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Turning Around Low-Performing Schools

By Camille Chapman, MA, SECC Program Associate, and Ed Tobia, EdD, SECC Program Associate

The research indicates there is no single strategy that is most effective for turning around schools and districts but rather a combination of strategies rooted in the uniqueness of specific situations is needed.

REL Northeast & Islands Reference Desk "Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools" http://www.relnei.org/referencedesk.2009-10-09.php

After decades of reform efforts, many schools continuously fail to meet federal and state expectations for student achievement. The greatest losses in these schools are the very lives of the students who have passed through the schools being unsuccessful year after year which most often leads to lack of success in life. As a result of a public increasingly impatient with the lack of progress in schools, recent legislation has placed stricter demands on schools to improve or to be dissolved. After a few years of failure to improve at all or minimal improvement, schools must change rapidly. Despite challenging conditions such as an apathetic community or an inability to attract even minimally acceptable teaching staff, chronically low-performing schools and districts must find ways to bring about rapid improvements so that they are not taken over by the state or disestablished entirely.

This article is intended to summarize some of the best practices in turning around schools and provide readers with references and resources to gain a deeper knowledge of the literature on turning around low-performing schools and strategies to help state departments and districts in their attempt to reform challenging schools. The practices do not occur and should not be implemented in isolation but are closely connected in practice. A focus on instruction is driven by effective leadership practices that include creating a sense of urgency by making



As I write this note, I am on a flight back from our High School Tiered Intervention Summit where for the last 2 days, I have joined many of you as we learned about work being done in and with high schools across the country as they strive to meet the needs of every student through a variety of strategies and interventions addressing academics, behavior, and social issues. Our presenters were from both high- and low-performing schools, and each of them talked about the struggles they face with meeting state assessment and accountability requirements. However, they also all possessed the same qualities of passion and commitment to ensuring student success. They talked of doing what's best for kids or whatever it takes to ensure that students learn. They were focused on students as individuals and were concerned about meeting the needs of each and every student.

I was encouraged to hear principals who were willing to make tough decisions to put their best teachers with the students who need the most help, to replace a basketball coach with a reading teacher who was needed to provide additional instruction for students who were struggling, and to confront teachers who were not willing to change and let them know that unless they changed, they would need to look elsewhere for a job. I was encouraged by the teachers who shared about the successes of their common planning time and professional learning communities as well as the instructional strategies and approaches they are using to help students improve their reading and writing skills and to be successful in algebra. All of these educators possessed an unrelenting focus on using data to identify and meet the needs of each and every student in their school. These are the behaviors and attitudes that research and practice have both demonstrated are necessary to turn around low-performing schools. As we focus on turning around low-performing schools in this issue of the eBulletin, it is refreshing to have seen such tremendous examples of leaders and teachers who are doing this work daily and seeing success for their efforts.

While there is great work being done and to be done at the school and district level to turn around low-performing schools, there is also a tremendous amount of effort to be put forth at the state level to build the infrastructures and systems necessary to support school and district leaders in this critical work. I hope that the information included in this issue will provide you with ideas and information about how you as state leaders can provide support and the necessary flexibility that will be needed for the very important work that is being done at the school level.

We continue to enjoy working with each of our states and look forward to continuing this work in the future. We are pleased at SEDL to provide the services of the Southeast Comprehensive Center and look forward to our continuing partnerships with all of you.

Sincerely,

Robin Jarvis, PhD

Director, SECC





dramatic changes in the daily work of teachers and how a school is organized. Leaders interested in turning a school around will be well served by reflecting on the examples of the competencies listed in "School Turnaround Leaders: Competencies for Success" (Public Impact, 2008).

Evidence on Turning Around Low-Performing Schools

One of the four core reforms outlined in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 is turning around the lowest-performing schools. Strategies recommended to turn around incessantly low-performing schools include the following:

- Restructure or close lowest-performing schools and reopen with new staff focused on job-embedded professional development for teachers.
- Bolster schools that offer academic enrichment by involving community organizations engaged in serving students.
- Afford incentives to teacher and leader teams committed to moving low-performing schools.
- Increase the length of the school day and year for core academics, enrichment, and professional development.
- Transition students into high school by creating ninth grade academies and summer programs for struggling students in content areas of algebra and Advanced Placement classes.
- Address the fourth grade reading drop off by putting in place a comprehensive literacy program in elementary schools and provide adequate training for teachers and principals in such schools. Train staff in secondary schools for a literacy program across content areas to include interventions for students who struggle.
- Establish summer programs for principals, teachers, and counselors from the lowest-performing schools to be trained to analyze data and plan for improving student achievement.
- Use a data-driven approach to understand school performance and communicate such information to staff, parents, and the community.

(U.S. Department of Education, American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, 2009).

In 2008, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) issued *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools*, a guide identifying practices that can improve the performance of continually low-performing schools—a process commonly referred to as creating "turnaround schools." The guide defines turnaround schools using two criteria. First, chronically poor performing schools are those with a high proportion of students (20% or more) failing to meet levels of proficiency in reading or mathematics as defined under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 for more than 2 consecutive years. Secondly, they showed considerable gains in student achievement quickly (no more than 3 years). Considerable gains are reducing by at

least 10 percentage points the proportion of students failing to meet proficiency in reading or mathematics, showing great improvements in other measures of academic performance, or improving the overall student performance on standardized reading or mathematics tests by an average of 10 percentage points.

The research base on school turnaround practices is limited. Turnaround schools studies are generally case studies that look back at factors that may have contributed to success. This research design is particularly weak in determining causal validity. The four recommendations in the guide are based on case studies of chronically low-performing schools that showed gains in student achievement in 1 to 3 years. The level of evidence is low because none of the studies is based on a research methodology that yields valid causal inference. Below is a synopsis of each of the four recommendations:

Signal the need for dramatic change with strong leadership.

- o Changing the leadership within the school is often necessary and crucial. Putting a new leader in place can be an urgent signal that change is on the way.
- o If the existing leader is not changed, altering current leadership practices can bring about needed adjustments.
- o The school leader must be highly visible in the classroom demonstrating the importance of instructional leadership.
- o Changes and anticipated changes should be publicized to all stakeholders.

