

# Turning Around Low-Performing Schools in Chicago



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In recent years, the nation’s lowest-performing schools increasingly have become a focal point of scrutiny and concern. Policymakers have called for swift and dramatic action to improve the nation’s 5,000 lowest-performing schools, arguing that the magnitude of their dysfunction requires a robust response. Specific strategies for “turning around” chronically low-performing schools have become prominent, with the U.S. Department of Education enacting policies to promote four school improvement models that include “fundamental, comprehensive changes in leadership, staffing, and governance” (State Fiscal Stabilization Fund Program: Final Rule, 2009, p. 58462). Spurred by federal grants and incentive programs, states and districts are attempting to catalyze rapid improvement in the lowest-performing schools through efforts that range from replacing principals, to firing the entire staff, to closing schools entirely.

Despite the attention and activity surrounding these types of school improvement models, there is a lack of research on whether or how they work. To date, most evidence has been anecdotal, as policymakers have highlighted specific schools that have made significant test score gains as exemplars of school turnaround and researchers have focused on case studies of particular schools that have undergone one of these models. This has led to a tremendous amount of speculation over whether these isolated examples are, in fact, representative of turnaround efforts overall—in terms of the way they were implemented, the improvements they showed in student outcomes, and whether these schools actually served the same students before and after reform.

**THIS IS AN OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS, SUMMARIZED FROM A LARGER REPORT** entitled *Turning Around Low-Performing Schools in Chicago: Full Report*. For more information on the methodology or findings of the study, please visit our website at [ccsr.uchicago.edu](http://ccsr.uchicago.edu).

To begin to address this knowledge gap, the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research and AIR partnered to examine five different models initiated by the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) in 36 schools. CPS was an early adopter of dramatic intervention strategies in low-performing schools, and the reforms in this study were implemented between 1997 and 2010. All of the schools were identified as chronically low performing and were reformed in ways consistent with the elements described in the school improvement models recommended by the federal government. The goals of the study were to make clear how school reform occurred in Chicago—showing the actual changes in the student population and teacher workforce at the schools—and to learn whether these efforts had a positive effect on student learning overall.

#### SUMMARY OF STUDENT OUTCOMES

- On average, Chicago elementary/middle schools that underwent reform made significant improvements over time. Four years after intervention, the gap in test scores between reformed elementary/middle schools and the system average decreased by almost half in reading and by almost two-thirds in mathematics.
- On average, Chicago high schools that underwent reform efforts did not perform differently than similar schools in terms of absences in grades nine through 12 or in terms of the percent of students on-track to graduate by the end of ninth grade.

### Overview of Reform Models in Chicago

Since 1997, CPS has initiated five distinct reforms that aim to dramatically improve low-performing schools in a short time. These initiatives are Reconstitution (seven high schools), School Closure and Restart (six elementary schools and two high schools), placement into the School Turnaround Specialist Program (STSP) model (four elementary schools), placement into the Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL) model (ten elementary schools and two high schools), and placement into the CPS Office of School Improvement (OSI) model (two elementary schools and three high schools).<sup>1</sup>

All initiatives relied on changing the school leadership; this was the only lever of change under the STSP model. Administered by the University of Virginia's Partnership for Leaders in Education, the STSP program focuses on the leadership aspect of low-performing schools by training principals to be "turnaround specialists." This reform is similar to the federal *transformational model*, where one of the requirements, among other elements, is the replacement of the principal in the school.

Three other models relied on changing both the leadership and the school staff. These are Reconstitution, AUSL and OSI models. Schools start the new academic year with dramatic changes to staffing, but the same students remain assigned to the schools. These reforms are similar to the federal *turnaround model*, which includes, among other actions, replacing the principal and at least 50 percent of the school's staff, adopting a new governance structure, and implementing a new or revised instructional program.

The last model, School Closure and Restart, was the most drastic intervention for several reasons: schools were closed for a year and students were moved into other schools; the schools subsequently reopened as charter schools; and student enrollment changed from assignment by neighborhood residence to an application and lottery system. In most cases, schools under the Closure and Restart model reopened with a few grades at a time and added a grade every year until the full grade structure was in place. This reform effort is similar to the federal *restart model*, in which schools are closed and reopened under the management of a charter school operator, a charter management organization, or an educational management organization. Table 1 shows some of the key elements of each of these strategies.

The fourth federal model is *school closure*, where schools are closed and students are sent to other schools in the district. While some schools in the district were closed permanently and students were displaced to other schools, these schools are not studied in this report since the schools are permanently closed. A prior CCSR study examined the outcomes of students who attended schools that were closed; it showed that displaced students in Chicago tended to transfer from one low-performing school to another. Overall, closings had no effect on student learning for displaced students.

