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*A Third Way: Lessons on the Politics of School District Turnaround*

*From Lawrence, Massachusetts*

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## **Introduction: The Politics of School District Turnaround**

Superintendents list politics as the top factor that impedes their job performance, according to a 2015 American Association of School Administrators survey (Education Week, 2015). State interventions in low-performing schools and district turnaround efforts tend to be especially contentious, as demonstrated by public protest in such communities as New Orleans (Buras, 2015; Jabar, 2015), Memphis (Glazer & Egan, 2016), Newark (Russakoff, 2015), and even smaller Massachusetts cities such as Holyoke (Williams, 2015). At the same time, research suggests that the effective navigation of politics is a crucial component of successful and sustainable district improvement initiatives (Honig & Coburn, 2008; Johnson et al., 2015; Jochim, 2013; Stone, Henig, Jones & Pierannunzi, 2001). Unfortunately, the academic literature is short on guidance for leaders looking to implement politically viable district turnaround.

Massachusetts' takeover of the chronically low-performing Lawrence Public Schools (LPS) provides a rare case of a state-led district-wide turnaround leading to early positive academic outcomes for students while generating limited political controversy relative to more typical cases of turnaround. [In a new working paper](#), I describe the factors that contributed to the way that key stakeholders in Lawrence—the general public, parents, educators, union leaders, and district partners—responded to the early reforms. In other words, I explored the question: why wasn't the Lawrence turnaround more controversial?

## **Context: Lawrence, Massachusetts**

Lawrence, a mid-sized industrial city about 30 miles north of Boston, is one of the most economically disadvantaged communities in the state. Leading up to the state's takeover, the public school system served approximately 13,000 students. Roughly 90 per cent of students qualified for Free or Reduced Priced Lunch, and 80 percent were learning English as a second language. Many of Lawrence's families came to Massachusetts from the Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico. Unfortunately, LPS students were scoring 0.70 standard deviations lower than the state average on both math and ELA standardized exams, and only about half of all students were graduating high school within four years. In the fall of 2011, the state responded by using authorities laid out in the 2010 Achievement Gap Act that allow the state to take control over

districts at the lowest levels of performance. The state placed LPS into state “receivership” and appointed a “Receiver,” who was given wide authority to alter district-wide policy.

The early turnaround strategy had five major components, including efforts to: (1) raise expectations for students and staff through ambitious performance targets, (2) increase school-level autonomy and accountability, (3) improve the quality of human capital, through staff replacement, staff development, and a new performance-based career ladder compensation system, (4) increase learning time, through expanded school day, enrichment activities, tutoring, and special initiatives, and (5) use data to drive instructional improvement. The first two years of turnaround implementation led to substantial positive gains in math and modest improvements in ELA and high school grade progression (Schueler, Goodman & Deming, 2016).

The Lawrence experience has not been without controversy, but this has been minimal when compared to more typical examples of takeover and turnaround. It helped that several local elected officials expressed public support for receivership before the state acted. Popular press coverage of the Lawrence schools shifted from a mostly negative tone pre-receivership to a more positive tone over the first two post-receivership years. The limited, existing polling data suggests no major signs of upset from parents or from retained teachers during the early phase of turnaround implementation. The most vocal criticism came from the Lawrence Teachers Union, which openly opposed the state takeover and had ongoing policy-based disagreements with turnaround leaders. However, district and union leaders agreed that union-district communication improved post-receivership and that the union took a fundamentally cooperative, rather than oppositional, approach.

## **Project and Methods**

To explore why the reforms were not met with more controversy, I held one-on-one interviews with a purposeful sample of 20 turnaround leaders and stakeholder group representatives. I supplemented the interview data with an analysis of news coverage of the Lawrence schools and publically available documents such as website content, case studies, public speeches, and minutes from public meetings. Interviewees included central office and state department of education officials, union leaders, elected officials, leaders of non-profit district partners, and a small number of principals and teachers. The educators were also purposefully sampled. Specifically, once my analysis of press coverage and survey data suggested there had been minimal resistance to the turnaround, I asked interviewees and other contacts to introduce me to participants who were known to have resisted the turnaround. The teachers in my sample came from this avenue of recruitment: they had been anti-receivership initially. My interview questions focused on public perceptions of the reforms and the factors that might have influenced the response. I coded the transcripts to identify major themes.