Maintain a consistent focus on improving instruction.

- o Identify specific gaps in student achievement by reviewing data
- o Use formative assessment data to determine the progress of individual student progress toward state standards.
- o Build priority areas for instructional focus and make the needed changes in those areas to improve student achievement.
- Have professional development opportunities that are targeted to teacher needs and content area needs for improvement.
- o Ensure curriculum alignment by having teachers review the current curriculum with state and local standards.
- o Monitor student progress regularly and systematically.

Make visible improvements early in the school turnaround process.

- o Begin with goals that can be accomplished quickly to get the "quick wins" needed to stay motivated.
- o Set early goals for which the authority and resources to implement are already in place.
- o Consider routine goals such as scheduling, improving access to resources, physical facilities, and improving discipline as examples of early wins.





Build a committed staff.

- o Identify staff that are not committed to turnaround or who do not have the qualifications to carry out turnaround efforts.
- o Redeploy staff with valuable skills that are not effective in their current roles.
- o Remove staff that oppose the turnaround efforts.
- o Enlist new staff needed such as interventionists, specialists, coaches, and mentors.

Educational literature on school turnarounds is very few and scattered. In 2007, the Center on Innovation & Improvement (CII) published, School Turnarounds: A Review of the Cross-Sector Evidence on Dramatic Organizational Improvement that identified the following 14 leader actions connected to turnarounds:

- 1. Collect and analyze data
- 2. Make action plan based on data
- 3. Concentrate on big, fast payoffs in year 1
- 4. Implement practices even if they require deviation from norms
- 5. Require all staff to change
- 6. Make necessary staff replacements
- 7. Focus on successful tactics; halt others
- 8. Do not tout progress as ultimate success
- 9. Communicate a positive vision
- 10. Help staff personally feel problems
- 11. Gain support of key influencers
- 12. Silence critics with speedy success
- 13. Measure and report progress frequently
- 14. Require all decision makers to share data and problem solve

This report provides detailed, actual scenarios that illustrate for school personnel the steps that successful school leaders have taken in turning around the lowest-performing schools.

While the research base consists primarily of case studies of organizations that have successfully turned around their performance, there are themes that emerge from the existing evidence.

- Strong leadership
- · A clear, focused instructional improvement strategy
- · Accelerated time frame and early, dramatic change

Advancing Research, Improving Education

- Consistent use of data to identify student needs, make decisions, and monitor progress
- Continuous staff development that focuses on student needs (see Duke, Keys to Sustaining School Turnarounds)
- Developing a supportive staff that is committed to the mission
- Forming partnerships and increasing parental and community involvement

Turnaround Leaders

The literature on turnaround schools (Herman, et al., 2008: Public Impact, 2008; Center on Innovation & Improvement, 2008) emphatically states the need for strong leaders who have the competencies required to turn around a school. Turnaround leaders have the capacity to analyze data, notice patterns and underlying issues that may be the cause of low student achievement, and act on the data in a focused and uncompromising manner. They create a sense of urgency as well as a sense of mutual accountability among all staff members at the school by communicating clear expectations that instruction is the first priority and by consistently monitoring the impact of instruction on student learning and holding teachers accountable for results. The most effective leaders accomplish both shortand long-term results by building the capacity of school staff and encouraging shared leadership rather than acting in a dictatorial manner. Finally, turnaround leaders model initiative and persistence by doing more than is required and facing and overcoming barriers rather than using them as an excuse for poor performance.

Public Impact (2008, pp. 9–10) identifies 10 competencies organized into four clusters that are needed by leaders who take on the task of turning around a school. State and district leaders should take these competencies into account when identifying principals for turnaround schools:

1. Driving for Results – This cluster of competencies is concerned with the turnaround leader's strong desire to achieve outstanding results and the task-oriented actions required for success. Competencies include:

Achievement: The drive and actions to set challenging goals and reach a high standard of performance despite barriers.

Initiative and Persistence: The drive and actions to do more than is expected are required in order to accomplish a challenging task.

Monitoring and Directiveness: The ability to set clear expectations and to hold others accountable for performance.

Planning Ahead: A bias towards planning in order to derive future benefits or to avoid problems.

2. Influencing for Results – This cluster is concerned with motivating others and influencing their thinking and behavior to obtain results. Turnaround leaders cannot accomplish change alone, but instead must rely on the work of others. Competencies include:

Impact and Influence: Acting with the purpose of affecting the perceptions, thinking and actions of others.



Team Leadership: Assuming authoritative leadership of a group for the benefit of the organization.

Developing Others: Influence with the specific intent to increase the short- and long-term effectiveness of another person.

3. Problem Solving – This cluster is concerned with leaders' thinking applied to organization goals and challenges. It includes analysis of data to inform decisions; making clear logical plans that people can follow; and ensuring a strong connection between school learning goals and classroom activity. Competencies include:

Analytical Thinking: The ability to break things down in a logical way and to recognize cause and effect.

Conceptual Thinking: The ability to see patterns and links among seemingly unrelated things.

4. Showing Confidence to Lead – This competency— essentially the public display of self-confidence—stands alone and is concerned with staying visibly focused, committed, and self-assured despite the barrage of personal and professional attacks common during turnarounds.

Self-Confidence: A personal belief in one's ability to accomplish tasks and the actions that reflect that belief.

A Clear Focus on Instruction

Turnaround school leaders and staff need to look at student achievement data to identify factors that deter student learning. Teachers can use student data from standards-based assessments and classroom assessments to evaluate the effectiveness of their instruction. By reviewing student achievement data, principals and staff can identify specific areas of weaknesses in instruction and establish necessary changes needed to focus instruction on deficit areas. Once weak content areas of instructional practices have been identified, leaders and staff can develop a plan for improving instruction. Critical to this effort is the importance that the school leader be the instructional leader.