**TABLE 1**

**Five Reform Initiatives in CPS, 1997–2010**

|                                      | Staff Replacement | Leadership Replacement | Governance Replacement | Change in Attendance Rules | Sample and Timing <sup>a</sup> |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Reconstitution                       | X                 | X                      |                        |                            | 7 HS (1997)                    |
| School Closure and Restart           | X                 | X                      | X                      | X                          | 6 ES; 2 HS (2002-2009)         |
| School Turnaround Specialist Program |                   | X                      |                        |                            | 4 ES (2006)                    |
| Academy for Urban School Leadership  | X                 | X                      | X                      |                            | 10 ES; 2 HS (2006-2010)        |
| Office of School Improvement         | X                 | X                      |                        |                            | 2 ES; 3 HS (2008-2010)         |

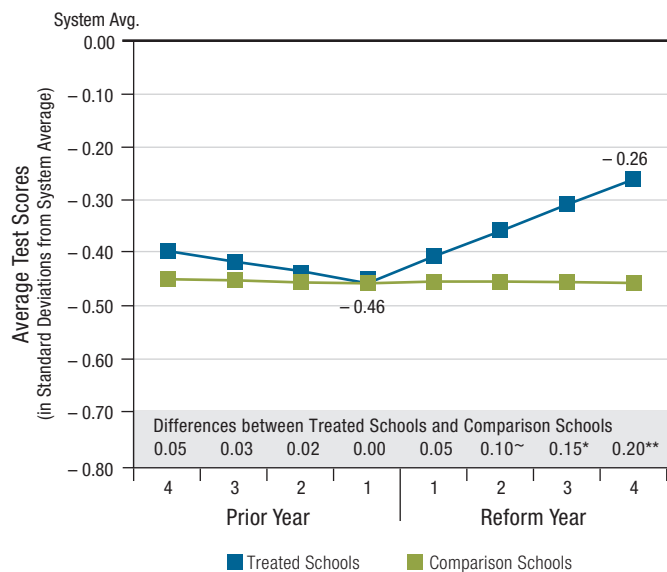
<sup>a</sup> ES = elementary school (schools serving any of the grades K through 8 but not serving students in the high school grades); HS = high school (schools serving at least some of the grades 9–12).

## Main Findings

Elementary/middle schools that went through reform made significant improvements in test scores compared with similar schools that did not; however, large improvements did not occur immediately in the first year. In the first year of reform, improvements in reading and math test scores were only marginally higher than those at comparison schools (see Figures 1 and 2). But there was progress during the years after reform at almost all schools that underwent reform, in both reading and math, so that the gap in test scores between reformed elementary/middle schools and the system average decreased by nearly half in reading and by almost two-thirds in mathematics four years after intervention. (See Figures A1 and A2 in the appendix for school-by-school changes after reform.) These trends are net of changes in student population that the schools might have experienced. That is to say, the analysis adjusts for the fact that some schools did not serve the same students before and after the intervention.

**FIGURE 1**

**Reading achievement in elementary/middle schools was significantly better after the second year of intervention; after four years the gap with the system average was reduced by almost half**

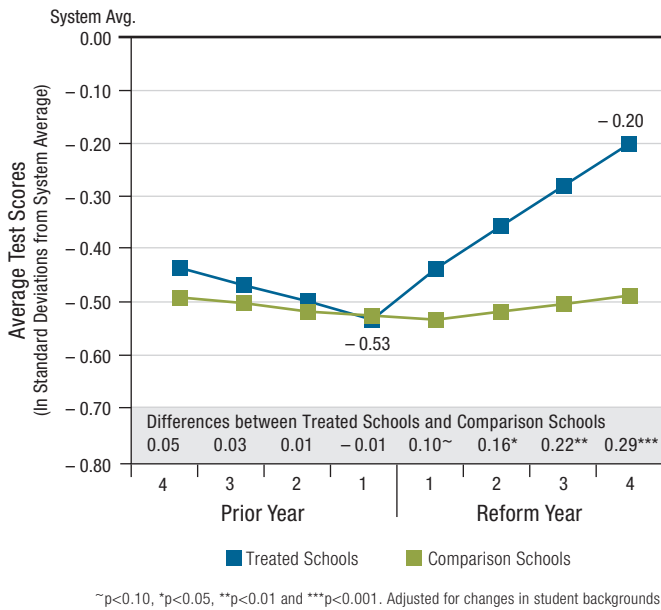


~p<0.10, \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01 and \*\*\*p<0.001. Adjusted for changes in student backgrounds.



**FIGURE 2**

**Math achievement at elementary/middle schools was significantly better after the second year of intervention. After four years, the gap with the system average was cut by almost two-thirds**