## **Findings: Explaining the Stakeholder Response**

Three primary factors appeared to work together to limit the negative response and to increase support for the reforms, including features of the: (1) local Lawrence context, (2) broader statewide accountability context, and (3) turnaround leaders’ approach to reform.

### ***(1) Local Context***

Several characteristics of the local Lawrence context help explain the generally mild response. First, the general public had come to view the district and city leaders as guilty of chronic administrative dysfunction. The previous three superintendents had been fired for allegations of wrongdoing; the most recent superintendent had been accused of fraud and embezzlement; and the mayor was under campaign finance investigation. This had produced a lack of confidence in local capacity to turnaround the school system on its own, and a willingness to let the state come in. Second, the district's manageable size of 30 schools allowed turnaround leaders to spend time building relationships throughout the system. Finally, student enrollment was increasing throughout the post-receivership period, which meant that turnaround leaders did not need to close schools or cut budgets.

Several features of the organized labor landscape also worked to the turnaround leaders' benefit. Massachusetts' principals do not have the ability to collectively bargain, which allowed the Receiver's team to replace nearly half of all principals within the first two years. In addition, two factors laid the groundwork for comity between the teachers' union and the Receiver's team: the union had long sought a better relationship with district leaders, and the Receiver's team respected the union's perceived role as a check on corruption in the pre-receivership era. Finally, the lack of a strong union-parent alliance hindered the union's ability to effectively mobilize the community against receivership.

### ***(2) State Accountability Context***

The accountability context in Massachusetts contributed to the limited conflict over turnaround in Lawrence. Massachusetts' Achievement Gap Act (2010) had given the state expanded authority to take over districts in cases of extreme underperformance. Under the terms of the Act, the powers of the Superintendent and the School Committee become vested in the state-appointed Receiver. The state also bestows new authorities to the Receiver, including the ability to suspend portions of the collective bargaining agreement and unilaterally extend the school day and year.

This unique capacity worked to shield turnaround leaders from some local battles and improved the district's ability to handle politically sensitive issues. State and district turnaround leaders claimed that these powers allowed them to recruit politically savvy district- and school-level leaders by offering them meaningful authority to bring about change. The state-given authority also provided crucial coverage for turnaround leaders to negotiate a union contract that would not have previously been accepted by the union. Under receivership, union leaders recognized that the Receiver could implement changes without their support. Furthermore, the vast nature of the Receiver's authority allowed turnaround leaders to appear measured for not using the full extent of their powers. For instance, turnaround leaders often emphasized that, although they had the authority to do so, they did not require teachers to reapply for their jobs or convert schools into charters.

### ***(3) Turnaround Leaders' Approach***

Within this state and local context, I find five features of turnaround leaders' approach that minimized potential resistance to their reforms. First, leaders placed a high priority on building relationships with stakeholders. This is amply illustrated by the turnaround team's early information-gathering efforts, their intentional shift from a compliance- to a service-based approach to district-school relations, the creation of teacher leadership opportunities, frequent engagement with the teachers union, and the enlistment of community-based non-profit groups in providing enrichment activities. These efforts empowered stakeholders within Lawrence to help shape and even take some accountability for the reforms.

Second, turnaround leaders implemented a differentiated approach to district-school relations, avoiding potential mismatches that could have created frustrations. For example, the district gave schools different levels of autonomy based on prior performance and perceived capacity. Rather than assuming all schools were in dire straights, turnaround leaders identified and publicly celebrated the educators at schools that had already been high-performing prior to receivership. The district also brought in outside partners to help schools adapt to their newfound autonomy with tailored support.

The third factor was leaders' use of "third way" framing and policy decisions. Traditionally, "third way" refers to a political position that reconciles, and even transcends, right- and left-wing political perspectives (Bobbio, 1997). Educational leaders have used the "third way" more broadly in describing efforts to avoid false dichotomies and to reconcile polarizing political disagreements. The Lawrence Receiver often characterized the national education community as one in the midst of a bipolar, ideological battle between proponents of market-based reforms, allied with charter school advocates, and proponents of more centralized systems of public schooling, allied with teachers unions. He argued that Lawrence, in contrast, subscribed to a third way by borrowing the best ideas from both camps.

