

What Studies Say About School Turnarounds

BY ANDREW BROWNSTEIN

Efforts to overhaul struggling schools have existed for decades, but it wasn't until President Obama fortified the process with \$3.5 billion in 2009 that the term school turnaround became etched in the public consciousness. Borrowed from the business world, the term is rooted in the idea of boosting student achievement at chronically poor-performing schools in a very short time—no more than three years, according to a popular practice guide.¹ With the unprecedented financial support for the School Improvement Grant (SIG) program, U.S. Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan set the nation's sights on turning around 1,000 schools annually for five years. "We could really move the needle, lift the bottom and change the lives of tens of millions of

underserved children," he said. Congress has continued the commitment, pledging \$535 million for fiscal year 2011 and \$534 million for FY 2012.

The optimistic rhetoric is belied by the enormity of the task: Successful turnarounds are extremely rare. Chronically low-performing schools are marked by, among other things, a limited capacity, a lack of high-quality teachers, and frequent turnover of principals and other staff members. Veterans of previous school improvement efforts—such as Comprehensive School Reform or restructuring under the federal No Child Left Behind Act—might be forgiven for thinking of turnarounds as the unicorns of federal education policy. A prominent policy wonk calls turnarounds a "fallacy,"² and a researcher asks the question, "Are bad schools immortal?"³

While some of the cynicism may be overblown—turnarounds may be rare, but they do happen—the scarcity of success stories is reason enough for journalists to approach the plans put forth by their neighborhood schools with a high degree of skepticism. It is vital for journalists to know the evidence for what works in this fairly new field, what doesn't work, and what research has yet to settle conclusively.

Given the relative newness of the field and the methodological difficulties facing school improvement research, the universe of unsettled questions is arguably vast. An influential practice guide released in 2008 did not find any empirical studies that were rigorous enough to determine specific turnaround practices that might yield significant improvement in student achievement.⁴

As the research community catches up with federal policy, there are likely to be additional difficulties obtaining rigorous results. For example, the most popular model chosen by schools under the revamped SIG program, the transformation model, has 11 separate components. It is not a "model," in the strict scientific sense that it mandates clear steps, curricular materials, or benchmarks. Its open-ended requirements to, for example, replace the principal or implement extended learning time allow for infinite variation on how those components are implemented.

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Hence, the many ongoing studies of SIG may eventually be able to say whether putting money into the transformation model works overall, but not which variety works. The absence of good data, the difficulty in implementing strong research designs such as true randomized experiments, and the overall complexity of the issues means that studying what works in school improvement is extraordinarily difficult.

For all of those reasons, this brief follows the lead of the 2008 practice guide. With few exceptions, it relies on less-rigorous

¹Herman et al, 2008

²Smarick, 2010

³Stuit, 2010

⁴Herman et al, 2008

case-study research and theory to summarize research findings about school turnaround practices. An important caveat: The lack of more rigorous studies does not necessarily mean that nothing works; it means we just don't know. As researchers frequently say, "Absence of evidence is not the same thing as evidence of absence." It could be that the field has not been around long enough to document those results, or possibly there hasn't been enough time or resources to bring rigorous studies to completion. Still, the complexity of the issues means the field could be decades away from such definitive research-based "proofs."

While there is a lack of empirical studies on turnaround practices that result in improved student achievement, it is possible to work backward—to examine successful turnarounds, in the world of education and elsewhere, and determine what characteristics they have in common. Nonetheless, using research in this manner has severe limitations. The field of "effective schools" research has been called into question because such studies don't demonstrate that effective schools are unique in having these qualities. In other words, qualities present in successful turnarounds may also be present in failed turnarounds. This argues for caution and modesty when approaching research findings in this area.

A final caution: While this brief looks at several factors in isolation, extensive research on past school improvement efforts—most notably the federal Comprehensive School Reform Program—demonstrates there is no "magic bullet" that leads to a successful turnaround. Rather, it is based on a combination of factors that need to be well-aligned and mutually reinforcing.⁵

This brief incorporates evidence from more than two decades of previous school improvement efforts, as well as numerous studies from the business world. It is organized around some of the most pressing questions in the school turnaround field. Each question is followed by a rundown of some of the key-research findings and points of controversy. (Citations in the text refer to a list of sources in the bibliography.) At the end of each section, we present a bottom-line summary of the research.