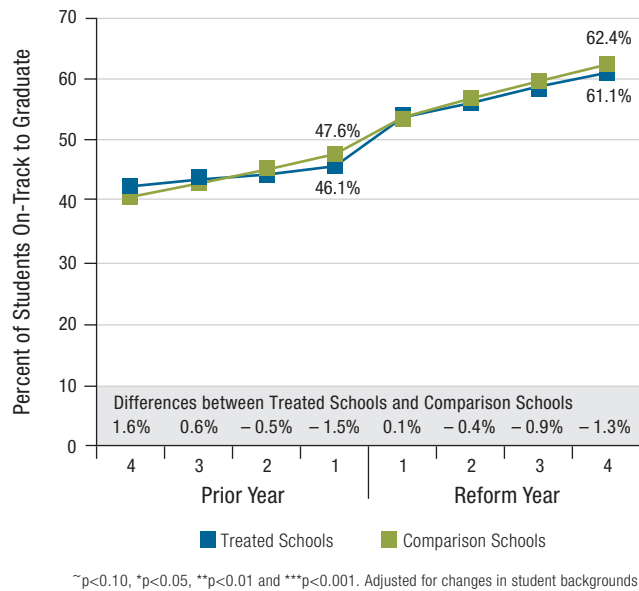
High schools that underwent reform did not show significant improvements in absences or ninth grade on-track-to-graduate rates over matched comparison schools, but recent high school efforts look more promising than earlier ones.<sup>3</sup>

On average, there were no significant improvements in ninth grade on-track rates and absence rates among the schools that went through intervention (see Figures 3 and 4). While on-track rates have improved system-wide over the last several years, on-track rates did not improve more in schools that underwent reform compared to similar schools that did not undergo reform. There was a drop in absence rates in the first year after reform compared to matched schools, but the improvement was not sustained over time.

Many of the high schools in this study went through the Reconstitution model in the late 1990's, and this particular model did not lead to improvements in attendance or on-track rates. (See Figures A3 and A4 in the appendix for school-by-school changes after reform.) CPS administration recognized the problems with earlier attempts at reconstitution, and many of the reconstituted schools were again targeted for reform in subsequent years.

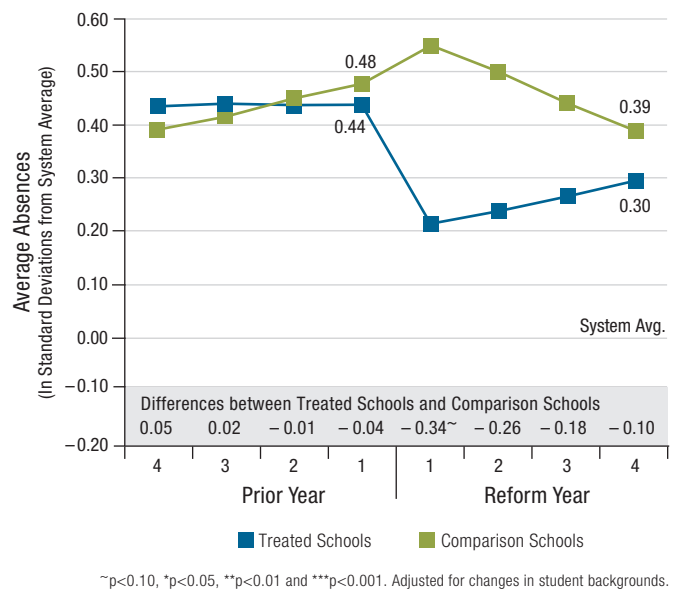
**FIGURE 3**

**Ninth grade on-track rates in treated schools were not different from comparison schools**



**FIGURE 4**

**High school absence rates were lower in the first year, on average, but not in subsequent years**



## Methods for Studying Student Achievement Trends

Reading and mathematics achievement trends for elementary schools (grades three to eight) as well as absences (grades nine to 12) and on-track-to-graduate (grade nine) trends for high schools were compared before and after the intervention took place. Two types of comparisons were used in what is called a difference-in-difference approach:

1. Comparing student performance in the schools before and after intervention; and
2. Comparing trends in student performance in the reformed schools to student performance in a group of matched schools that did not experience the intervention.

The matched group of schools had similar student performance as the reformed schools before intervention, and served similar types of students. Three different methods of choosing a matched comparison group were used to ensure that the conclusions would be the same regardless of which schools were used to make the comparisons. The analyses of student outcomes also took into account any changes in the background characteristics of students entering the schools over time, including changes in students' race, gender, socio-economic indicators, prior achievement, grade level, age at grade, and disability status.

Math and reading scores come from standardized tests that CPS students take each year in grades three through eight. Until spring 2005, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) was administered in CPS; after that the test was replaced by the Illinois State Achievement Test (ISAT). To make the scores

comparable across tests, we converted them into standard deviations from the system mean in each year and for each grade. Thus, they can be interpreted as the degree to which students' scores were different from average in the system in that year. For example, a score of -0.50 means that students are performing one-half of a standard deviation below the system mean for students in their grade. Standardizing within each year provides an automatic adjustment for any system-wide trends that should not be attributed to the intervention, or to differences in tests, or scoring of tests, that may have occurred across the years.

Test scores cannot be used to study high schools because tests were given at different grade levels over the course of the years being studied. Therefore, absences and on-track rates are examined here. Student absence rates were recorded by CPS in a slightly different manner in the years prior to 2007–08 from how they were in the years after. In order to make measures comparable, we converted each student's absence rate into standard deviations from the system mean for each fall semester. This makes the measure of absence rates consistent across all years included in this study; they can be interpreted as the degree to which students' absence rates for the fall semester were different from the average in the system for that year. The on-track-to-graduate variable was not standardized because it was measured in the same way for all years in the study, taking a value of zero for students off-track and a value of one for students on track. A student who is on track has accumulated five credits and has no more than one semester F by the end of ninth grade.

