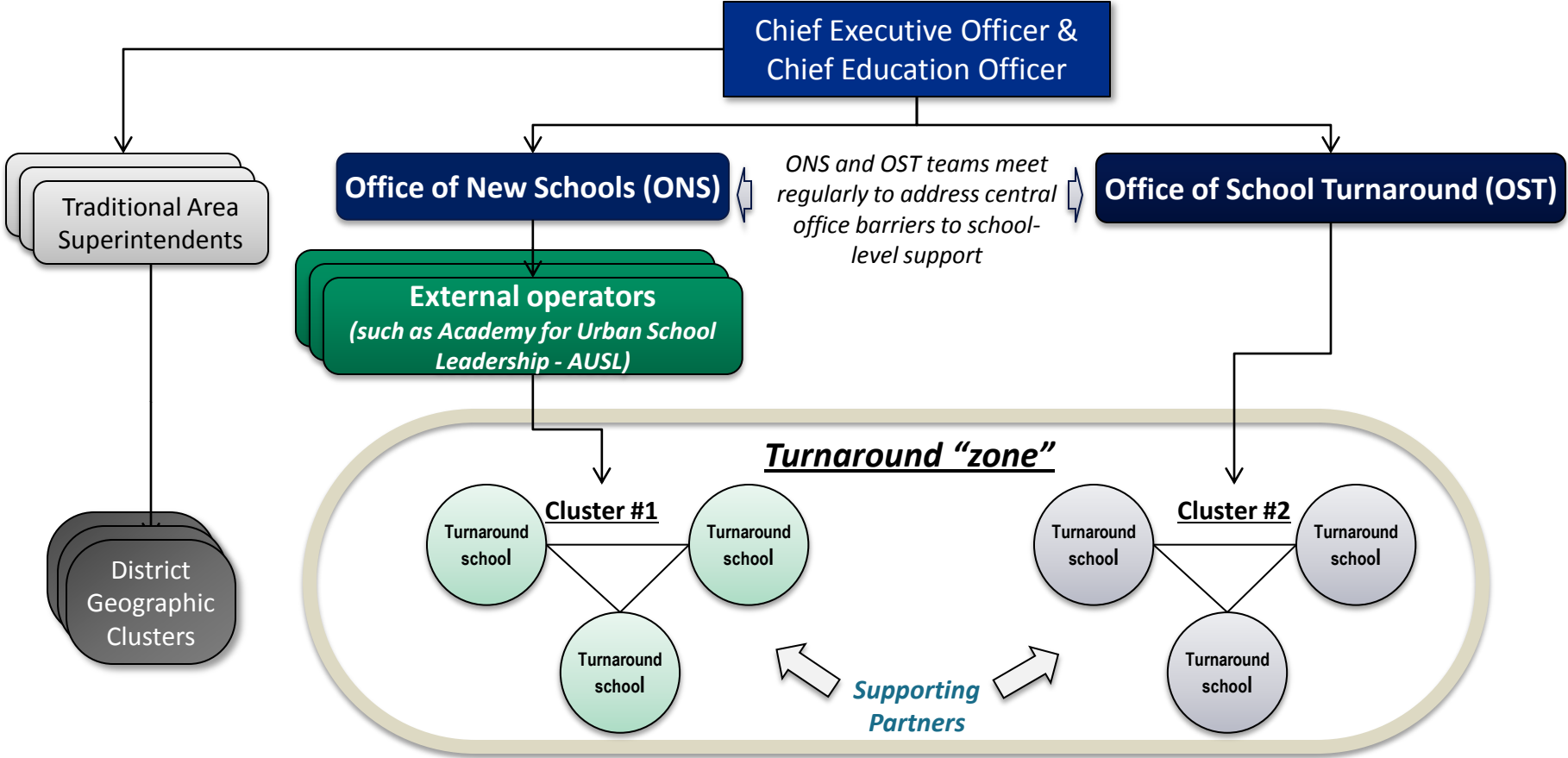
– Darius Adamson, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Achievement Zone

# The emerging District Turnaround Offices vary in terms of the functions they fulfill

	Attracting and supporting partners	Coordinating school support	Fostering human capital	Monitoring and oversight	Securing resources
Chicago Public Schools (Office of School Turnaround, Office of New Schools)					
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (Achievement Zone)					
Los Angeles Unified School District (iDesign Schools)					
District of Columbia Public Schools (Office of School Innovation)					
New York City Department of Education (Department of Portfolio and Planning)					