The brief draws on a review of over 50 research studies or syntheses, as well as scholarly articles and interviews with scholars involved in the many aspects of school turnaround research. Special thanks go out to the following EWA Research Roundtable members, who provided invaluable insight and reviewed this brief prior to publication: Bryan Hassel, co-director of Public Impact; Rebecca Herman, managing research analyst at the American Institutes for Research; and, Martin Orland, director of evaluation and policy research at WestEd.



Is replacing the principal necessary in order to achieve a successful turnaround?

The importance of this question is underscored by the fact that the two most popular models under the revamped School Improvement Grant rules—transformation and turnaround—both

require replacing the principal. (Data from the U.S. Department of Education on the first round of SIG grants awarded in 2010 show that 74 percent of SIG schools had chosen the transformation model, while 20 percent chose turnaround.)

In two influential studies—one of seven middle schools, the other of 15 elementary schools—the majority of the successful turnarounds began with new leadership; all underwent significant changes in leadership practices.⁶ The reasons for this may be self-evident: Such schools have been chronic low-performers and languished in self-defeating cultures that were frequently ambivalent, and more often hostile, to changing the status quo. Case studies found frequent instances in which new principals were seen as catalysts for change.

An exploratory study of schools that participated in the Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) Program, a federally sponsored whole-school-reform initiative, found that in five of six sample schools in which student-achievement gains were sustained, major reforms coincided with the arrival of a new principal who stayed in place during the entire improvement period.⁷

The phenomenon is mirrored in the corporate world, where an extensive literature review of successful turnarounds found that top managers were replaced 70 percent of the time.⁸ One of the more useful aspects of the business literature is providing a sense of the characteristics shared by turnaround leaders. These include the ability to communicate a positive vision, help staff to "personally feel" problems, and to measure and report progress frequently.⁹ While business leaders enjoy considerably more freedom than their K-12 counterparts, they share dynamics in common as they perform, in the words of one researcher, "rapid U-turns from the brink of doom to stellar success."¹⁰

While they focus on different aspects of the change process, turnaround leaders tend to signal the urgency of their task from the first day. They thrive on challenge, stay focused on goals, and motivate others. They also tend to be adept at what one study describes as "distributed leadership," mobilizing and motivating a staff to build a professional community with strengths in a wide variety of areas and empowering them with authority beyond the classroom for whole-school success.¹¹ A 2002 study of seven successful turnaround middle schools around the country noted a similar "attitude of sharing decision-making and garnering support from all stakeholders."¹² This approach typically extended beyond the schoolhouse door to include business partners, parents, and key members of the community.

Other attributes of successful turnaround principals that permeate the literature include: eliminating distractions to ensure that most classroom time is spent on instruction; providing visible improvements early in the turnaround process (quick wins); and creating a sense of high expectations.¹³ One anecdote summarizes the change in culture brought about by a new principal: At one school that underwent a difficult and sustained turnaround, the previous principal was described as someone with good intentions who nonetheless "felt sorry" for the students. The new principal, by contrast, created "a culture of high expectations, irrespective of [students'] home lives," which was reinforced by data analysis, transparency, and accountability. One respondent in that study made the observation, "The excuses stop at the school door."¹⁴

⁵ Aladjem et al, 2010; Orland and Hoffman, 2010

⁶ See Picucci et al, 2002; Duke, n.d.

⁷ Aladjem et al, 2010

⁸ Hoffman, 1989

⁹ Steiner et al, 2008

¹⁰ Hassel and Hassel, 2009

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Picucci et al, 2002

¹³ Herman et al, 2008

¹⁴ Aladjem et al, 2010

The attribute of data management cannot be overstated. A study of successful turnarounds in the corporate world found that new leaders conducted extensive internal research to determine problems facing their companies to narrow those to ones in most urgent need of solutions.¹⁵ One celebrated example is that of Continental Airlines, which in the early 1990s was ranked 10th out of 10 among major airlines in all key customer service areas and was headed for a third bankruptcy. One of the first actions of new management was to analyze where the company was strong and weak in order to set an agenda for change.¹⁶

It deserves mentioning that data use at successful turnarounds goes beyond the principal. It's a fundamental feature of a turnaround, although leaders are clearly important in making it happen. A study of 10 schools in Virginia that achieved turnaround status with the aid of an outside specialist described the "high frequency" with which data were shared and used to leverage action, make decisions, and plan instruction. Teachers began to "own the data."¹⁷

Successful turnaround principals typically operate with relatively few constraints on their authority at the district level, and often push the boundaries of their authority to affect change. Authority over budget, staffing, and schedules are all frequently cited as essential to a successful effort.