More recent attempts at high school reform have paid more attention to school organization. As yet, there are only seven high schools that experienced reform models other than Reconstitution, and several of them have only been in existence for one or two years. We are hesitant to make sweeping conclusions based on such a small number of schools with limited data. However, among those schools with at least one year of data, most showed some improvement in on-track rates above the comparison schools. (See Figures A3 and A4 in the appendix for school-by-school changes after reform.) Most of the high schools reformed in recent years also showed a decline in absence rates in their first year, although not in subsequent years.

**Schools that underwent reform generally served the same students as before intervention, with the exception of one model of reform** (see Figure 5). With the exception of schools in the Closure and Restart model, schools reenrolled between 55 and 89 percent of students who could reenroll in the year after intervention—rates that were similar to their year-to-year reenrollment rates prior to intervention. These patterns held true in the second and third years following intervention as well. In fact, more students reenrolled in subsequent years than in the first year of reform. The composition of students in intervention schools—in terms of race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and special education status—was similar before and after intervention. These data contradict claims made by critics who argue that turnaround schools systematically push out low-performing and more disadvantaged students when schools undergo the transformation and turnaround models. Concerns about who the schools serve are valid, however, for the closure model.

**Schools under the Closure and Restart model experienced substantial changes to their student body composition**, serving more economically advantaged students, students of higher prior achievement, and fewer special education students. After intervention, schools under the Closure and Restart model also served fewer students from the neighborhood around the school.

**The vast majority of teachers in schools under Closure and Restart, AUSL and OSI models were not rehired after reform.** These schools rehired less than 10 percent of the teachers from the year before intervention. This is consistent

with the theory of change behind the federal restart model and turnaround model, which requires that at least half of the staff change. In contrast, most schools in the Reconstitution model rehired about half of their teachers. Schools that were reconstituted had only a few months for planning and hiring new staff, and this may account for the larger percentage of teachers who were rehired. **The teacher workforce after intervention across all models was more likely to be white, younger, and less experienced, and was more likely to have provisional certification than the teachers who were at those schools before the intervention.**

### How Should We View These Results?

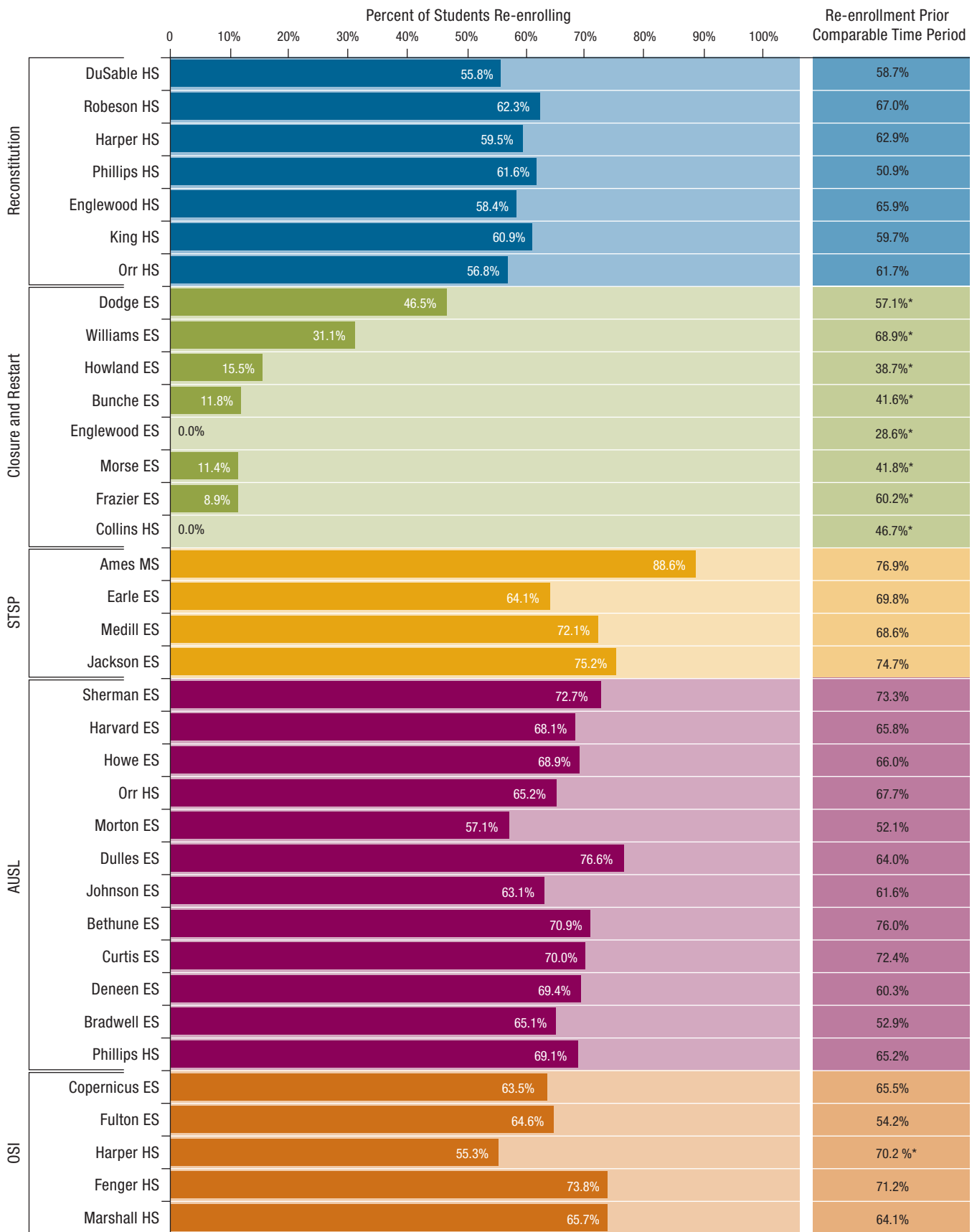
The results of this study suggest that turning around chronically low-performing schools is a process rather than an event. It does not occur immediately when staff or leadership or governance structures are replaced, but can occur when hard work and resources are sustained over time.