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# Chicago employs a portfolio approach to turnaround, managing both new schools and turnaround schools



*The Office of School Turnaround and Office of New Schools each perform DTO-like functions*

# Chicago Public Schools, Office of School Turnaround (OST)

## (1 of 3)

*Established in 2007, the Office of School Turnaround is CPS's internal turnaround office, which targets services and supports to a group of chronically low-performing schools. OST acts as a special forces unit, responding to school's needs in a timely manner and troubleshooting problems as needed. The team consists of 11 FT employees in the School Turnaround office; 20 FTE including school-based staff.*

### Attracting and Supporting Partners

- OST turnarounds are internally managed – Lead Partner-operated schools are overseen separately by the Office of New Schools (see later slides)
- However, OST works with several partner organizations such as Teach for America, the New Teacher Project, and the UVa School Turnaround Specialist Program to help support its efforts, most notably in human capital

### Coordinating School Support

- School support is the core mission of OST; the office is organized around this role
- Division of labor is role-specific: each individual manages a different component across a cluster of schools, such as community resources, family engagement, or teaching and learning

### Fostering Human Capital

- OST's model depends heavily on school-level coaching and support, extending the capacity of current school employees (both teachers and administrators)
- In the three years since inception, OST has cultivated a track record of cultivating and promoting leaders from within its schools

# Chicago Public Schools, Office of School Turnaround (OST)

## (2 of 3)

### Monitoring and Oversight

- The embedded nature of OST personnel make informal monitoring and oversight a key component of the provided support
- Team includes a Director of Performance Management who oversees the design of metrics for monitoring progress
- OST does not identify eligible schools nor manage consequences for underperformance; these functions are still housed within the main CPS district structure

### Securing Resources

- OST is funded by federal and state grants as well as a significant district investment
- The Office writes grants to support its work –though most of the resulting funding is funneled directly into school-level services schools, some is also used to offset administrative costs
- School-based OST teams include community engagement managers who leverage community resources to help students during and after school hours

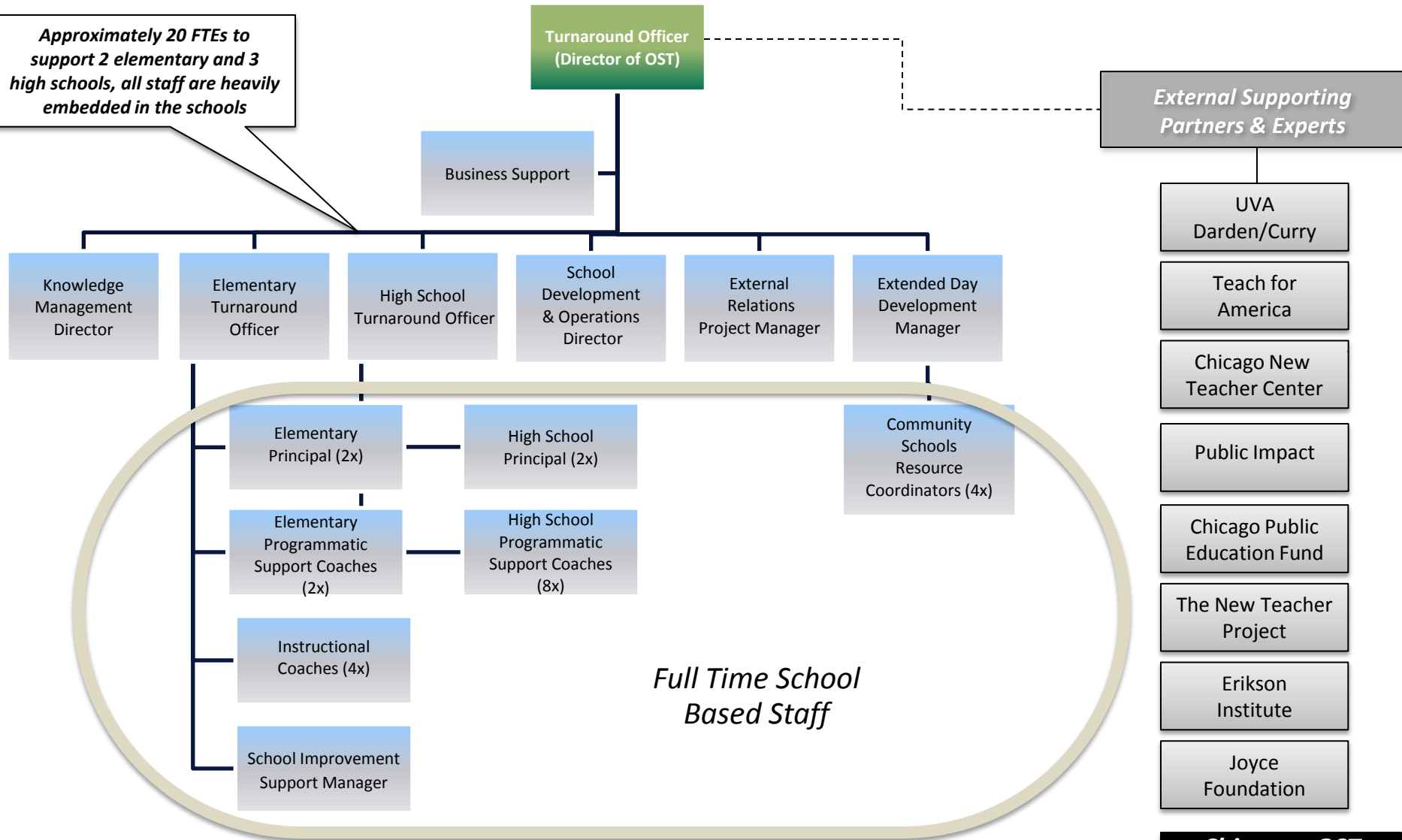
***“We are a very hands-on office. When you look at our time, 70 percent is in schools. We come together so much we’re really shoulder-to-shoulder with [staff] so we can see all that’s happening at the school level.”***