By setting the example, the instructional leader must be visible in the classrooms and show the importance of aligning standards, curricula, and assessments. Professional development, differentiated for teacher need and instructional improvement, is also crucial. Teachers need to know how students learn and what the key components of effective instruction are. Additionally, they need an arsenal of effective interventions to use with students who fall behind (Herman, Dawson, Dee, Greene, Maynard, & Redding, 2008).

Accelerated Time Frame and Early, Dramatic Change (Quick Wins)

In order to create a clear focus on instruction, it is necessary to communicate to staff that dramatic change is in order and that the change must happen guickly rather than being phased in over time (Hassel and Hassel, 2009). Dramatic change signals that it is imperative to break organizational norms to achieve significantly improved results. The changes undertaken by schools that have turned around their performance include

- Identifying a high-priority area in which the school can experience "early wins" so that the school staff remains motivated and the district staff and the community members can see the visible impact of initial changes;
- Changing staff assignments to take advantage of teacher strengths;
- Changing schedules to promote an intense focus on instruction as well as creating opportunities for job-embedded professional learning; and
- Engaging with external partners who can provide technical assistance and act as a critical friend to provide unbiased progress monitoring.

Turnaround school leaders identify no more then one or two specific goals that can be met on an accelerated time frame. It's important to show success in the short-term to motivate staff to continue to take on the significant changes necessary in a turnaround school. Early and clearly identifiable successes also stifle negativity before it can take hold.

Creating a Culture of Data Use and Performance Monitoring

To quickly identify leader and teacher actions that are working or not working, it is important to regularly monitor the impact that changes are having on classroom instruction and student learning (Rhim, et al., 2007). The data collection and use is not limited to leaders and decision makers, but it is critical to have public forums (i.e., teacher team meetings, staff meetings, parent and community meetings). The point is not to use the data for summative evaluation but in a formative manner so that decisions can be made about how to make rapid and data-based adjustments in the delivery of instruction to maximize student learning (Almanzan, 2005). For example, teachers in turnaround schools frequently assess the reading skills of students since those skills impact learning in all content areas. Leaders use the data to target technical assistance for teachers on the incorporation of literacy strategies into daily lessons. Teachers use the data from those assessments to decide which literacy strategies are appropriate for a particular lesson.

Continuous Professional Development

Professional development targeted towards areas of weakness identified by performance monitoring was evident in schools that had turned around (Herman, et al., 2008). A common approach among these schools was to establish collaborative teams of teachers to align what was in the state standards and district curriculum with their daily instruction and ongoing student assessments. In turnaround schools, teachers meet regularly



to review samples of student work, relate that work to student expectations in the state standards, and adjust their instruction accordingly (Picucci, 2002). There is emerging evidence that teacher collaboration focusing on what to teach, how to teach it, how to determine if students learned what was taught, and what to do if they didn't is the most beneficial form of professional development (Darling Hammond et al., 2009).

Developing a Committed Staff

Principals can do much to develop a common vision for a school by maintaining high expectations for staff and students alike while providing the necessary support so that both teachers and students can achieve success. Effective turnaround leaders obtain support from teachers by having daily interactions with teachers as individuals, in teams, or an entire faculty focusing on the belief that all students can be successful. They model the importance of continuous learning by going beyond expectations and doing whatever is necessary to support teachers, by attending staff development sessions and contributing to team meetings. They are present in classrooms and offer immediate and constructive feedback on their observations. When necessary, turnaround leaders must take on the difficult task of replacing ineffective teachers. All these actions communicate to the entire staff that everyone is responsible and accountable for the success of the school.

Forming Partnerships and Engaging the Community

Because turnaround efforts can be contentious, families, businesses, and community stakeholders can play a crucial role in bolstering or debilitating turnaround efforts. Below are three strategies districts can use to genuinely bring on board the community in turnarounds.

- Look at the Current Failure. By publicly acknowledging and taking responsibility for bleak student achievement results, districts can allow others in the community to feel the problem.
- Establish a Vision for the Future. By encouraging community stakeholders to be a part of the changes in the school rather than insignificant observers, a team effort and positive approach can be formed.
- Announce and Celebrate Early Wins. Community conception that turnarounds are on-track can be established by broadcasting early results that occur in turnaround schools.

(Kowal, Hassel, & Hassel, 2009)

Conclusion

As the quote at the beginning of this articles states, "There is no single strategy that is most effective for turning around schools and districts." State and district leaders working with low-performing schools are encouraged to find the combination of turnaround strategies that will work best for the context and culture of the schools needing rapid improvement.

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Additional Resources

Kowal, J. M., & Hassel, E. A. (2005). School restructuring options under No Child Left Behind: What works when? Turnarounds with new leaders and staff. Washington, DC: The Center for Comprehensive School Reform.

http://dww.ed.gov/topic/?T_ID=21

http://www.schoolturnarounds.org

http://www.centerii.org/

http://www.schoolsmovingup.net

State Highlights and Events

Alabama

Lessons Learned for Turning Around Low-Performing Schools

By Reeda Betts, Education Administrator, Alabama Reading Initiative; Debbie Webster, School Improvement Leader, Federal Programs; and Cheryl Sparks, School Improvement Leader, Federal Programs,

Alabama State Department of Education Mary Lou Meadows, EdD, SECC State Liaison

School turnaround is ultimately an inside-out process that requires time. Outside assistance is helpful and almost always necessary, but true sustainability and success are dependent upon the capacity built in the administration and staff of the school. The Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) is dedicated to building the capacity in local education agency (LEA) leaders, school administrators, coaches, and teachers that results in lasting changes. Alabama's State Support Team members work directly with LEAs and schools to put theory into practice on a daily basis and learn valuable lessons from both the triumphs and the tribulations. For over a decade, ALSDE has provided technical assistance to identified schools. Through those experiences, we have learned the following lessons.