Other studies have suggested that successful efforts to turn around low-performing schools usually do so by building the organizational strength of the school over time, using staff changes as just one of many mechanisms to improve school climate and instruction. A list of recommendations compiled in the IES Practice Guide on School Turnaround<sup>4</sup>, based on case studies of schools that showed substantial improvement, starts with establishing strong leadership focused on improving school climate and instruction, strengthening partnerships across school communities, monitoring instruction, addressing discipline, and building distributed leadership among teachers in the school. The second recommendation is to maintain a consistent focus on improving instruction by having staff collaborate around data to analyze school policies and learning conditions. The third recommendation is to pursue quick wins that target critical but immediately addressable problems, including student discipline and safety, conflict in the school community, and school beautification. The final recommendation is to build a committed staff, dedicated to school improvement through collaboration. None of the schools highlighted in the IES practice guide as successful examples of school improvement changed its entire staff, but all of



**FIGURE 5**

**Reenrollment rates in the first year of intervention were similar to the rates before intervention, with the exception of restarts**



\*Re-enrollment rate at this school was significantly different after reform

them replaced teachers who did not share a commitment to change.

This is consistent with research at CCSR examining 100 elementary schools that made significant progress over a seven-year period—and 100 more that did not. The research found that schools strong on at least three of five essential elements—effective leaders, collaborative teachers, strong family and community ties, ambitious instruction, and safe and orderly learning climate—were 10 times more likely to improve and 30 times less likely to stagnate than those that were strong on just one or two.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that the recent reform models, OSI and AUSL—both of which have explicit blueprints for reform focused on building the organizational strength of schools—

achieved consistent improvement in all of the elementary/middle schools they managed.

Continued study will be needed to know whether these gains are sustained beyond the first four years, particularly if attention and resources from the district start to fade. These schools started out with extremely low levels of student performance and presented significant barriers to reform. A prior study at CCSR showed that over the past 20 years, CPS schools that started out with the lowest performance showed the least improvement.<sup>6</sup> From this perspective, this study provides promising evidence about efforts to improve chronically low performing schools—showing improvements in schools that historically have been most impervious to reform.

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## Endnotes

1. This office was previously known as the Office of School Turnaround. AUSL is a local school management organization charged with the training of teachers to affect whole-school transformation. They partnered with CPS to transform low-performing schools.
2. De la Torre, M., and J. Gwynne (2009). *When Schools Close: Effects on Displaced Students in Chicago Public Schools*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research.
3. Because the district did not consistently administer tests to the same grade levels over the period being studied, we were unable to examine changes in test performance at the high school level.
4. Herman, R., Dawson, P., Dee, T., Greene, J., Maynard, R., Redding, S., and Darwin, M. (2008). *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools: A practice guide* (NCEE #2008-4020). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/practiceguides>.
5. Bryk, A.S., P. Bender Sebring, E.M. Allensworth, S. Luppescu, and J.Q. Easton (2010). *Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
6. Luppescu, Stuart. Elaine M. Allensworth, Paul Moore, Marisa de la Torre, James Murphy with Sanja Jagesic. 2011. *Trends in Chicago's Schools Across Three Eras of Reform*. [http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/content/publications.php?pub\\_id=157](http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/content/publications.php?pub_id=157)

# Appendix

## School-by-School Changes in Student Achievement

The figures presented in this appendix come from the same models that estimate the overall effects on test scores. These figures are adjusted for the same changes in students' characteristics: changes in students' race, gender, socio-economic indicators, prior achievement, grade level, age at grade, and disability status. In each figure, the bars on the left represent the difference in the first year after reform compared with similar schools that did not undergo intervention. Bars that are positive indicate more growth than comparison schools. Bars that are negative indicate less growth. The bars on the right in each figure represent the difference in the yearly growth rate in the years after the first year, up to the fourth year after reform. Schools that were reformed less than four years ago have fewer years on which to calculate their yearly growth after year one, and the bars represent the average of the years they existed. To find the cumulative effect the yearly growth should be multiplied by the number of years since the first year of reform, plus the year one effects.

