

This analysis explores changes in building-level student achievement after school turnaround at School District of Philadelphia (SDP) Promise Academies and Renaissance Charter schools. Specifically, it looks at whether Promise Academies and Renaissance Charter schools have met expectations for rapid growth, as defined by the literature, in reading and math on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA).

## Background

The School District of Philadelphia's Renaissance Schools Initiative was first implemented in 2010-2011. The initiative intended to spur dramatic improvements in student performance over a short period of time by providing additional resources, changes in staffing, increased attention and other strategies designed to improve persistently low-performing schools. The initiative consists of two models:

**Promise Academies**, which remain District managed, but undergo changes in leadership and teaching staff, as well as receive additional funding and support; and

**Renaissance Charter Schools**, which remain neighborhood schools but are managed by charter providers, with relative autonomy from the District.

Since 2010-2011, twenty schools have been converted to Renaissance Charters, and fifteen schools have become Promise Academies (although three of the fifteen have since closed).

In the literature on reform, turnarounds are generally defined by at least two qualities: (1) significant improvements in student achievement at chronically low performing schools and (2) academic gains made over a short period of time (Aladjem, et al., 2012; Strunk et al., 2012; Meyers, 2013; Herman et al., 2008; Mass Insight, 2010; Brownstein, 2013).

However, there is a lack of strong evidence from studies and/or research that supports a causal link between turnaround strategies and rapid student achievement. This is, in part, a result of there being no consistent methodology for identifying schools in need of turnaround nor schools that have been successfully "turned-around" (Strunk et al., 2012; Meyers, 2013; Herman et al. 2008; Brownstein, 2013; O'Brien & Dervarics, 2013). There is no single, replicable school turnaround model that has proven successful; as such, it is believed that turnaround initiatives must be specific to schools' and districts' situation and needs (Strunk et al., 2012; Meyers, 2013; Herman et al. 2008; Mass Insight, 2010; Brownstein, 2013).

Based on the standards defined by "turnaround initiatives," the expectation is that student achievement should increase dramatically in a short period of time, determined by relevant literature to be within three to five years (Strunk et al. 2012; Meyers, 2013; Herman et al. 2008; Mass Insight, 2010; Brownstein, 2013). Measures of improvement vary, as do definitions of "dramatic gains." Aladjem et al.'s report for the U.S. Department of Education considers a dramatic change in achievement to be a 4 to 8 percentage point increase per year in students scoring advanced and proficient on standardized tests. Hansen & Choi (2012) identify 5 percentage points as their standard. When possible, some studies have used statistical tests to determine the significance of academic improvements within the first couple years of a turnaround initiative; however, in each case, the researchers acknowledged that several factors threatened the validity of such statistically-founded conclusions (Strunk et al., 2012; Meyers, 2013; Herman et al., 2008; Brownstein, 2013; O'Brien & Dervarics, 2013). Nonetheless, there is no doubt that rapid positive growth is the expectation of any turnaround program.

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## Key Findings

- More than half of Renaissance Charter schools have met the criteria for rapid growth, defined for this purpose as a minimum increase of 4 points each year in the percentage of students scoring advanced or proficient on state standardized tests.
- The majority of Promise Academy Schools did not meet the criteria for rapid growth.

# Renaissance Schools Initiative

## A look at student achievement in Renaissance Initiative Schools

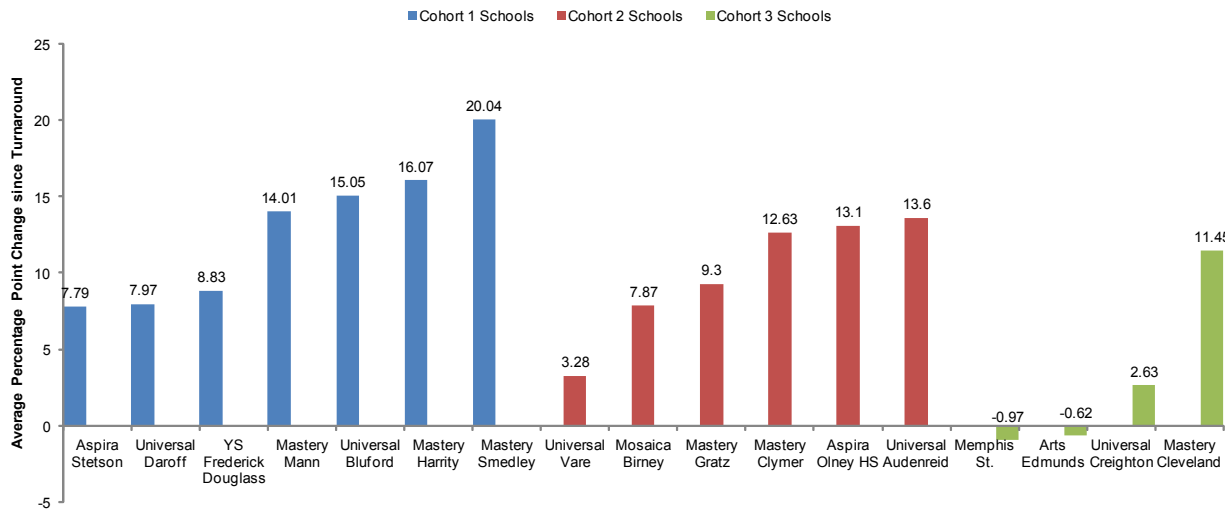
These trends and expectations have shaped the lens of the following analysis, which looks to gauge the success of Philadelphia's turnaround schools since inception in 2010-2011. This research brief will look specifically at data related to student academic performance.

