

## Turning Around Low-Performing Schools: Implications for California's District and School Support Providers

Presented by the Regional Educational Laboratory West at WestEd and the California Comprehensive Center

**April 28, 2009 – Oakland \* April 29, 2009 – Irvine \* April 30, 2009 – Sacramento**

Representatives of state, county, and state-approved independent organizations that support California's state-monitored districts and schools met in three locations to expand their knowledge of evidence-based strategies for turning around low-performing schools. Each event provided opportunities for participants to hear from experts and from school leaders who have successfully turned around and are sustaining improvement at their sites, as well as to learn from one another's experiences.

Invited participants for the full-day events in Northern California (Oakland) and Southern California (Irvine) included District Assistance and Intervention Team (DAIT) representatives, School Assistance and Intervention Team (SAIT) representatives, Regional System of District and School Support (RSDSS) directors, county office of education Title III directors, and other county office and school district staff. The audience at the half-day Sacramento event included California Department of Education staff and administrators from local state-monitored districts and schools. The Sacramento event was targeted to and planned especially for state department of education personnel, who were unable to travel to the other events due to state budget constraints.

Part of a U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences (IES) initiative to bring evidence to practice, the events were designed to deepen participants' understanding of how to recognize and apply good evidence-based strategies to improve persistently low-performing schools. Each featured *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools*, one in a series of research-based practice guides published by IES, as well as related resources from IES's Doing What Works website ([dww.ed.gov](http://dww.ed.gov)). Participants learned about the research

findings and website resources and discussed ways to apply them to their work with districts and schools.

### *Background*

In California, schools become state-monitored when, while participating in programs funded by the legislature to support implementation of research-based school reform, they are identified for intervention and support based on low student academic achievement, failure to meet statewide growth targets, and/or lack of progress. Such schools are required to contract with a SAIT provider that will evaluate the school's academic program using the Academic Program Survey (APS), monitor implementation of the nine Essential Program Components (EPCs), and support the school's continuous improvement process, including providing ongoing feedback. Districts in Program Improvement Year 3 may be required to contract with a DAIT provider that will conduct a comprehensive needs assessment, implement a set of high-impact strategies to improve student academic achievement, and provide ongoing support for both the district- and school-level change process. The California Comprehensive Center (CACC), in partnership with the California Department of Education (CDE), provides training, technical assistance, and resources to these state-approved SAIT and DAIT providers.

## Summary of Events

The events were conceived and planned to support the work of support providers by meeting three objectives:

- » develop further understanding of research-based strategies to turn around low-performing schools, and the resources available on the Doing What Works (DWW) website, as well as how to recognize and apply good evidence.
- » learn from school leaders who have successfully implemented turnaround strategies; and
- » plan the application of research findings and DWW resources to district and school support systems.

At each event, three presentations provided information about IES-sponsored research and resources targeted to improving student outcomes in chronically low-performing schools.

### Understanding Evidence-Based Strategies

A representative from Mathematica Policy Research and the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) gave a brief introduction to IES practice guides, each of which offers specific evidence-based recommendations for addressing a current education challenge. Each guide is developed by an expert panel of researchers who have examined strategies for addressing the issue, and practitioners who have had related experience in their district or school. For each recommendation, a guide presents specific steps to implement the recommendation, an assessment of the strength of the supporting evidence, and solutions to common roadblocks or barriers to carrying it out.

The relative strength of the evidence for any given recommendation is categorized as strong, moderate, or low, based on the expert panel's review of current research on the issue. Evidence is ranked as

- » **strong** if the recommendation is based on rigorous research and the panel has a high degree of confidence that the practice is effective;
- » **moderate** if there is some research to suggest that the practice is effective, but there is also some question about whether the research has effectively controlled for other explanations or whether the practice would be effective in most or all contexts; and
- » **low** if the practice has not been shown to be effective through rigorous research, but there is some compelling

evidence that the practice works, and the expert panel thinks it is an important recommendation. A low level of evidence does not mean that the recommendation is less important than recommendations with a strong or moderate rating. It may mean that a rigorous, experimental study of the practice would be difficult, that researchers have not yet studied it, or that there is weak or conflicting evidence of effectiveness.