Collaborate to Coordinate and Consolidate State Services

Perhaps the most difficult lesson to learn and to correct is the necessity of coordinating SDE services in order to ensure that LEAs and schools receive consistent messages and targeted assistance without feeling overwhelmed. Alabama's strategy for coordinating field services is monthly, face-to-face meetings of SDE staff who coordinate the work of regional staffs and special projects. Many positive actions have resulted from the consistent

interactions among these coordinators. Under the guidance of the state's deputy superintendent, assistant superintendents, and section directors, the coordinators review research and state data together, conduct joint visits to LEAs and schools in order to have common learning experiences and determine appropriate action steps, plan collaborative professional development sessions, and work diligently to avoid unnecessary duplication of state services. This group has formed the professional relationships that allow them to dialogue, troubleshoot, and problem solve to better support Alabama's schools.

Effectively Equip and Coach State Support Team Staff

A major effort by SDE coordinators is to ensure high quality training and support for regional and school-based staffs. Each of our field-based teams receives initial and monthly follow-up training based on short- and long-range outcomes for client growth, internal professional learning, sharing successes and solving problems, reviewing upcoming planned activities and strategies, and updates regarding pertinent SDE activities and information. Schools identified for improvement have traditionally been supported by multiple state and local initiatives. In an effort to speak with one voice from the SDE, various sections come together to train our teams in topics or processes common in school improvement support. Examples include continuous improvement planning, best practices-strategic teaching, adequate yearly progress (AYP) and accountability, the collaborative model, Alabama's Leadership Success Academy, positive behavior supports, reform models, and many facets of federal programs, etc. Regional and schoolbased members of the State Support Team are equipped not only with research-based tools and practices but with knowledge regarding other support efforts both within and outside the department as a result of monthly coordinator meetings. A large portion of each month, team leaders and coordinators work in the field guiding, coaching, and supporting our various staffs to ensure effective follow-up to training and consistent delivery of high quality services. The goal of all training and support is to improve our practice to better serve our clients and ultimately the children of our state.

Coach Districts and Schools to Utilize Diverse Data Sources

It is no shock to anyone reading this article that data, all kinds of data, form the basis for how schools are identified for support. Similarly, data sources show schools how to focus clearly on the mark, how to formulate appropriate plans to get there, how to assess for meaningful student outcomes, and how to decide to adjust when things are not working. Often in improvement schools, the data dilemma lies not in its availability but rather in how data is used or is not used in planning meaningful strategies to address challenges. Schools that develop structures to organize and process data, invest in using it to measure growth toward goals, and intentionally respond to discovered gaps that



will make measureable improvement. Toward this end, we have learned that the State Support Team staff must be able to work face-to-face with administrators, leadership teams, and individuals as they grow in keeping data central. We have also learned that attention to data cannot be exclusive to academic information. With the graduation rate a national issue, for instance, tracking cultural, process, and demographic information should be part of the ongoing picture of how a school is progressing. When schools carefully select and consistently keep eyes, minds, and hands on the data, they are able to grow toward examining everything from classroom assessments and student work to early warning systems and whether teacher collaboration times are effective. As our teams coach and support the identification, analysis, and use of various data sets and the structures and processes that make data live, our clients become more confident and therefore successful in addressing challenges and maintaining the processes of continuous improvement.

Rely on Research—Not Just What but Why

It's called buy-in. Too many times, leadership places demands on their followers without telling them the why. It is human nature to want to know why, and in the case of education, "Because I said so" is not a good enough answer. We see principals initiating new programs and new schedules without taking the time to get buy-in from faculty and staff. An example of this might be when starting an adviser/advisee program, a teacher hears in a faculty meeting that she will be a part of the adviser program. She gets a folder and the "stuff" she needs but she never is informed about "WHY we are doing it." She does the "stuff" but not as passionately and purposefully as she would have if she had understood why.

Research and data are key parts in convincing teachers they need to begin doing something or implement some kind of change. It is not enough to say this or that school has implemented something so we need to implement it also. How was it implemented? Why was it implemented? What were the results of the implementation? What could it do for us? These are crucial pieces of information that teachers need to wrap their minds around to implement change.

As we move things out to LEAs and schools, we use research to undergird and promote all our practices. Training, job-embedded professional development, and daily practices are all research-based. In the future, we see the need to work with districts and schools to include buy-in as a major step when introducing new concepts and programs at the school level. Our efforts will include assisting leaders in moving from an autocratic form of leadership to an effective form of shared leadership.

Critical Caring Culture Builds Confident Shared Leadership

A central theme consistently visible in high-performing schools is a focus on the things students can do rather than the things they can't. Inherent in this view of high expectations for all

students is a culture founded in positive, supportive relationships both among adults and between adults and students. The health and sustenance of such a climate rests largely in the lap of leadership. Characteristic of schools in need of improvement is often the opportunity to build capacity for developing positive school culture and shared leadership. We have learned that when the State Support Team begins to work in a needsimprovement environment, there must be a conscious effort to model the belief that no one is invisible and everyone, each adult and child, contributes in meaningful ways and can be successful. When leadership begins to develop this belief and demonstrates it through sharing decision making, valuing input, and being a learner, things begin to change. Ocean liners do not turn around on a dime or in a minute, but as leadership is shared and confidence is built in a school as a community of learners, culture improves, expectations elevate, and students and adults perform better. Positive growth and change, especially in school culture, depend on respect and collaboration. We have learned that without being intentional about building trust, making connections, and looking for what is right with schools and the people in them, it is almost impossible to effectively impact change from a support perspective. State Support Team members understand that a first step in turning schools around is establishing solid relationships with district/school staff and students through becoming a valuable functioning member of their improvement team and efforts.

Lead Schools to Have a Laser-Like Focus on Improvement

There is a story about a young man who graduated from college and decided to seek employment. He hoped to find a job somewhere away from his hometown. He walked into the local bus station, approached the ticket counter and asked the clerk for a bus ticket. What do you suppose the ticket clerk asked the young man? He said, "Where do you want to go?" The young man said, "I don't know. Just give me a ticket to somewhere." He didn't get a ticket! Of course, the moral of the story is that if you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there. In working with low-performing schools, we have discovered that one of the major reasons why these schools fail to achieve what they truly want is that they never direct their focus; they never concentrate their power and energy on a few things and see them through to excellence. Instead they "dabble" in many things and become satisfied with average.