# Appendix

**FIGURE A1**  
**Improvement in reading scores was variable in the first year, but consistently up in later years in almost all schools**

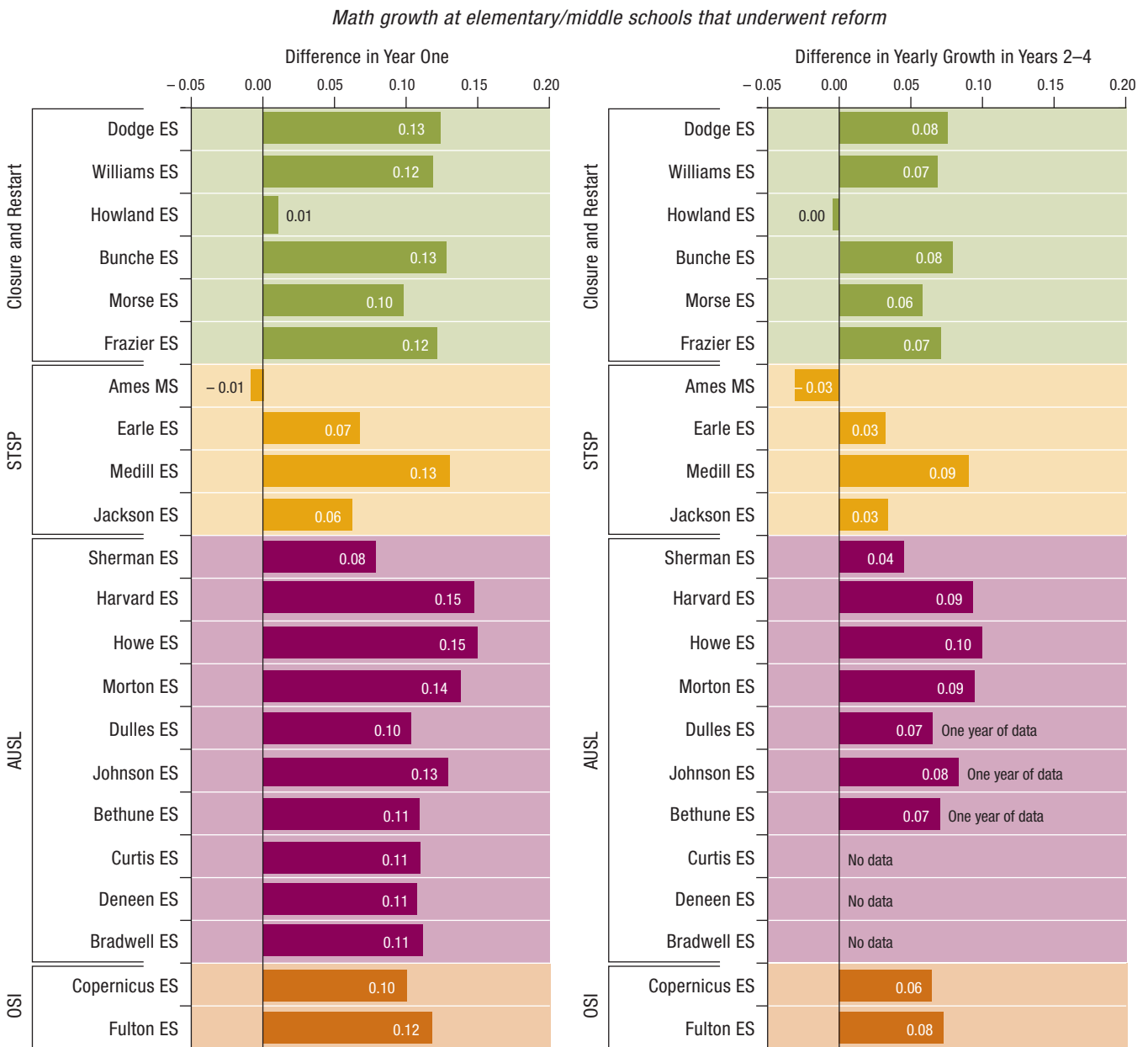


**NOTE:** Units are in standard deviations, adjusted for changes in student backgrounds. The comparison is to matched schools. Positive numbers indicate more growth. The school-by-school figures are based on the population of students at each school. School names are the name before intervention.