Dr. Rebecca Herman, principal research scientist for American Institutes for Research (AIR) and panel chair for the featured practice guide, gave an overview of *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools*. Her presentation focused on the four recommendations in this guide:

- » **Signal the need for dramatic change with strong leadership.** Schools should make a clear commitment to dramatic changes from the status quo, and the leader should signal the magnitude and urgency of that change. A low-performing school that fails to make adequate yearly progress must improve student achievement within a short timeframe. It does not have the luxury of implementing incremental reforms over a number of years.
- » **Maintain a consistent focus on improving instruction.** Chronically low-performing schools need to maintain a sharp focus on improving instruction at every step of the reform process. To improve instruction, schools should use data to set instructional improvement goals, make changes to immediately and directly affect instruction, and continually reassess student learning and instructional practices to refocus the goals.
- » **Make visible improvements early in the school turnaround process (quick wins).** Quick wins can rally staff around the effort and help overcome resistance and inertia.
- » **Build a committed staff.** The school leader must build a staff that is committed to the school's improvement goals and qualified to carry out the changes necessary to meet them. This may require staffing changes, such as releasing, replacing, or redeploying those who are not fully committed to turning around student performance.

Dr. Nikola Filby, associate director of REL West, provided an overview of the structure and content of the Doing What Works website. Doing What Works provides resources for educators at all levels of the system that support

the evidence-based recommendations contained in the WWC practice guides. To help educators identify and make use of effective practices, the website includes three sections: Learn What Works, which includes multimedia presentations, research reviews, expert interviews, and key actions to help educators understand the research base supporting the use of recommended practices; See How It Works, which offers interviews with teachers and administrators, videos and slideshows on specific practices, and sample artifacts; and Do What Works, which provides professional development tools to help teachers, coaches, and administrators improve their practices.

### Learning from School Leaders

At the Oakland and Irvine events, principals and key staff from successful turnaround schools described how the four recommended practices played out in their settings and engaged in conversations with participants about the realities and challenges of implementing change in low-performing schools.

#### Waterford High School [April 28 in Oakland]

In 2001, its first year of operation, Waterford was the lowest-performing school in the county, a decile 1 school with an API of 475. By 2008, the school had demonstrated the fastest growth in the state, with an API of 808 and a decile 10 similar schools ranking. Waterford has consistently met AYP since 2003/04. The school is featured in the School Turnaround section of Doing What Works, and the principal recounted the school's journey "From Worst to First," referring to a headline in a local newspaper that highlighted the school's improvement.

- » **Strong leadership:** The principal stressed the importance of communicating a clear purpose to the entire school community and of creating a set of high expectations and values. To capitalize on staff strengths, leadership and authority at Waterford are shared.
- » **Consistent focus on instruction:** Early in the improvement process, RSDSS consultants helped the school collect and analyze data about the use of instructional time. The discovery that, on average, only 65 percent of class

#### Waterford High School

Grades 9–12

55% White  
40% Hispanic  
1% Black  
1% Asian  
46% Free/Reduced Lunch  
13% ELL

time was focused directly on instruction and student learning resulted in targeting student learning for improvement efforts. A set of instructional norms now guides teaching and learning at the school, including a stated learning objective for every lesson, teaching first and then checking for understanding, concept development, student-produced work in all lessons, and lesson plan alignment across teachers and classes. A data-driven approach, including formative and summative assessment, guides all instructional decisions. Job-embedded professional development, the principal reported, "focuses relentlessly" on improving teachers' skills; continuous monitoring of instruction and student progress have become school norms.

- » **Quick wins:** The principal suggested starting with "low-hanging fruit" — simple but effective strategies that can impact teaching and learning, such as increasing wait time, clearly stating the lesson purpose, and improving time on task.
- » **Committed staff:** Early in the change process a concerted effort was made to identify advocates within the staff and to build consensus. Waterford now has a cohesive staff with high expectations for instruction, a "laser focus" on improving student performance, and strong professional relationships.

#### Torch Middle School [April 29 in Irvine]

In 2000, Torch was identified as one of the lowest-performing middle schools in the state. Its API was 445 and Torch was both a statewide and similar schools decile 1 school. By 2008, the school's API was 783 with a similar schools ranking in decile 10.