Not all successful school turnarounds have new leaders behind them. In five of 15 schools in one case-study report, the principal did not change; however, the leadership actions did.¹⁸ Given the entrenched cultures in many low-performing schools, overhaul efforts may meet strong resistance. Without new leadership, existing principals often find it difficult to break from the status quo and distance themselves from practices that prevented change in the past.¹⁹

! *It can be said:*

Research has shown that many successful school turnarounds are headed by new principals. However, more critical to the success of the enterprise are new leadership practices, among them articulating high standards, creating a sense of urgency for reform, and using data to drive achievement. Some studies show that such changes can be made without replacing top managers.

? **Does replacing a large portion of the teaching staff help a school make dramatic gains in quality?**

Major replacement of staff is a requirement of the turnaround

model chosen by one in five SIG schools. That model requires that schools replace at least 50 percent of their staff members. (Other models invoke staff replacement, just not as explicitly or extensively.)

While building a committed workforce tends to be crucial to a turnaround's success, it is questionable whether research supports such a large-scale replacement of staff. The key, in most cases, is to have the right staff in the right places.²⁰ Turnaround schools are more specific than most about identifying the skills they need and basing hiring, firing, and relocating decisions on the fit between the proposed staff and the position.

In one key study of 15 elementary schools that sustained a turnaround for two or more years, nine principals removed staff members who lacked the skills to raise student achievement or the desire to work with low-achieving students. Teachers were transferred to other schools, counseled out of teaching, or encouraged to retire. Some staff members' contracts were not renewed. The vacancies allowed principals to find replacements whose abilities aligned with the turnaround effort. Principals in 11 of those schools created one or more positions expressly designed to raise student achievement.²¹ Some staff members needed additional training to work with challenging student populations. Others were redeployed to areas of greater need. In most of the literature surrounding successful turnarounds, principals had the freedom to replace staff members who resisted the effort. As one principal told teachers, "This is not a place for everyone; if you're not willing to improve, you have to be willing to leave this school!"²²

In the corporate context, leadership replacement is common, but wider staff replacement is more limited.²³ At Continental Airlines, for example, most top leadership was replaced, but there was no feasible way for a corporation with 40,000 employees to transform itself by swapping out its people en masse. Instead, the strategy relied on ensuring that employees already in their positions knew that making dramatic change was necessary to their jobs.²⁴ (This issue has also arisen in the context of school turnaround, where there is scant evidence of an adequate supply of highly qualified replacements to replace unsuccessful teachers in low-achieving schools.²⁵)

Research on previous school reform efforts show that more-wholesale replacement of staff members can be a risky proposition, often with unintended negative consequences. Studies of reconstitution—a strategy frequently employed in the 1990s in which staff members at low-performing schools were all required to reapply for their jobs—demonstrate that the process tended to be enormously complex and difficult, with extreme variance in student achievement at reconstituted schools.²⁶

Schools that replaced staff under NCLB restructuring—a status given to schools that repeatedly fail to meet targets for adequate yearly progress under the federal law—generally reported positive results if they engaged in significant planning beforehand. Successful schools planned for the staffing change for as much as a year. Others held job fairs for the new positions or negotiated with unions to resolve stumbling blocks in their contracts. When that didn't happen, successful restaffing was typically compromised. In Mansfield, Ohio, for example, schools restaffed for NCLB restructuring the same year that there was a general reduction in

¹⁵ Appel, 2005

¹⁶ Brenneman, 1998

¹⁷ Duke, 2005

¹⁸ Duke, n.d.

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Herman et al, 2008

²¹ Duke, n.d.