### Methods

Based on the research related to successful turnarounds, a reasonable baseline by which to judge academic gains was determined to be a 4 to 8 percentage point increase in students scoring advanced or proficient on the PSSA each year after turnaround.

Therefore, Cohort 1 schools would be considered to have met the expectation for adequate progress with a minimum increase of 12 percentage points, Cohort 2 schools with a minimum increase of 8 percentage points, and Cohort 3 schools with a minimum increase of 4 percentage points.

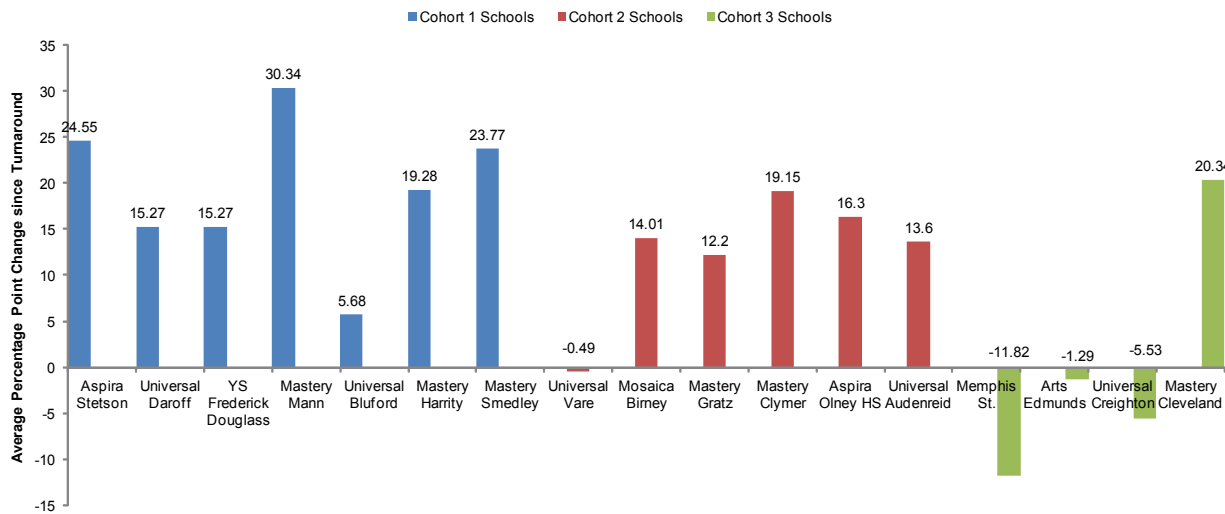
**Figure 1. Average Percentage Point Change since Turnaround in Students Scoring Adv./Prof. on PSSA Reading for Renaissance Charter Schools**



### Findings

Overall, fifteen of the seventeen Renaissance Charter Schools in Cohorts 1, 2, and 3 experienced an increase in the percentage of students scoring advanced or proficient on the PSSA reading test since turnaround. Thirteen experienced an increase in the percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced in math on the PSSA (see Figures 1 and 2). Performing Arts Charter at Edmunds, Universal Creighton, Universal Vare, and Memphis Street Charter School @ Jones, all had a decline in math

**Figure 2. Average Percentage Point Change since Turnaround in Students Scoring Adv./Prof. on PSSA Math for Renaissance Charter Schools**