#### Torch Middle School

Grades 6–8

2% White  
94% Hispanic  
1% Black  
3% Asian  
79% Free/Reduced Lunch  
35% ELL

- » **Strong leadership:** Joining the school in 2001, the current principal initiated a needs assessment and focused staff on achieving academic excellence. He adopted Taking Center Stage, an innovative CDE project to promote excellence in middle grades education, as Torch's framework for change. The project provides clear recommendations for a coordinated system in which standards, assessment, accountability, and curriculum are aligned and focused on ensuring that all students meet grade-level standards.

- » **Consistent focus on instruction:** Consultants from the Los Angeles County Office of Education helped analyze the instructional program and made recommendations to change instructional practices and align professional development with needs.
- » **Quick wins:** The focus on student success prompted efforts to change the school culture. College logos were painted in classrooms; classrooms and the campus were cleaned up; and the uniform, tardy, and homework policies, as well as classroom management strategies, were consistently maintained. Instituting block scheduling and team teaching were examples of quick wins that made a positive difference for teachers.
- » **Committed staff:** The principal emphasized the importance of choosing staff leaders based on their ability and on a track record of getting results, as well as establishing trust and delegating responsibility. Giving staff enough time and multiple opportunities to collaborate and work together also helped build staff commitment.

**Edgemont Elementary School** [April 29 in Irvine]

Edgemont improved its API from 415 in 2000 to 714 in 2008, and it exited PI in 2006. Once known as “the school with limited means,” it is now an exemplary school featured on the Doing What Works website.

**Edgemont Elementary School**  
Grades K–5

- 4% White
- 84% Hispanic
- 10% Black
- 1% Asian
- 97% Free/Reduced Lunch
- 68% ELL

- » **Strong leadership:** The school had hired a new principal in 2002, and the current principal has been at the school since 2005. She has focused reform efforts on schoolwide instructional consistency and fidelity to the core curriculum, and on improving classroom management and discipline. Her other priorities included increased leader visibility, improved school climate and culture, and increased teacher collaboration.
- » **Consistent focus on instruction:** The principal worked with staff to improve instruction based on a coherent system of assessment and data analysis. Consistent class scheduling across grade levels and the use of student assessment portfolios have enabled teachers to align resources and support services to better identify and meet students’ instructional needs. Frequent and targeted data review, developing teacher professional

learning communities, and aligning professional development to specific areas of need have also contributed to improving instruction.

- » **Quick wins:** The school adopted the Accelerated Reader program to encourage student reading, developed English/language arts assessment portfolios, aligned intervention services for students, improved the school culture, and expanded community outreach.
- » **Committed staff:** The principal implemented bimonthly meetings of a leadership team and grade-level teams, and conducts surveys to gather staff input. Providing release time to analyze data and plan instruction also helped build a cohesive and collaborative staff.

**Applying Research to Practice**

At each event, representatives of SAIT, DAIT, and CDE were invited to connect presentation content to their work with low-performing schools and districts.

At the Northern California event, a panel including a SAIT lead, a DAIT lead, and a CDE representative discussed how the four recommended practices intersect with the nine EPCs that frame CDE’s approach to supporting low-performing schools. Panelists’ remarks were guided by three broad questions from the moderator:

- » What are examples you’ve seen of turnaround practices in action?
- » What are examples of barriers/roadblocks you’ve seen?
- » What are some practical solutions to overcoming such roadblocks?

Panelists agreed that strong leadership is key to making progress. They also agreed that quick wins of any kind are helpful, but stressed the importance of improvements that focus on instruction, such as increased or uninterrupted instructional time, more planning time, and coaching support for teachers. Roadblocks discussed included a new turnaround administrator facing old systems, staff, and culture; defensiveness and a perception of change as loss; seeing data as an indictment of teachers; feeling pressured to rapidly improve student achievement; and dealing with collective bargaining policies. Some suggested solutions were: helping district staff understand that their roles in improving achievement should go beyond monitoring; creating a positive atmosphere for understanding and using data; providing additional training for turnaround leaders; developing a shared

research knowledge base among all stakeholders in the turnaround process; engaging collective bargaining leaders as partners from the beginning; allowing more staffing flexibility; and using the SAIT process as a catalyst to combat old cultural norms.