– Cleo Aquino, Chicago Office of School Turnaround

# Chicago Public Schools, Office of School Turnaround (OST)

## (3 of 3)

*Approximately 20 FTEs to support 2 elementary and 3 high schools, all staff are heavily embedded in the schools*



# Chicago Public Schools, Office of New Schools (ONS)

## (1 of 2)

*Chicago's Office of New Schools works with outside partners to establish management contracts, performance benchmarks, and shared governance with operating partners. The team consists of 23 FT employees (though this also includes staff focused on stand-alone charter schools).*

### Attracting and Supporting Partners

- Lead Partner support and management is the core mission of the ONS
- ONS is responsible for establishing management contracts, performance benchmarks, and shared governance with operating partners
- Current Lead Partners include well-respected CMOs, community groups, and other school providers such as the Academy for Urban School Leadership

### Coordinating School Support

- ONS manages a portfolio of 103 schools that consists of charter and contract schools developed through Renaissance 2010 and all charter schools opened prior to 2005
- The Office acts as a liaison between schools, partners, and CPS as a whole
- Parallel ONS and OST teams meet regularly to ensure alignment of programs and when necessary, resolve district central office barriers

### Fostering Human Capital

- ONS is heavily involved in recruitment of teaching talent to its schools and works closely with Lead Partners such as AUSL as well as maintaining its own recruitment team

# Chicago Public Schools, Office of New Schools (ONS)

## (2 of 2)

### Monitoring and Oversight

- Accountability is a key function of ONS; the Office outlines and manages the accountability system for new schools (both charter and non-charter)
- ONS designs individual MOUs and performance agreements, then formally evaluates Accountability plans
- All schools share common metrics: test scores (composite and gain), attendance, and graduation rates
- Performance evaluation of the schools occurs through periodic evaluations that include informal reviews as well as formal annual performance reports

### Securing Resources

- ONS includes a community partnership team to help bring community support and resources to its schools
- Staff also work closely with counterparts in partner organizations to secure funding or resources for special initiatives

***“It’s not a hands-off relationship. There’s a recruitment team, a community partnership team, accountability team...we are working with [external partners] on every element that touches a school.”***

– Jennifer Dai, Chicago Office of New Schools

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# Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Achievement Zone (1 of 2)

*The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Achievement Zone model was first implemented in 2007 to improve outcomes in the district's highest priority underperforming schools. The Zone serves 11 schools, chiefly middle and high schools. Office staff of approximately 10 people including an Executive Director reporting directly to the Superintendent.*