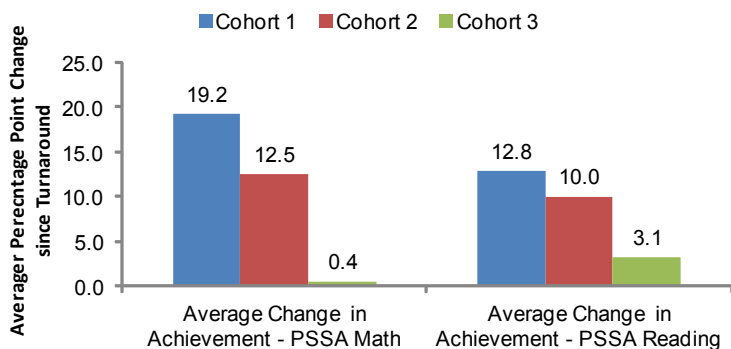
proficiency since their conversion to Renaissance Charters. For the Renaissance Charter schools for which reading PSSA data were available, nine met the criteria for acceptable progress as outlined above. In math, thirteen met the expected criteria.

All six schools operated by Mastery, the provider operating the most Renaissance Charter schools, met the above criteria in both reading and math. Of the five schools operated by Universal, only one (Bluford) met the criteria for improvements in reading and one (Daroff) in math.

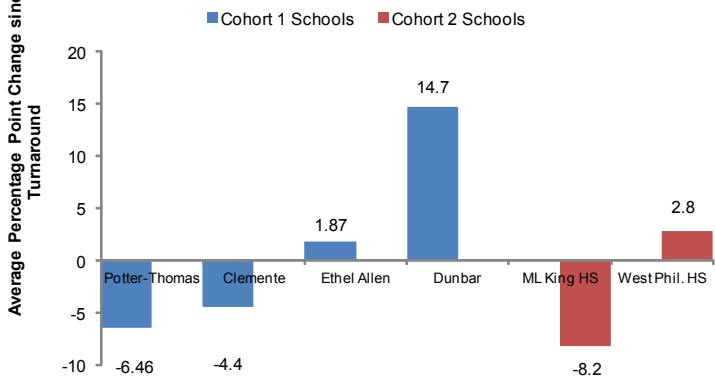
# Renaissance Schools Initiative

## A look at student achievement in Renaissance Initiative Schools

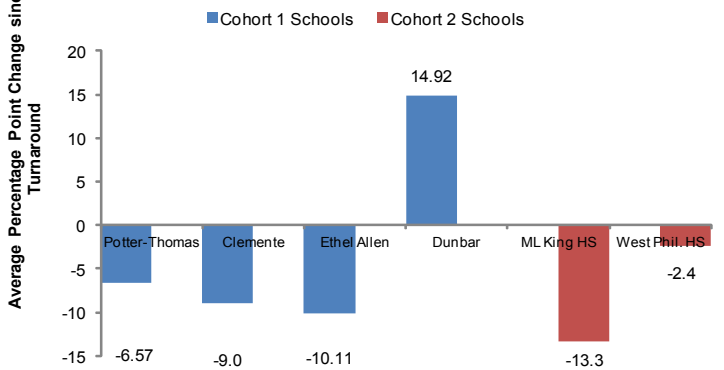
**Figure 3. Average Percentage Point Change Since Turnaround in Students Scoring Adv./Prof. on PSSA Math and Reading - by Renaissance Charter Cohort**



**Figure 4. Average Percentage Point Change since Turnaround in Students Scoring Adv./Prof. on PSSA Reading for Promise Academy Schools**



**Figure 5. Average Percentage Point Change since Turnaround in Students Scoring Adv./Prof. on PSSA Math for Promise Academy Schools**



On average, Cohort 1 Renaissance Charter schools showed the most growth since turnaround in both PSSA reading and PSSA math, followed next by Cohort 2 schools, then Cohort 3 schools. This is the expected and anticipated outcome. As “time since turnaround” increases, school-level achievement should increase as well, at least for the first several years (see Figure 3).

Overall, Promise Academies had far less success improving student proficiency in reading and math as measured by the PSSA. Only three of the six existing Promise Academy schools increased the percentage of students scoring advanced or proficient in reading since turnaround (see Figure 4). Only one of the six Promise Academy schools increased the percentage of students scoring advanced or proficient in math since turnaround (see Figure 5). In both reading and math, only one school, Dunbar, met the criteria for rapid growth. No other Promise Academy met the criteria identified for rapid growth in either reading or math.

### Limitations

- Student level PSSA data was not available for all Renaissance Initiative schools at the time of this analysis, and therefore the analysis was limited to changes in proficiency at the schools; and
- There is limited data available for Cohort 1 and 2 schools at this point.

### References

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