At the Southern California event, a SAIT representative and a DAIT representative provided examples from their fieldwork of the practices described in the IES practice guide, emphasizing the need to build the leadership skills of school principals and train teachers to use data to differentiate instruction.

At the Sacramento event, Tom Parrish, managing director, American Institutes for Research, discussed research that AIR and the California Comprehensive Center are doing to learn from California schools that are high-poverty and high-needs but also high-performing, and that have sustained success over time. He noted that the strategies outlined in the practice guide are consistent with practices in schools that have sustained success. For example, such schools establish a clear vision of high expectations, use assessment and data systematically, and build strong staff capacity that includes teacher participation in decision-making. Additional common elements for sustaining success include school/classroom organization (e.g., effective student grouping, maximized instructional time, and extended learning opportunities); parent/community involvement; and strong district support (e.g., flexibility in resource use, strong support of instruction, and effective professional development).

Fred Balcom, director of CDE's Accountability and Improvement Division, provided the state department's perspective in his comments at the Southern California and Sacramento events. He stressed that the research featured in the practice guide should support and inform technical assistance providers' work with the state's low-performing schools. Half of the 12,000 public schools in California have been designated as low performing under federal rules, he pointed out, and these schools need to turn around quickly. In Sacramento, Balcom's remarks focused more specifically on implications of the practice guide recommendations for CDE's work. He noted that department staff would benefit from more opportunities to meet and discuss their work in light of practices highlighted in the guide. He indicated that CDE is striving to better coordinate and more clearly

prioritize its work, as well as to ensure that districts receive consistent information, mandates, and messages from CDE that are grounded in research evidence. Districts report that they often get mixed messages about different "do now" priorities from various CDE divisions. The department needs to remain focused on its goal of closing the achievement gap, which requires thinking about and doing things differently. "We need to do the right things, not just do things right," Balcom noted.

### *Concerns, Conclusions, and Next Steps*

**The practice guide recommendations need to be better integrated into the structure of the existing state system of support, but the low levels of evidence are a concern.**

Most state-approved support providers agreed that the *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools* practice guide is an effective framework for their work with schools and districts. They felt it could serve as a comprehensive way to examine what is being done — not as a new way to do work, but as a new lens for work already in progress. The importance of integrating the four recommended practices with the EPCs was also stressed.

A number of participants expressed concern about the low level of evidence for each of the four recommended practices, and the impact that might have on using them as a framework for their work with districts and schools. Expert presenters clarified that a designation of low evidence does not mean a recommendation has no validity. The low level of evidence for the four strategies recommended in the *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools* practice guide mainly resulted from a lack of current rigorous research on effective strategies for quickly turning around low-performing schools. The panel did not find any empirical studies with the rigor necessary to determine that specific turnaround practices consistently produce significantly better academic outcomes. Consequently, the panel examined less rigorous case study research and theory to provide recommendations about turnaround practices. Dr. Herman noted that many strategies mentioned in the research did not meet the basic standards of evidence to be included in the guide. The practice guide suggests strategies likely to improve student learning, but it does not offer evidence that these practices will always succeed in all school settings and circumstances.



**Quick wins can be used to build credibility and momentum.**

Participants noted the difference between a “quick win” and a “quick fix.” For a quick win to be effective, it must be meaningful, sustainable, and build momentum for change. Such actions should advance the district or school’s larger reform goals. It was suggested that the APS and EPCs could be used to identify specific areas in which to focus quick win efforts.

**More needs to be done to train and support turnaround leaders, especially principals.**

Participants agreed that principals and district staff need more training, support, and resources to hone their leadership skills so that they can competently lead turnaround efforts. Although principals complete the state’s required administrator training program (AB430), they frequently do not get the follow-up coaching and support they need to fully and systematically implement the APS and EPCs.

**CDE plays a critical role in the turnaround process, but more coordination is needed, both across state-level departments and between CDE and approved support providers.**

Both support providers and state staff observed that CDE needs to break down established silos, build more internal capacity to support the improvement process, and better coordinate its efforts and services.