## Attracting and Supporting Partners

- The Achievement Zone (AZ) is an internal turnaround model: to date, district is not contracting out management of schools to partner organizations
- Several organizations provide support to schools in the district, but none are specific to the Achievement Zone

## Coordinating School Support

- The Achievement Zone is the prime source of school support for its schools; the district is divided into 6 sub-districts, but schools are pulled in for turnaround in the AZ regardless of geographic cluster
- The Zone provides some additional resources to its schools (including new data analysis systems) and has developed an intensive coaching model to provide individualized support
- Specialized school-level support includes an intervention specialist, math and reading specialists, activities coordinator, and data analyst

***"It's easy to say on paper, 'let's build a collaborative culture,' but it's harder to truly align people's efforts...those [district] folks make our schools a priority, and we're all on the same page about that. That's the piece that has helped us the most."***

**-Darius Adamson, Charlotte-Mecklenburg**

Achievement Zone

**Charlotte-Mecklenburg**

# Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Achievement Zone (2 of 2)

## Fostering Human Capital

- AZ staff have focused heavily on extending schools' capacity to analyze and act on achievement data
- Leadership development is a high priority as well; current Executive Director was promoted to position this year after serving as principal of a successful turnaround school

## Monitoring and Oversight

- The office collects and reports its data separately from main district data, which allows for easy comparison of Zone and non-Zone schools
- Results to date have been excellent: 10 of 11 schools significantly outpaced district and state in terms of growth

## Securing Resources

- Superintendent commitment to secure funding for AZ personnel did not survive the latest round of drastic budget cuts, which include \$80M in reductions for 2010-2011; the AZ was disproportionately affected because it has more staffers per student
- Due to these cuts, **the AZ will not exist in current configuration by Sept 2010**
  - Instead ALL Title I eligible Elementary Schools will be placed in their own Zone, and another Zone will contain ALL Title I Middle and High Schools
  - Though presented as a scale-up, it is a substantially different model; the effort to serve all Title I schools simultaneously may result in diluting the model significantly

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# Los Angeles Unified School District, iDesign Schools (1 of 2)

*The LAUSD Public School Choice initiative has given rise to a wide variety of school models and configurations. Within the district structures created to oversee their implementation, the iDesign office established in 2007 most closely resembles a District Turnaround Office. Three full-time staffers support externally managed (Network Partner) turnaround schools, as well as directly managing schools.*

## Attracting and Supporting Partners

- iDesign is currently working with 3 Network Partners (Lead Partners) who are managing schools
- The iDesign office manages the RFP and MOU process for these organizations
- Ongoing district reorganization has resulted in more schools and initiatives falling under iDesign umbrella, including pilot schools
  - In October 2009, iDesign was merged with Charter Schools and put under one Executive Director
  - Office of Innovation and Charter now encompasses a broad portfolio of school designs and configurations
- iDesign worked with 20 schools in 2009-2010 school year, some are partner-managed, and some are directly managed
- Executive Directors of both iDesign and the Office of Innovation and Charter have reform backgrounds rather than deep district ties: one led CMO, one reform efforts in DC and Oakland

## Coordinating School Support

- iDesign's 3 FTE are all deeply engaged with supporting both the schools under direct management and Network Partner schools, although they are currently working as generalists without clearly defined roles

***"We have been in the process of rethinking what our office should look like for pretty much all of this school year. We've all come in hitting the ground running and haven't yet been strategic about division of labor."***

-Monique Epps, Director of iDesign schools

**Los Angeles**

# Los Angeles Unified School District, iDesign Schools (2 of 2)

## Fostering Human Capital

- The vision for iDesign is to empower schools to implement innovative practices in order to increase student achievement, including give them the tools, resources, training and support they need to be innovative
- Several partner organizations are assisting with teacher recruitment; talent development is a key priority

## Monitoring and Oversight

- One central initiative of iDesign is to completely overhaul partner accountability metrics, incorporating walk-throughs and other non-test data
- Office will also implement a system of feedback and reciprocal accountability for schools to rate the support they receive

## Securing Resources

- Office works in conjunction with other district staff to obtain outside funding for its portfolio of schools
- Somewhat handicapped by a highly siloed district culture
  - A proposal for an entirely different DTO to be funded with SIG money was recently submitted; all schools receiving SIG funds would report to that office, including 7 iDesign Schools
  - However, current iDesign staff was not consulted/informed of the proposal until after submission