# Appendix

**FIGURE A2**

**Improvement in math scores occurred at most elementary/middle schools that underwent reform**



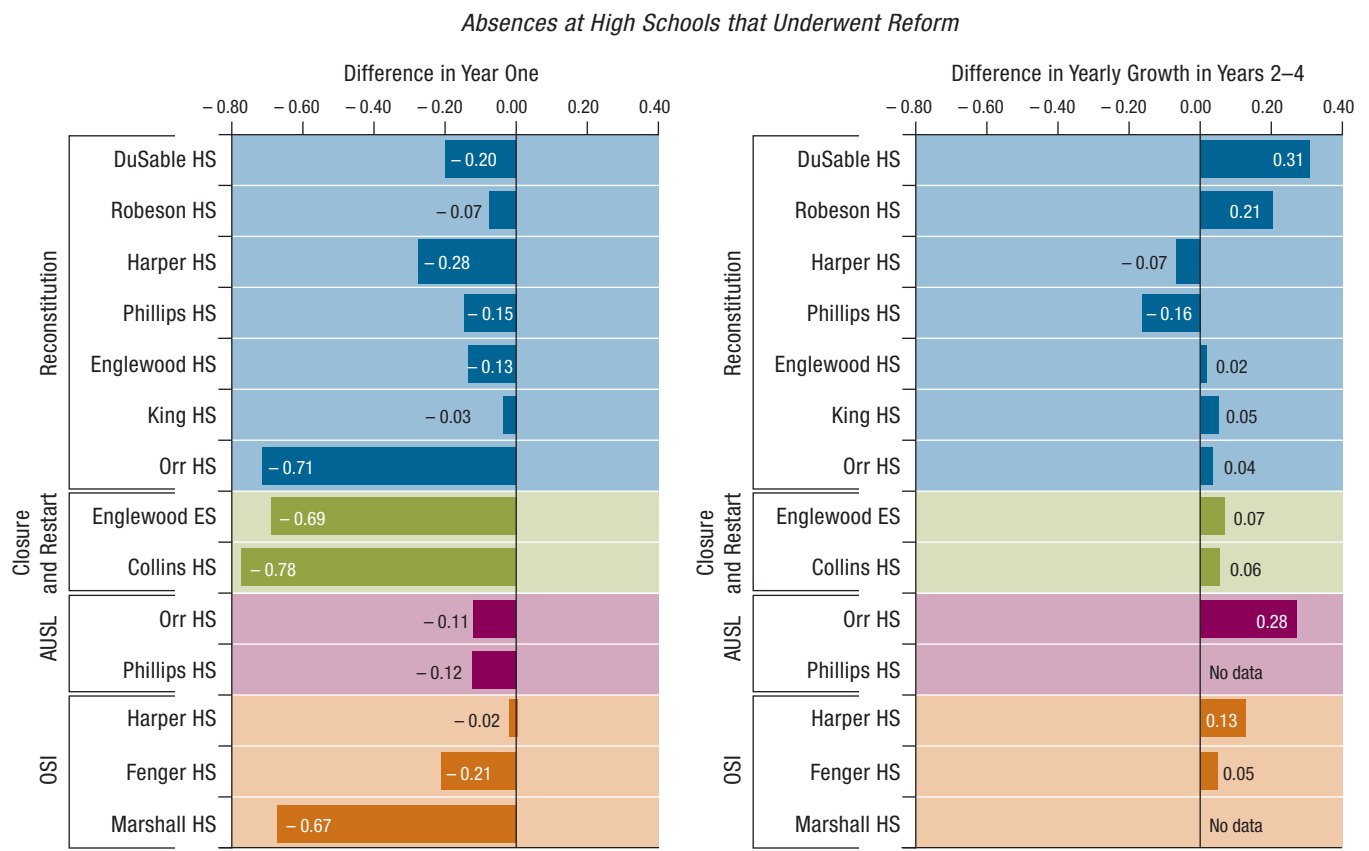
**NOTE:** Units are in standard deviations, adjusted for changes in student backgrounds. The comparison is to matched schools. Positive numbers indicate more growth. The school-by-school figures are based on the population of students at each school. School names are the name before intervention.