It is a hard task to help these schools see that writing a continuous improvement plan (CIP) is not a punishment, but that the very tool they need to direct their focus is already in their hands. The CIP provides a great venue for establishing focus as major stakeholders come together around critical needs and discover solutions together. The CIP helps them to determine a few goals based on data, a few effective strategies that their efforts will be based on, and minimal action steps that lay out the path to meeting the goals. Once these are defined, then faculty



meetings, professional development, data meetings, etc., become purposeful and consistent.

Two challenges remain ahead of us as part of the State Support Team. The first one is changing the mindset of schools to see the CIP as the tool that can help them concentrate their energy in a few areas. Schools need to understand that the CIP is:

- A process not an event that occurs one time.
- A tool that can bring everyone together to determine how they will meet present and future challenges discovered by taking a concentrated look at academic, cultural, and other forms of data.
- A concise instrument that can help communicate and establish expectations.
- A written plan that represents a real commitment. Without a commitment, a goal is only a dream.
- A mechanism for inspecting what you expect.
- A document that allows you to keep your goals in sight so it can be referred to often. This helps you to concentrate on results, rather than on activities. It also provides a constant reminder and source of motivation to reach the goal.

The second challenge we face will be helping schools design an effective collaborative plan (CIP) or roadmap for reaching their goals. Conquering these challenges will allow the different initiatives at the state department to focus on how it can best support these plans.

There is an old saying, "If you chase two rabbits, both will escape." As we seek to help schools move towards improvement, it will be imperative that all initiatives work together closely to coordinate services so that schools can see the unity in the support that is provided. If we can be successful in our effort, schools will reap the benefits, and student achievement will increase.

Incorporate Intensive Instructional Training for Administrators and Teachers

Every school improvement effort must lead directly to changes in student learning. Student achievement data cannot and will not improve if deliberate actions are not taken at the daily instructional level. In Alabama, professional development for administrators and teachers is centered around teaching to state standards, using instructional time effectively, and actively engaging students in learning, daily. Professional development activities provided within this framework ensure that administrators and teachers understand what should drive instruction, when certain practices and strategies should be used, and **how** to assure and assess student learning and adjust instruction. The methods used in adult professional development simulate the methods that are considered "best practices" in the classroom. Administrators and teachers experience content area lessons to evaluate the effectiveness of instructional practices and strategies. This method makes learning visible and allows for a smooth transfer from instructional theory to actual classroom practice.

Provide Powerful Professional Development That is Ongoing, Job-Embedded

Years of research tells us that one shot "sit and get" workshops are not the optimal form of professional development. Unfortunately, we have learned this lesson from practice, as well. To be effective, training at all levels must be followed by ongoing, job-embedded professional development and coaching. LEAs and schools in multiple years of school improvement receive various levels of on-site support from members of the State Support Team ranging from weekly to monthly visits based on multiple sources of data to indicate individual LEA and school needs. Regional support personnel provide leadership and instructional support to LEA leaders, school administrators, and teachers in the form of collaborative planning, modeling, side-by-side coaching, and reflection and feedback sessions. This learning-by-doing process builds capacity in a safe, trusting environment. According to the research of Joyce and Showers (2002) when participants receive ongoing support and guidance in the form of coaching and they return to the classroom, the result is a 95% transfer to practice.

Gradually Grow Educators to Sustain Positive Changes

In coaching adults to embrace change, the process is as important as the result. In over a decade of providing technical assistance to identified schools, we have learned that to see meaningful practice "stick," we must coach our clients using a continuum of gradual release. With State Support Team staff on-site with clients regularly, there is sustained opportunity to plan and support this continuum based on need, learning style, and capacity. Building knowledge and skills, processes and practice requires time, planning, modeling, support, reflection and feedback. Frequently called the "I do," "We do," "You do" as an instructional approach, it works in the classroom, and it works in capacity building with adults. Factored in the gradual release process is attention to adult learning theory, which includes appreciation for what they bring to the table, considering relevance to their work, and valuing their input into the selection of learning topics. Many opportunities to apply this kind of coaching come in the process of writing, developing, and implementing continuous improvement plans and instructional best practices. It is our goal to build capacity in district and school personnel so that meaningful processes become normal procedure and are sustainable without external support.

Henry Ford said, "Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success!" Every school turnaround lesson learned represents a process that requires collaboration on many fronts to achieve success. State, local, and school educators must work together to ensure that positive changes occur **inside** every classroom. When these changes are made and those who do the work daily are equipped to sustain them, schools turn around, and the differences are obvious from the **outside**.





Georgia

Focused Efforts are Key to School Turnaround

By Matt Cardoza, Director of Communications, Office of Standards, Instruction, &

Georgia Department of Education Glenda Copeland, MA, SECC State Liaison

In November 2009, Georgia's State Board of Education and State Superintendent of Schools Kathy Cox recognized 17 schools for being removed from needs improvement (NI) status. What is most impressive about that accomplishment is that these 17 schools were in state-directed status, meaning they were in NI year 5 or more.

A great question to ask is, what did these 17 schools do differently to make adequate yearly progress 2 years in a row? Georgia is one of the original six states chosen by the U.S. Department of Education to participate in a Differentiated Accountability pilot. As part of Georgia's Differentiated Accountability Plan under NCLB, a school in NI level five and above has a full-time state director that is in the school ensuring that it follows best practices and does everything necessary to make AYP.

That includes providing observations and professional development to teachers, academic coaches, and administrators. The state directors work to help the schools implement strategies and policies that can be sustained after the school has been removed from state-directed status, so the schools continue to make AYP. Working with their state directors, each of these 17 schools focused on high expectations and saw great results in student achievement. And they worked together to implement short-term action plans and monitored their school improvement plans closely.

One successful tool that all these schools used was the School Keys: Unlocking Excellence through the Georgia School Standards. This resource is the foundation for Georgia's comprehensive, data-driven system of school improvement and support. Correlated to several well-known and respected research frameworks, the School Keys describe what Georgia's schools need to know, understand, and be able to do. This is the same thing that the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) ask of our students.