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# Office of School Innovation, District of Columbia Public Schools (1 of 2)

*DC is implementing a portfolio strategy under the auspices of the Office of School Innovation. Partner managed turnarounds are under the umbrella of Autonomous Initiatives within this office. The office employs 2 FTEs within this division. The AI Manager reports directly to the OSI Chief.*

## Attracting and Supporting Partners

- Division oversees 4 schools run by 2 lead partner organizations (Friends of Bedford and Friendship) with a third (Scholar Academy) joining in September 2010
- A large role of Autonomous Initiatives is to liaise with other district offices such as budget, contract management, and human resources to create a partner-friendly context throughout the system

## Coordinating School Support

- Autonomous Initiatives (supporting partner operated schools) were moved from the Chief Academic Officer's division into a more DTO-like structure within in the Office of Innovation in order to provide more comprehensive support
- The Office of Innovation focuses not just on teaching and learning but rather on supporting effectiveness in all areas that touch a school
- This will fit into an overall district realignment that will result in more individuated support-- fewer schools per Superintendent--but also in the loss of a lot of staff/support structures

***“A turnaround effort is going to look a bit different at each school. But we are trying to develop a ‘menu’ of potential options and strategies so we aren’t starting from scratch each time.”***

– Emily Schultz, Office of Innovation, DCPS

# Office of School Innovation, District of Columbia Public Schools (2 of 2)

## Fostering Human Capital

- Partner organizations are developing rigorous teacher hiring and evaluation systems, with support from the Office of Innovation
- This dovetails with an expected hiring and retention overhaul in all District-managed schools, a central initiative of Chancellor Michelle Rhee
- Turnaround schools will have the opportunity to opt in to or out of districtwide professional development; DTO will assist in these decisions

## Monitoring and Oversight

- Accountability in partnership schools was recently reconfigured: previously, the Office of Innovation held the partner organization accountable for outcomes, but schools remained within the traditional cluster system for teaching and learning; this created some “murky lines of accountability” as the cluster superintendent managed the principal while OSI managed the partner
- This year, all partnership schools instead report to the autonomous OSI cluster, streamlining oversight

## Securing Resources

- Staff spend significant time working with staff in other district departments to identify areas where resources could be leveraged or shared
- OSI is currently developing a strategy to use School Improvement Grant funds to support the work of some partner-managed schools

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# An emerging DTO: New York City Department of Education, Department of Portfolio and Planning (1 of 2)

*NYC DOE's Department of Portfolio and Planning is in the midst of a significant organizational realignment to be completed in Summer 2010. With this realignment, the District is exploring the feasibility of expanding upon their successful phase out/phase in strategy, and is redesigning the OPP to better support partner-managed turnarounds*

## Attracting and Supporting Partners

- New York City has a history of highly successful collaborations with external partner organizations, though most have been through a phase in/phase out strategy rather than support for true turnarounds
- Several partner organizations may potentially undertake turnaround if the district supports are in place
- District has many years of experience with crafting and overseeing MOUs to govern partner relations, and has demonstrated effective engagement with and support for partners

## Coordinating School Support

- New department structure will merge functions currently performed by an Office of Enrollment, Office of School Improvement (identification/state/monitoring/implementation), Office of Gifted & Talented, Office of Early Childhood Education, and the Department of Portfolio Planning
- Umbrella will ultimately include approximately 200 FTEs, though some departments (Gifted & Talented, Early Childhood) will have little direct connection with turnaround

***“Schools and leaders in New York City are already empowered to make choices. We feel we’ve had a lot of success with our current model but are creating the district supports for partner-managed turnarounds to see if we can do even more.”***

**-Miriam Sondheimer, Director of Transformation and Turnaround Policy**

**New York**

# New York City Department of Education, Department of Portfolio and Planning (2 of 2)

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## Fostering Human Capital

- New Department of Portfolio and Planning will continue to invest heavily in cultivating the pipeline of partner management and school-based leaders
- Division Director, Marc Sternberg, is transitioning to district role after leading one of the city's successful new schools
- Focus will remain on empowering school level decision-making

## Monitoring and Oversight

- An early goal of the division is to better integrate state and federal accountability processes while maintaining fidelity to its own district model of School Quality Reviews
- Will also aim to streamline state and federal compliance burden faced by schools