# Appendix

**FIGURE A3**

**There was large variation across high schools in improvements in absence rates**

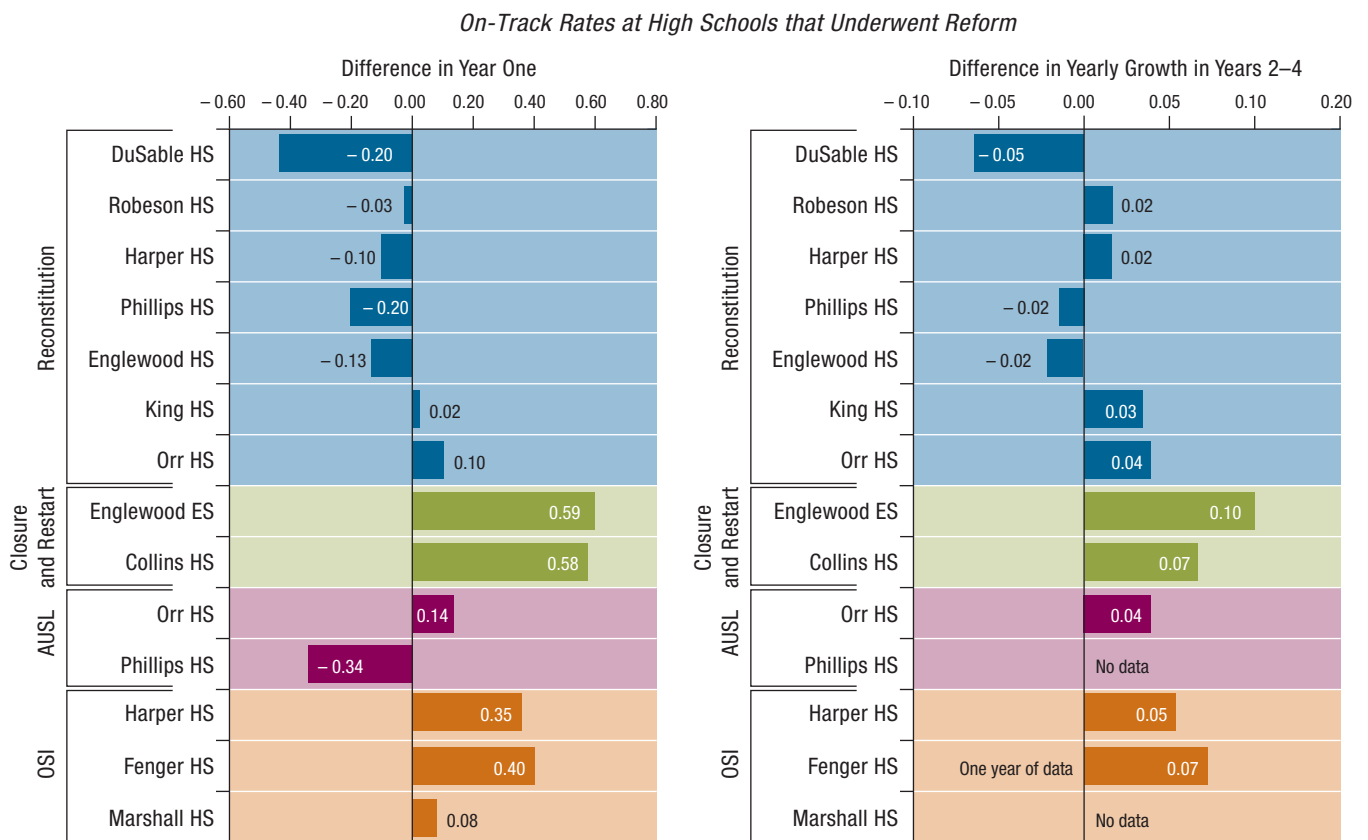


**NOTE: A lower absence number is better.** Units are in standard deviations, adjusted for changes in student backgrounds. The comparison is to matched schools. The school-by-school figures are based on the population of students at each school. School names are the name before intervention.

# Appendix

**FIGURE A4**

**Recent reform efforts showed more improvements in on-track rates than earlier efforts**



**NOTE:** Units are in percentages, adjusted for changes in student backgrounds. The comparison is to matched schools. Positive numbers indicate more growth. The school-by-school figures are based on the population of students at each school. School names are the name before intervention.

## About the Authors

**Marisa de la Torre** is Associate Director at CCSR. Her work involves studying different Chicago Public Schools' policies, including high school choice and school closings. Her work on high school choice in Chicago was recently published in *School Choice and School Improvement*. Currently, she is studying a number of different reforms aimed at low-performing schools and indicators of high school readiness. Before joining CCSR, she worked for the Chicago Public Schools in the Office of Research, Evaluation, and Accountability. She received a master's degree in Economics from Northwestern University.

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**Dean Gerdeman, Ph.D.**, is a Principal Researcher on the Education, Human Development, and the Workforce team at the American Institutes for Research. Gerdeman leads and supports federally sponsored education research, evaluation, and technical assistance projects. He is deputy director of the Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest, a \$45 million research center funded by the Institute of Education Sciences to serve a seven-state region, overseeing multiple project teams in applied education research and analysis. Gerdeman serves as project director for a \$2 million Department of Education "Investing in Innovation" evaluation of a nationally recognized teacher certification initiative. Previously, Gerdeman was a program officer in the Institute of Education Sciences, where he managed a \$105 million program portfolio. He is a past recipient of the American Association for the Advancement of Science policy fellowship at the NSF, in which he consulted with agency officials on evaluation and management of graduate education programs. At the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), he served as a researcher in science education and a field supervisor for first-year science teachers in urban schools. Gerdeman earned a doctorate in education and master's degrees in biology and education from UCLA.

*This report reflects the interpretation of the authors. Although CCSR's Steering Committee provided technical advice, no formal endorsement by these individuals, organizations, or the full Consortium should be assumed.*

*This report was produced by CCSR's publications and communications staff.*

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