Through the Georgia Assessment of Performance on School Standards diagnostic process (GAPSS Analysis), a variety of data are collected from multiple sources to assess the status of a school on each of the standards. The data are combined to inform the results of the GAPSS Analysis, which helps in the development and implementation of school improvement initiatives, including high impact practices, in a school.

Advancing Research, Improving Education

The 17 schools in Georgia that were removed from NI status all promoted the elements of standards-based classrooms throughout the school. They allowed teachers the time to collaborate with one another and work with their administrative teams and state directors to develop lesson plans based on the Georgia Department of Education instructional frameworks.

All in all, these schools used state directors and best practices to focus their efforts to "turn around" their performance. It shows that when we are all focused on the same goal, ALL schools can achieve at high levels!

Louisiana

Turning Around Low-Achieving Schools

By Darlene Morgan Brown, PhD, SECC State Liaison

The backbone of the state's plan to turn around low-achieving schools has been and will continue to be the Recovery School District (RSD). Louisiana is the only state in the nation that has created a separate statewide entity dedicated solely to actively taking over and turning around the lowest-achieving schools in the state. The RSD was created by the Louisiana Legislature in 2003. The passage of these statutes gave the state, through the RSD, extraordinary power to remove from local control any individual school that has been designated as a "failed school," one that has remained in an academically unacceptable school status for 4 consecutive years and has not been corrected during that period by local authorities.

What sets Louisiana apart is the fact that, rather than taking over entire school districts with all of their dysfunctions, central office bureaucracies, employees, and restrictive collective bargaining agreements, the RSD takes over individual schools, their students, and their funding. This direct authority has enabled the Louisiana Department of Education (LDE) to intercede in more than 5% of the state's public schools. Additionally, the RSD gives individual schools the freedom to hire and fire staff based on performance, enables them to require longer school days and/or a longer school year, and requires the use of a data-driven instructional model that provides real-time feedback on student learning. Finally, the RSD embraces school choice for parents and students through a diverse set of alternative school management models including charter school providers and other private managers.

The Louisiana Education Reform Plan supports participating LEAs in turning around persistently low-performing schools using six strategies:

1. Keeping schools currently under RSD management in that management structure and pursuing one of the four intervention models in any schools that remain persistently low-



achieving. The RSD is committed to "restarting" dramatic reform in these schools through models such as "transformation," "conversion," and other approaches consistent with the four Race to the Top models.

- Creating the High-Performance Schools Initiative (HPSI) to support districts willing to create RSD-like conditions and fully implement one of the four interventions models in their struggling schools before state intervention is mandated. Louisiana's long-term plan to address struggling schools also involves building the capacity of willing districts to carry out successful turnarounds. To avoid state takeover, LEAs with struggling schools are encouraged to enroll these schools in the HPSI.
- Continuing to bring schools into the RSD when districts are unwilling or unable to fully implement dramatic strategies or fail to do so successfully.
- 4. Creating strong pipelines of talented teachers, leaders, and school operators for struggling schools. Louisiana will undertake an ambitious effort to fuel the supply of highly effective teachers and leaders for its schools, with a special emphasis on its HPSI and persistently low-achieving schools.
- 5. Using the RSD as a research and development engine to drive innovation. Louisiana will continue to use the RSD to test and refine new turnaround strategies.
- Using the Memorandum of Understanding between the RSD and LEAs. This approach enables the RSD to extend its reach and resources to all areas of the state as it develops additional capacity.

These six strategies will facilitate the creation of RSD-like conditions in all schools—hence, producing a world-class education for every child in Louisiana.

Mississippi

Evaluating and Turning Around the Lowest-Performing Schools

By Laura B. Jones, EdD, Director, Office of School Improvement, Mississippi Department of Education

Debra Meibaum, MAT, SECC State Liaison

Mississippi's work with turning around its lowest-performing schools is far-reaching and multifaceted. As far back as 2000, the Mississippi Legislature passed legislation enacting an intensive full-scale evaluation of the state's lowest-performing schools, at that time referred to as "Priority Schools." In 2008, the state legislature revisited that legislation and further defined the state's lowest-performing schools as those schools that fell into the lowest performance classification—now labeled "failing" under the new accountability model in any 1 year and those schools that fell into the performance classification just above failing—now labeled "At-Risk of Failing" and "Low Performing" for 2 consecutive years. The revised legislation also changed the term "Priority School" to "School At-Risk."

This legislation calls for a complete review of the school and the school district associated with the failing school. The legislation also mandates that the review be completed by peer educators, most of whom are retired, that have undergone extensive training. Evaluations cannot be conducted by state department staff.

The evaluation team conducts evaluations on all aspects of the educational process. The following is an overview for each of the nine instruments:

Validated Personnel Appraisals

This instrument is conducted for the following categories of educators: teachers, assistant principals, principals, central office administrators, and superintendents. Several data collection procedures will be used including interviews, observations, document reviews, and questionnaires. One common data collection instrument would not likely yield valid data regarding job performance.

• Instructional Process/Curriculum Delivery

This instrument is comprised of rubrics used to relate interviews of teachers and principals, as well as, observations of teachers with indicators of effective implementation of an aligned balanced system of curriculum and instruction. These indicators define the extent of curriculum alignment with standards and assessments, validity, resource support, etc.

· School Management

This instrument addresses four broad categories of school management: management of daily school operations, leadership and management of school programs, leadership of human resources, and acquisition and management of fiscal resources. Data sources include interviews, observations, questionnaires, and unannounced visits to observe "routines" of the school.





Community Involvement

This instrument is intended to measure the degree to which the school reflects the values and interests of the community at large and the degree to which the school fits the community that it serves. The instrument will determine, but not be limited to, the utilization and extent of community resources, effective community collaboration, and evidence of sustainability in partnering. Schools will record community involvement in a portfolio collection of documents and score themselves using an impact level-scoring guide.

Public Relations

This instrument assesses the extent to which receptive and expressive forms of communication within and between/among district central offices, schools, classrooms and the public are present and effective. The instrument also seeks documentation of in-place procedures for communication. The evaluation consists of interviews, informal observations, and self-assessment questionnaires completed by school secretaries, teachers, principals, and superintendents.