SAIT and DAIT representatives would appreciate more definition and clearer communication of CDE expectations for SAITs and DAITs. They perceive the quality of SAIT/DAIT work to be uneven across different approved providers, and suggested that exemplars from CDE would be helpful, as well as closer monitoring of SAIT/DAIT work quality by the department. There was consensus that the SAIT process is currently better defined, trained, and supported than the DAIT process, and that more consistency across DAIT teams is needed, but both DAIT and SAIT providers indicated a need for more training and support. Participants requested that CDE provide clearer agreements, assurances, expectations, and protocols for DAITs.

The tools used in the DAIT and SAIT processes need to be better aligned, and should include more specific descriptors of leadership and instruction.

Another suggested area for building state capacity is provision of research-based technical assistance. The

practice guides and Doing What Works website, for example, are useful resources CDE can provide to schools and support providers. Ensuring that CDE staff are well grounded in current reform research is an important step toward building and sustaining the internal capacity to agree on high-leverage priorities and deliver clear, coherent messages about state expectations to schools and districts.

**Coherence is also an issue for the DAIT/SAIT processes at the district level.**

More clarification is needed of the roles and relationships between DAIT and SAIT teams working in the same district, and models of how such a relationship should operate would be helpful. One suggestion was to provide more opportunities for SAIT and DAIT teams to meet to talk about best practices and about how to work in the same district in a more systematic and coordinated way.

**The role of districts in the turnaround process is key, but too often problematic.**

DAIT and SAIT representatives lamented a lack of buy-in from some key district leaders, as well as lack of knowledge and skills at the district level to effectively support schools in the turnaround process. They noted that district expectations are not always made clear to school sites and that frequently, the district and the school are not on the same page about priorities or processes. Too often, a district puts a principal in place, or retains an existing leader, who is not capable of competently leading a turnaround effort.

When there are multiple support providers in a district, they too often have competing priorities, creating confusion for district and schools alike. For example, competing providers may not base their work on the same theory of action or have the same alignment with the APS and EPCs. One participant suggested designating one district staff member as a coordinator to better align and integrate the work of multiple providers.

Collective bargaining was frequently cited as a roadblock to implementing some of the turnaround recommendations. Bargaining unit contracts commonly prevent replacing teachers who are not “on board” or not equipped to carry out research-based instructional strategies. The state, some suggested, might offer training related to bargaining agreements and identify approaches that districts could use to build relationships with

bargaining units, which could, in turn, enable district schools to implement the staffing strategies outlined in the practice guide.

\* \* \* \* \*

Over the coming months, CACC staff will be working with CDE staff to plan specific action steps and refine the state's support systems. Additional REL West events are being planned to continue to bring research evidence to practice for state, district, and school staff charged with the difficult task of improving outcomes for students in the state's lowest-performing districts and schools.

## Resources

- » Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools and other practice guides may be downloaded from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/practiceguides>.
- » The What Works Clearinghouse website is <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>.
- » The Doing What Works website may be accessed at <http://dww.ed.gov>.
- » The REL West at WestEd website is <http://www.wested.org/cs/we/view/pg/11>.
- » The California Comprehensive Center website is <http://www.cacompcenter.org>.
- » The California Department of Education website is <http://cde.ca.gov>.
- » SchoolsMovingUp is located at <http://www.schoolsmovingup.net/cs/smu/print/htdocs/smu/home.htm>.
- » The Waterford High School website is <http://www.waterford.k12.ca.us>.
- » The Torch Middle School website is <http://www.bassett.k12.ca.us/torch>.
- » The Edgemont Elementary School website is [http://www2.mvUSD.k12.ca.us/schools/es/Edgemont/NewEdgemontWeb\\_March%2006/index.htm](http://www2.mvUSD.k12.ca.us/schools/es/Edgemont/NewEdgemontWeb_March%2006/index.htm).
- » Research Summary Supporting the Nine Essential Components and Academic Program Survey may be downloaded at [http://www.cacompcenter.org/pdf/aps\\_research\\_summary.pdf](http://www.cacompcenter.org/pdf/aps_research_summary.pdf).

*These proceedings were prepared under Contract ED-06-CO-0014, from the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, by the Regional Educational Laboratory West, administered by WestEd. The content of the publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.*

**CONTACT INFORMATION:** REL West at WestEd • 730 Harrison Street • San Francisco, CA 94107 • 866-853-1831 • [relwest@WestEd.org](mailto:relwest@WestEd.org) • [WestEd.org](http://WestEd.org)