²² Aladjem et al, 2010

²³ Hoffman, 1989

²⁴ Brenneman, 1998

²⁵ Orland, 2010

²⁶ See, e.g., Brady, 2003; Malen, et al, 2002; Murphy and Meyers, 2007; Rice and Malen, 2010

staff. Union rules required that teachers bid for open positions in order of seniority. The unintended consequence was that teachers who were the last to bid for jobs often found themselves in grade levels for which they were unqualified. A teacher who had taught kindergarten and 1st grade for eight years was assigned to 8th grade math.²⁷

In addition to collective bargaining agreements, efforts to replace staff can be hindered by teacher shortages. When a principal removes a staff member, replacements are not always available, particularly in rural areas. Shortages of teachers with the qualifications and commitments necessary to do the very difficult work required for successful turnarounds are particularly acute.²⁸

! It can be said:

Replacing staff members is necessary when they lack specific expertise or a commitment to the school's progress, but studies suggest that the wholesale restaffing envisioned by SIG's turnaround model may be unnecessary, hard to implement, and counterproductive.

? Do schools need to demonstrate "quick wins" in order for a turnaround to take root?

In one study of seven turnaround middle schools, one of the first actions of a principal was to replace chairs in the auditorium, fix broken light fixtures, and paint lockers. A teacher explained that "those small things added up to huge differences so that kids started to see that it was important to [the principal] and it was important to us where they studied."²⁹

As it turns out, changing the physical plant of a school building is one of the more frequently cited examples of "quick wins"—defined as visible improvements that occur early in the turnaround process. While they seldom improve student achievement immediately, they set the tone for change and establish a climate where long-term progress is possible.³⁰ In another example, a principal removed displays that had been posted on the walls for years and put up new displays of student work every few weeks.³¹

In one study of nine elementary schools, principals faced immediate problems such as low teacher morale, parental dissatisfaction, and weak discipline—all areas that were particularly important and open to rapid change. The principals chose one area to improve quickly, and the quick wins sent a clear message that the schools were making progress.³² Changing the way the school looks at time—for example, by extending the

learning day, creating common planning time for teachers, or carving out blocks of uninterrupted instructional time—are also frequently utilized quick wins.³³

Quick wins enjoy a prominent place in the corporate turnaround literature. One study noted the importance of implementing a series of key initiatives at the start of the turnaround.³⁴ In the Continental example, top management decided that given the tight finances and daunting timelines facing the company, the early months were not a time to mull over complex strategy. The CEO initiated the Go Forward Plan, which focused on four key elements: understanding the market, increasing revenues, improving the product, and transforming the corporate culture.³⁵

Given the fragility of the early days of a turnaround effort, researchers say it is important that quick wins are sustained and built upon. If that doesn't happen, they can become further examples of the fleeting nature of school reform and fodder for those who resist change.³⁶ Principals at failing schools may be under pressure from parents and staff to address many goals at once. Several studies show that principals at successful turnarounds help ease that pressure by focusing on one or two priorities and establishing a short timeline for completing those goals.³⁷

! It can be said:

Quick wins can set the tone for positive school change and establish a climate where long-term progress is possible. However, studies show that schools that try to do too much at once risk getting derailed. Other research demonstrates that such wins must be sustained and built upon or they can become fodder for those who resist change.

? Do teacher-centered activities like embedded professional development or evaluations tied to student achievement increase the chances of school turnaround?

Despite the universality of professional development programs in K-12 education, there is a paucity of strong empirical research on whether they play a role in raising student achievement. Recently, two federally funded, randomized field studies on intensive professional development programs found little to no effects on student achievement. In the first study, two professional development approaches to early reading increased teachers' knowledge of literacy development and their use of explicit reading instruction, but had little effect on achievement.³⁸ The second study examining secondary math professional development concluded that it yielded significant changes in teachers' instructional practice, but had no impact on middle school students' understanding of rational numbers.³⁹

²⁷ Scott, 2009

²⁸ Orland, 2010

²⁹ Picucci et al, 2002

³⁰ Herman et al, 2008

³¹ Picucci et al, 2002

³² Johnson and Asera, 1999

³³ Herman et al, 2008

³⁴ Appel, 2005

³⁵ Brenneman, 1998

³⁶ Herman et al, 2008;

Aladjem et al, 2010

³⁷ Murphy, 2007

³⁸ Garet et al, 2008

³⁹ Garet et al, 2011

While rigorous studies of professional development have not yet unraveled a connection between improving teacher skills and raising student achievement, there is evidence that successful turnarounds frequently employ some variety of ongoing, intensive professional development as a means of improving the quality of instruction.⁴⁰ This would appear to be consistent with the requirement for “high quality, job-embedded” professional development in the two most popular SIG models, transformation and turnaround.