Safe and Orderly School Climate

This instrument includes components such as a document review of a school's comprehensive school safety plan and interview questionnaires used to set performance levels regarding implementation of related indicators. School compliance with any federal and state mandates regarding school safety is also evaluated.

School Board Policy and Performance

This instrument will provide a detailed description and profile of policies, behaviors, supporting documents, materials, and instruments used to facilitate effective school board performance. The evaluation will consist of document/artifact reviews, interviews, and questionnaires completed by board members, local administrators, and community members.

School Resource Allocation

This instrument evaluates the allocation of school resources including the distribution of dollars, staff, technology, and maintenance at the district level and the use thereof. This instrument also assesses reasonable returns on the dollar, wise decision making in the allocation of those resources, and expenditures in line with the priorities at the school level. Data on the use of those resources is collected at the school, district, and state level, and then compared.

School Wellness

This instrument evaluates the policymaking process and the implementation of the school's Wellness Plan and School Health Council as required by Mississippi Code 37-13-134 and in accordance with the 2004 Women, Infants, and Children Reauthorization Act.

These instruments and the scoring spreadsheets that accompany them are available at http://www.mde.k12.ms.us/sag/evaluation. html

South Carolina

Initiatives Address Turning Around the Lowest-**Performing Schools**

By: Beth A. Howard, EdD, Coordinator, Office of Special Projects, South Carolina Department of Education; David Rawlinson, Director, Office of Special Projects, South Carolina Department of Education; Amanda Burnette, Education Associate, Office of Special Projects, South Carolina Department of Education

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South Carolina's Accountability

Historically, South Carolina has been recognized continuously for its rigorous standards, assessments, and accountability system (EdWeek, 2009). In 2001, the first school report cards were established to assess student achievement across the state. Over the past years, the state has seen an increase in the percentage of schools that have been rated as low-performing (see Table 1).

Table 1

School Absolute Ratings	2008	2007	2006	2005	2004
Excellent	8.4%	6.6%	11.6%	15.2%	20.4%
Good	15.9%	19.5%	21.8%	27.4%	33.9%
Average	35.1%	33.0%	32.0%	31.5%	28.5%
Below Average	24.5%	26.1%	22.3%	20.0%	14.6%
At-Risk (Unsatisfactory)	16.1%	14.9%	12.1%	5.9%	2.6%

Note. (SCDE, 2009)

To address this increase in at-risk/unsatisfactory schools, the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) established guidelines for dealing with schools that did not show progress. Beginning with the November 2003 report card, any school receiving an absolute rating of at-risk/unsatisfactory has been monitored to determine if progress has been met. If it is determined that students' academic performance has not met expected progress, the state superintendent has the authority to take any of the following actions:

- 1. furnish continuing advice and technical assistance in implementing the recommendations of the state board of education;
- 2. declare a state of emergency in the school and replace the school's principal; or
- 3. declare a state emergency in the school and assume management of the school (S.C. Code Ann. 59-18-1520, 2008).



Through this established legislation, the state identified 16 schools that had not met expected progress, according to their 2006 report cards. State Superintendent of Education Jim Rex decided to continue technical assistance through the establishment of a collaboration of the lowest-performing schools, which he deemed the Palmetto Priority Schools (PPS).

Palmetto Priority Schools Initiative

South Carolina's homegrown PPS project, created 3 years ago, provides targeted assistance to academically struggling schools. The PPS initiative was developed as an alternative to a state takeover for a group of schools that share several general challenges: a high-poverty population, excessively high turnover rates of leaders and teachers, and a history of underachievement in the school which negatively affects the community. The current 37 schools in the collaboration have an average poverty rating of 94%. State Superintendent Rex chose to implement a collaborative strategy as an intervention to serve the schools. The collaborative model combines four strategies that are applied in a manner to address differing needs within each school. These four strategies are collaboration, leadership mentoring, a dropout prevention initiative, and teacher recruitment. Each participating school is represented in the collaborative leadership team by its principal, district superintendent, and school board chairperson. Team members meet regularly with the state superintendent; David Rawlinson, director, of the PPS; and liaisons assigned to the schools. A variety of additional resources are available to these schools, including partnerships with colleges and universities. Participating schools can learn from one another, and strategies that are working in one school can be guickly shared with the others. The following success was noted the first year of the collaboration:

- Six of 16 schools met expected progress; two of those schools met AYP.
- Overall, the 16 schools averaged a .28 gain in their absolute
- Eight of 16 schools gained a .1 or higher in their absolute ratings.

The 2009 gains have not yet been analyzed due to the pending establishment of newly revised accountability standards.

During 2009–2010, the PPS initiative expanded with the development and implementation of more intense assistance through a turnaround component.

South Carolina Turnaround Project

The SC Turnaround Schools Project provides schools with the authority to change their existing situation through flexibility in state regulations and policies that deal with hiring, budget matters, curriculum, and instruction. The project includes a stateled pilot, a district-led pilot, and a private partnership pilot. In the state-led pilot, a turnaround team—consisting of a curriculum specialist/team leader, a data specialist, a math/science specialist,

and an English language arts/social studies specialist—has been hired to work with the faculty and staff within the school.

In the district-led pilot, the school district made a decision to reconstitute the school at the beginning of the first year in the turnaround process. In addition, the district formed an inhouse turnaround team to work with school personnel on the curriculum and student achievement.

In the private partnership pilot, the school district, with support and funding from SCDE, entered into a private partnership to address the needs of the underperforming school. The private partner provided a comprehensive program for the turnaround school that included a diagnostic assessment for the school, an expert who worked in a full-time capacity with the school to implement needed changes, and intensive work with teachers and the administrative staff to improve teaching and learning.

Lessons Learned from Palmetto Priority Schools Initiative

1. The PPS initiative provided a support system for high-poverty/ low-performing schools. The initiative provided this cluster of schools a collaborative opportunity to receive assistance in making changes in the conditions of their schools. The initiative created a "protected" space and an attractive choice for change through the PPS, as opposed to a state takeover, which can be expensive and unpopular with the community and schoollevel constituents. A team approach was developed, so that leaders could learn from one another. The other major support provided was through state identified liaisons that worked with the school leadership to make certain that the school was pursuing comprehensive school reform.