## Securing Resources

- District is considering how to use potential new federal funds to increase its support for partner-managed turnarounds without dismantling current strategy
- Reorganization to be completed in Summer 2010 will help identify areas where resources could be leveraged or shared

# Lessons from emerging turnaround offices

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- Thoughtful planning can reduce, but not eliminate, **trial-and-error**: 3 of 6 offices profiled have already undergone (or are undergoing) reorganizations and realignments of personnel roles and responsibilities to better suit the needs of the schools under management
- Effective DTOs can vary in **their relative level of independence** from other District offices; the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Achievement Zone operates as a fairly stand-alone unit, while the Autonomous Initiatives of the Office of Innovation and Charter (D.C.) aims to facilitate, rather than replace, relationships between its schools and other administrative structures
- Several interviewees noted **resistance or skepticism** from both within the district system and from the community at large, where “flavor of the week” reform movements come and go
- To generate school and community buy-in, some districts have invested in a **public outreach** to explain the mission and vision of the new office; for instance, Chicago’s Office of School Turnaround produced an eight-minute video to showcase its work in schools

*“Now that we’ve had a few years of experience with turnaround, we have learned a lot about how to support partnerships effectively. We have an idea of what works, so the next goal is to draw on that and to expand it.”*

– Emily Schultz, Office of Innovation, DCPS

- Current role of the Local Educational Agency
- The model District Turnaround Office
- Lessons from emerging turnaround offices
- Guidance on building a District Turnaround Office

# Establishing a District Turnaround Office: Fundamental design principles

1

## Understand the starting conditions

Clearly assess effectiveness of existing district functions, including:

- Communication with state agencies to identify schools for turnaround
- Ability to attract and support high-quality external partners
- Human capital development and cultivation of school leadership pipeline
- Data analysis and accountability for lowest-performing schools (rather than district as a whole)

2

## Be sure the creation of a DTO isn't merely a structural change

The DTO must actually address the needs of the district; when developing the DTO, identify its explicit goals in each of 5 key areas:

1. Attracting and Supporting Partners
2. Supporting Turnaround Schools
3. Fostering Human Capital
4. Monitoring and Accountability
5. Securing Resources

3

## Let district context determine initial levels of priority

All DTOs should ultimately incorporate the 5 core functions, but the specifics will (and should) vary from district to district:

- For instance, DTOs are best set up for both monitoring/compliance AND support...but the balance is often a delicate one and may look different in different settings
- Clear communication within the LEA and with external partners can help set the right priorities from the start



*Too often, districts make structural changes that only increase the layers of bureaucracy that inhibit, rather than facilitate, effective support for low-performing schools. **The DTO is a fundamentally different structure, designed to cut through the existing bureaucracy and streamline support to the neediest schools.***

# Human capital is paramount to the effectiveness of the DTO

## DTO Executive

### What to look for:

- Successful field record with school improvement and/or school turnarounds
- Knowledge of particular district context BUT is independent-minded and not overly invested in maintaining close allegiances with other district management
- Demonstrated ability to make difficult, sometimes politically unpopular, decisions
- Several types of leaders have had success in this role, e.g., senior-level managers recruited from other district departments, former CMO leaders, high-achieving principals
- Current district offices vary significantly in this parameter (e.g., Chicago team is mostly district veterans; LAUSD team is chiefly bringing reform experience from CMOs or other districts)

## Program staff

### What to look for:

- Key expertise in particular areas such as data analysis or community engagement, yet who are nimble enough to serve as generalists in all areas of school support
- K-12 education experience is highly valuable, but managers from corporate or nonprofit backgrounds can also succeed because day-to-day work will require flexibility and creative thinking
- A diversity of team backgrounds, skills, and expertise
- A balance between district insiders and outsiders (differs by district)

***“The key to success is the team itself. Just like in the schools, it starts with identifying good talent, and then making sure that the person is well matched to their function or role.”*** – Cleo Aquino, CPS OST

# Key factors for ongoing success

## Provide significant authority to the office

- Secure informal (e.g., buy-in from key leadership) and formal (e.g., direct reporting line to Superintendent) authority for DTO
- Empower the DTO to make key decisions around turnaround issues without burdensome bureaucratic processes
- Identify an DTO leader who can manage relationships with key stakeholders, including SEAs, other LEA offices, and policymakers