Decades of research suggests that embedded professional development is more effective than traditional workshops at changing teachers’ instruction. Schools in successful turnarounds relentlessly focus on improving teachers’ skills.⁴¹ For example, teachers at one inner-city elementary school that underwent a sustained turnaround participated in weekly science and math classes at a nearby technology institute. The school provided substitute teachers to cover their classrooms, and following the classes, experts from the institute visited the teachers and observed instruction, providing coaching as needed.⁴²

A second—and very different—approach to working with teachers is to base hiring and firing decisions on their impact on students. This linkage has heightened awareness of nascent efforts to tie teacher evaluations, at least in part, to growth in student performance. The Obama administration’s interest in the practice goes beyond the requirement in SIG’s most widely used model. It is a key component of the administration’s education agenda, as seen in the Race to the Top competition and in the requirements for obtaining waivers from the accountability regimen of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Research tying student-achievement gains to the evaluation of teachers is contentious and in its infancy. Here, perhaps more than any other area of turnaround research, the problem is the newness of the reform. Teacher evaluations in general have been notorious for their lack of rigor and absence of consequences (positive or negative) for evaluation results. Schools are only just now implementing teacher-evaluation models that claim to have both. It is not surprising, therefore, that there is scant solid empirical research showing whether such evaluations might spur school turnarounds.

Reforms in evaluating teacher effectiveness frequently focus on two areas: “value-added” models and classroom observations. (See EWA Research Brief: [What Studies Say About Teacher Effectiveness](#).) Value-added models measure growth in student performance over time, using test scores, as well as other background data, to predict future outcomes. The goal is to screen out factors such as family, race, background, the effect of peers, and sometimes prior achievement to isolate the role of individual teachers in students’ success or failure. One study used value-added evaluations of teachers to predict the achievement of 3,000 students in the Los Angeles Unified School District, and then randomly assigned teachers to their classrooms. The models, while imperfect, were significant predictors of future student achievement.⁴³

⁴⁰ See Conzemius, 2000; Duke, n.d., Duke, 2005; Picucci et al, 2002 and; Tung and Ouimette, 2007

⁴¹ Herman et al, 2008

⁴² Duke, n.d.

⁴³ Kane and Staiger, 2008

⁴⁴ Rothstein, 2011

⁴⁵ Kane et al, 2011

⁴⁶ Rothstein, 2011

⁴⁷ Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2010

⁴⁸ Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012

Such studies have their limitations. Roughly one-quarter of K-12 teachers typically teach in grades or subjects where standardized tests are not administered and thus obtaining such measures is possible. And there is a danger that a reliance on test-based measures will lead to a narrow focus on teaching to the test at the expense of other kinds of valuable instruction. Further, researchers have identified a host of factors that could lead to measurement error, including differences in tests, the nonrandom assignment of students and teachers, and the seeming fluctuation of the value-added estimates of specific teachers from year to year.⁴⁴

Due to the limitations of value-added models, researchers are examining whether augmenting them with evaluations of effectiveness based on direct observation of teachers may yield more promising results. Frequently cited is the Cincinnati Public Schools’ Teacher Evaluation System (TES), in which teachers are observed and scored four times annually: three times by a peer evaluator external to the school and once by a local administrator. One study of the TES model, based on 365 reading teachers and 200 math teachers, found a small but significant correlation between teachers’ scores and students’ future achievement.⁴⁵

A major, ongoing study of 3,000 teachers, funded with \$45 million from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, is testing the proposition that combining the two approaches could capitalize on their strengths while offsetting their weaknesses. Though some researchers have criticized the Gates studies for overstating their value-added results,⁴⁶ the foundation, which acknowledges its results “scratch the surface,”⁴⁷ is reporting early evidence that value-added models and classroom observation, along with student feedback, could trump most evaluations currently employed by schools “in terms of predictive power, reliability, or diagnostic usefulness.”⁴⁸



It can be said:

Despite a lack of strong empirical research linking professional development to student achievement, there is evidence that successful school turnarounds frequently rely on intensive, ongoing professional development to improve instruction. It is too early to say whether teacher-evaluation models that incorporate student achievement might have a positive effect on the turnaround process.