Lesson: One person does not have the ability to provide the needed support to the PPS. Many of these schools are in need of a great deal of new capacity to effect deeply embedded systematic change. The new capacity would consist of a team of providers to assist the school in making significant improvement in student achievement.

2. Flexibility and fewer regulations were two additional areas that were to be provided to the PPS. Flexibility was intended to allow resources to be targeted and used as needed. Fewer regulations meant deregulating the PPS and streamlining various reporting processes.

Lesson: The state department must provide operating conditions that allow more flexibility in decision making over staff, time, budget, and programming. School-level leadership must have authority over hiring, placement, compensation, and work rules, as well as authority over the curricular and instructional program. The state department needs to give the principal the autonomy to select and assign staff and have control over the financial resources to implement the school improvement plan.

3. The PPS have experienced constant turnover in teachers and in school-level and district-level leadership. Schools and districts have been assisted with recruitment efforts for teachers and administrators



Lesson: There is a need to incentivize experienced teachers and administrators with a proven track record to work in our state's chronically low-performing schools, as well as reward them for making a commitment of 3 to 5 years or more. This is needed for continuity and sustainability of reform efforts.

4. The PPS were provided technical assistance funding to assist them in the implementation of their plans of action. The funding amounts varied, depending upon the tiered level of support in which the school was placed. The amounts ranged from \$200,000 to \$500,000. Based upon the improvement plans that were developed and due to local- and-state-level budget cuts, many of the schools utilized their monies for hiring teachers to reduce class size and hired instructional support personnel.

Lesson: Adequate funding has to be provided to cover the cost of instructional support personnel. This would assist schools in adding new capacity to support their instructional programs.

5. The state-level support in the past has primarily focused on the teaching component of the school's instructional program. Instruction was being addressed through the use of teacher specialists, iCoaches, TAP Master and mentor teachers, professional development, and other programs. The PPS began to assist schools in shifting their focus to student needs and resources, as well as the instructional program.

Lesson: Individual student needs must be addressed. These should include matching the instructional program of the school with the students' social needs. Students must feel that they are safe, must be motivated to learn, and must have relationships with adults who serve as mentors and teachers. Relationships are a vital component of the entire process, to include faculty, staff, and students.

6. The PPS initiative formed a collaborative leadership team made up of the school principal, the district superintendent, the district school board chairperson, SCDE leadership team members, and liaisons. The group met regularly for professional development and information sessions. The initial PPS collaborative was an oral agreement between all parties involved. There was a need for the development of a more formal agreement, which led to the implementation of memorandums of agreement (MOAs) for all stakeholders.

Lesson: The lack of implementation of the MOA needs to carry stiffer penalties. Student growth must be another factor taken into consideration as a component of the MOA.

Lessons Learned from the South Carolina Turnaround Project

 The Turnaround Schools project, although in its infancy in South Carolina, has been a successful approach to assisting historically underperforming schools in our state. Although SCDE was given some increased authority in directing these schools, as provided by the Turnaround Schools Proviso passed by the state legislature, more say in the direction of the schools' instructional program is desirable. **Lesson:** If a school is truly going to be "turned around," there needs to be more authority provided to the state education agency in ensuring that best practices are being implemented in the process.

2. Labeling a school as a turnaround school may have negative connotations in the school community. The SEA and LEA must be prepared to provide a positive public relations campaign to offset the negative community perception of the school, as well as garner the support of the local stakeholders.

Lesson: Providing a positive public relations campaign surrounding turnaround schools that involves the community stakeholders in the turnaround process is critical to each school's success.

 All entities that provide support to the school (i.e. LEA, school board, school administration, etc.) need to be committed to the turnaround effort. Each of these entities must be prepared to make hard decisions focused on improving teaching and learning.

Lesson: Turning around a school that has been low-performing for a number of years requires the unfailing support of all entities involved so that decisions are made in the best interest of teaching and learning rather than being influenced by what is politically correct.

4. From our experiences in South Carolina, the schools that have been low performing for a number of years often have a cadre of teachers who are not of the highest quality. The LEA needs to have the authority to remove the teachers who are not providing the best teaching to the students in turnaround schools. In addition, incentives need to be provided to retain and recruit the highest caliber of teachers.

Lesson: Schools cannot be turned around until the quality of teaching has reached its highest level. Flexibility must be given to LEAs to remove teachers in these schools who cannot provide or are not providing high quality teaching. Incentives for recruiting and retaining the highest quality teachers should be provided.

5. Leadership at the school level is critical to the success and implementation of school turnaround. The administrators who are selected to lead these schools must share the vision for redesigning the school and be prepared to fully implement the plan. SEAs and LEAs should work together to select and train the most qualified applicants to fill these roles. Incentives should be provided to retain and recruit these leaders.

Lesson: It is critical to have the most highly qualified leaders serving as school administrators in turnaround schools. Incentives should be provided to retain and recruit these leaders.

For more information regarding the Palmetto Priority Schools and the South Carolina Turnaround Schools Project, please contact the SCDE Office of Special Projects.





South Carolina and SECC

The Southeast Comprehensive Center has been involved with the work of the PPS since its inception. SECC has worked with SCDE in the writing of policies to support the PPS, has aided in the development of a reorganization manual to address the current legislation of state takeover, and has assisted in providing professional development. With SECC's continued support and guidance, the state of South Carolina will be better able to provide service to this cluster of schools in order to bring about positive conditions in teacher quality, school and district leadership, and curriculum and instruction.

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The Southeast Comprehensive Center (SECC) is one of 16 regional centers established by the U.S. Department of Education. The primary goal of the regional centers is to build the capacity of the state education agencies and statewide systems of support to implement NCLB. Links to the other regional centers, the content centers, and the U.S. Department of Education may be found on the SECC Web site (secc.sedl.org).

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