## Invest upfront time in coordination and communication

- Clarify roles, responsibilities, and authorities of the DTO and other LEA offices
- Determine where the DTO will draw upon other resources within the district to provide schools with a coordinated and streamlined strategy
- Continuously over-communicate to key stakeholders, particularly during the DTO's initial development
- Establish regular communication with districts and schools engaged in the turnaround process

## Secure adequate capacity

- Build the DTO to be a longstanding and sustainable organization in the LEA by:
  - Providing adequate and continuing financial resources to the DTO
  - Prioritizing the recruitment of talented, experienced, and change-oriented staff to the DTO
- Leverage additional capacity creatively, including identifying untapped, existing resources at the LEA and establishing partnerships with external providers

## Ensure transparency and reciprocal accountability

- Consider the balance between accountability and support: be sure schools are receiving all the resources (including time) needed to undertake turnaround, but intervene swiftly once there is certainty that current approaches aren't working
- Be explicit about the supports and flexibility the DTO is and isn't authorized to provide
- Design accountability metrics that allow for feedback from schools and partners to evaluate the quality of support they are receiving and to suggest improvements to structures and processes

# DTOs may face a number of key challenges

## Stability

*“There is always hesitancy within the community: is this office credible and is this office really committed for the long haul? Unfortunately a lot of these schools have seen many large-scale district initiatives that have never come to fruition. Establishing credibility and trust within a community is key to success.”*

*-Cleo Aquino, Chicago OST*



- Turnaround strategies (and possibly DTOs) could be highly vulnerable to the shifting sands of district administration, where reconfiguration is routine.
- 4 of 5 offices profiled in this report are currently going through substantial realignment and reorganization; this is not likely to change while the federal and state landscape is changing (with new funding streams, etc)
- In addition to internal chaos, this can undermine external support for turnaround initiatives

## Stakeholder Support

*“[As a principal], I wasn’t really enthused about the Achievement Zone. For me it was one more label. I’m already a Title I, non AYP, free reduced lunch school... You have to really show the principals that you are supporting their leadership development.”*

*-Darius Adamson,  
CMS Achievement Zone*



- School and partner buy-in is not automatic even if the DTO is designed to provide needed services
- The onus will be on the DTO to demonstrate responsiveness and support.
- Direct solicitation of feedback (reciprocal accountability) and a focus on human capital development can help forge a true partnership.

# DTOs may face a number of key challenges

## Clarity

*“Partners reporting to multiple offices can create an interesting dynamic –they get tempted to see what one person says and then turn around and ask the other. The support interface has to be completely streamlined...”*

*...Communication is an ongoing job, not a one-time job. Sometimes I wonder, why am I still having these conversations after these partners have been around for almost two years? But every phase is going to present new challenges.”*

*-Emily Schultz,  
Office of Innovation, DCPS*



### **At the district level:**

- Other departments within and outside the LEA will still play a role in turnaround schools (particularly at first)
- Lines of accountability must be clearly articulated so schools aren't subject to multiple layers of management
- Within the district, both upfront communication and recurring discussions about the role of the DTO are essential
- Many interviewees reported that even in Y2 and Y3 of partner management, they were still playing an active role in educating district peers about the DTO

### **At the school level:**

- Even after an MOU process is executed, staff may still need to be educated about what flexibilities they have to prevent unneeded frustration.

## Capacity

*“Our department is three people strong and we have a LOT on our plate. We have competing priorities. They are all in the urgent and important box. When you have so many things in that box it is hard to step back and evaluate.”*

*- Monique Epps, LAUSD iDesign*



- Many districts profiled are struggling with either an expansion of schools under management, reductions in staff, or both
- Even in an LEA committed to long-term support for turnaround, DTO staff should expect high workloads and competing priorities, and may find it challenging to continue/scale up initiatives without diluting the level of support provided
- If designed carefully, the DTO can reduce district costs in the long-term by replacing rather than adding to ineffective layers of bureaucracy

The report and related documents are the result of a research and development process led by Mass Insight with the support of various partners.

It should be used in conjunction with the Main Report, *The Turnaround Challenge: Why America's best opportunity to dramatically improve student achievement lies in our worst performing schools*, and a variety of other resources we have developed and distributed.

For more information on *The Turnaround Challenge* and our Partnership Zone Initiative, please visit our website at [www.massinsight.org](http://www.massinsight.org) or contact us at [turnaround@massinsight.org](mailto:turnaround@massinsight.org).

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