Do restarts and school closures stand a better chance of causing dramatic gains than the other school turnaround models?

While they are the least popular models to be employed under the SIG program, closure (used by 2 percent of schools, according to U.S. Department of Education data of schools that won SIG grants in 2010, its first year of implementation) and restart (4 percent)

nonetheless enjoy a powerful constituency. It is common in school turnaround debates to hear that most SIG schools took the easy way out, and that closing schools or restarting them as charters have a far greater chance of improving student achievement than the other models.

Restart involves closing the school and reopening it under new management, such as an education-management or charter-management organization. The approach is grounded in the idea that such organizations have greater flexibility and efficiency than school districts to shepherd through tough changes in chronically low-performing schools.

Studies analyzing the effectiveness of charter schools, ranging from statistically sophisticated meta-analyses to narrative reviews of the research, have concluded that the difference between the average charter and traditional public school is probably small, with charter schools outperforming district schools on average in some settings and with some populations, and underperforming them in others.⁴⁹

There is evidence that some charter schools run by education-management organizations achieve higher gains in student achievement than other charters and public schools. Such management organizations tend to have characteristics in common that are needed to weather successful turnarounds: effective professional development, streamlined school administration, clearly articulated academic standards, and a commitment to improve facilities. A January 2012 study of charter-management organizations found they typically offer more instructional time per day, enjoy greater autonomy over the curriculum, and are more likely to have comprehensive disciplinary policies.⁵⁰

A study of KIPP, a network of 89 charter schools in 19 states and the District of Columbia, also found a notable effect on student achievement. Within two years of joining the program, students experienced statistically significant increases in state assessment scores in math in 18 out of 22 schools studied, and 15 out of 22 schools in reading.⁵¹

A major caveat attached to this research is that none of it looked specifically at the kind of chronically low-performing schools that undergo turnarounds. In fact, anecdotal evidence suggests that many large management organizations bypassed the restart opportunity because they prefer to create a strong culture from scratch to improving existing schools. A 2011 article in *Education Week* quoted leaders from KIPP and other major providers indicating that they preferred to operate in environments in which parents and students chose their schools. In other words, they want to operate in environments where they believe the elements for success are already there, which is not always the case with turnarounds.

Closure involves shutting down a school and sending students to other schools of presumably higher quality. It is a model often cited by researchers who find that most turnarounds are costly, difficult to implement, and likely to fail.⁵² Several studies suggest that closure's link to improved student achievement is largely

dependent on moving students to dramatically higher-achieving schools than the ones they left.⁵³ This is an important finding, given that chronically low-performing schools tend to operate in areas where neighborhood schools frequently are of similar low quality and transportation to higher-achieving schools is difficult.

A review of 44 schools in the Chicago Public Schools that closed between 2001 and 2006 found that 40 percent of displaced students enrolled in schools on academic probation and 42 percent enrolled in receiving schools where scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills were in the lowest quartile of the distribution of scores in the system. On average, the additional effects on their learning were neither positive nor negative.⁵⁴ A second study found that transition to new schools after closure can have a sustained negative effect on achievement unless students are transferred to substantially higher-performing schools.⁵⁵



It can be said:

Gains in student achievement linked to school closure appear to be largely dependent on transferring to a high-quality school, a result not attained by many students leaving chronically underperforming schools. Restarts may have a greater chance of success, particularly when they pursue strategies, and enjoy the supportive contexts, of successful charter-management organizations such as KIPP. More research is needed on how such organizations fare with consistently low-performing schools.

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⁴⁹ Betts and Tang, 2011; Loveless, 2009

⁵⁰ Furgeson et al, 2012

⁵¹ Tuttle et al, 2010

⁵² See Smarick, 2010 and Stuit, 2010

⁵³ See de la Torre and Gwynne, 2009 and Engberg et al, 2011

⁵⁴ De la Torre and Gwynne, 2009

⁵⁵ Engberg et al, 2011

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