Beyond the rhetoric, the third way framework became evident in the turnaround team's policy choices. Although most schools remained under district management, the Receiver handed over the operation of a small number of schools to a diverse range of groups, including charter school operators and the local teachers union. The schools that came under charter management retained neighborhood-based student assignments and a unionized teaching force. This was a politically useful decision, since it removed charter opponents' primary concerns about charter schools. Providing the local union with the opportunity to lead a school gave the union a chance to demonstrate the effectiveness of their preferred turnaround strategies, such as teacher leadership teams, which helped improve overall union-district relations. A final example of the third way was the Receiver's dual emphasis on lifting academic expectations and building students' social and emotional skills through expanded enrichment offerings.

Fourth, turnaround leaders made several strategic staffing decisions that mitigated resistance to some of the most controversial reforms – those that related to human capital, such as dismissals and the new performance-based contract. For instance, the Receiver retained, recruited and promoted staff members whose own attitudes aligned with the Receiver's, preventing friction that might have occurred with team members who were critical of the turnaround approach. The team also retained and developed relationships, early on, with key insiders whose institutional knowledge helped the team avoid political minefields and who promoted the reforms within their

own extended networks. The human capital decisions were by no means smooth sailing; in the first year of the turnaround, the Receiver dismissed about ten percent of the teaching force through a “Receiver’s Review” process that generated significant anxiety among educators and complaints from the union regarding overreach and lack of due process. Nevertheless, the response likely would have been much worse had the Receiver dismissed larger numbers of teachers or required all staff members to reapply for their positions. Finally, leaders improved the palatability of the new, performance-based compensation system by increasing pay across the board.

The final factor that minimized conflict and generated support for the turnaround was the leaders’ focus on producing early results while minimizing disruption. The Receiver’s team prioritized programs they thought would produce immediate benefits for students, such as the Acceleration Academies, while simultaneously building out reforms geared toward longer-term improvement such as systems for increasing school-level autonomy and accountability. For the Acceleration Academy program, highly regarded teachers provided struggling students with targeted instruction, in a single subject, delivered in small groups of roughly ten, over weeklong vacation breaks. The Academies played a major role in producing positive first-year impacts (Schueler, Goodman, Deming, 2016). As anticipated, the strong first-year results helped to convince parents and educators that the reforms were beneficial and made it more difficult for critics to oppose the reforms. At the same time, the turnaround leaders avoided reforms, such as the creation of a school choice system, that they worried would create disruption and confusion for families without contributing to substantial short-term gains.

## **Implications**

In sum, I find that three factors converged to minimize public resistance to the Lawrence turnaround model: particular characteristics of the local Lawrence context, the expanded powers granted to the state and Receiver through the state’s accountability system, and the turnaround leaders’ judicious use of those powers. There are several policy implications. First, the findings on the role of context suggest that the results may not be replicable in districts that are radically different from Lawrence, such as large urban districts with dwindling enrollment, a strong principals’ union and a strong parent-union alliance. At the same time, the findings may provide guidance for state leaders on the selection of districts most ripe for this type of reform.

Second, my finding that the new authorities granted by the state’s accountability system played a role in limiting resistance raises important questions about the sustainability of reform if and when the state returns local control. The current Receiver has three years left on his contract, but the state’s Education Commissioner has begun to discuss an exit strategy. A lack of short-term outrage may not translate to durable support, and latent union, teacher, and parent concerns over issues such as compensation, extended learning time, non-renewals, teacher retention, excessive test prep, and disciplinary practices at charter-run schools, could build and create challenges for sustainability. Turnaround leaders would be wise to solidify support among those stakeholders whose influence would increase under a locally-governed system.

Finally, the findings provide encouragement for state and district leaders who wish to create politically viable change. In a policy climate often characterized by polarization, Lawrence provides a noteworthy example of what is possible: leaders transcended either/or thinking to

promote creative collaborations, devolved decision-making while increasing accountability, raised academic standards while bolstering extracurricular offerings, and empowered local stakeholders to take ownership over the reforms even within a system of state control. Lawrence's third way provides encouraging lessons for school systems that seek dramatic improvement without radical resistance.

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