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Turning Around Low-Performing Schools: Evidence-Based Practices

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

University of Nevada Las Vegas Student Union Building
Las Vegas, Nevada

Almost 50 Nevada Department of Education, district, and school administrators met in Las Vegas on June 1, 2009, to expand their knowledge and understanding of evidence-based strategies for turning around chronically low-performing schools. Sponsored by the Regional Educational Laboratory West (REL West) at WestEd, in partnership with the Southwest Comprehensive Center (SWCC), the day-long event provided participants with opportunities to hear from experts and to learn from one another's experiences.

Part of a U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences (IES) initiative to bring evidence to practice, the event was designed to deepen participants' understanding of how to recognize and apply evidence-based strategies to improve persistently low-performing schools. It 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). In addition to learning about research findings and website resources, participants discussed ways to apply them to state, district, and school support systems and improvement plans.

Background

In a 2008 needs survey conducted by REL West, respondents identified school improvement as the most critical issue for states, districts, and schools in the western region. Each of the four states (Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah) served by REL West is currently in the process of implementing a coherent system of interventions and supports for districts and schools that have been identified for program improvement under federal and state accountability systems. The SWCC has been a key partner in Nevada's school improvement efforts, providing technical

assistance and resources to the Nevada Department of Education (NDE). This event was especially timely due to recent legislation that changes the way NDE supports schools in program improvement under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and state law. As NDE staff further refine the state's support system, they want to ensure that the strategies being implemented by districts and schools are grounded in research.

Presentations

Three presentations provided participants with information about IES-sponsored research and resources targeted to improving student outcomes in chronically low-performing schools.

Daniel Player, a researcher at Mathematica Policy Research, gave a brief introduction to IES practice guides, each of which offers 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 to carrying it out.

Based on the expert panel's review of current research on the given issue in a practice guide, the relative strength of the evidence for each recommendation is categorized as strong, moderate, or low. 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; or
- » **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 change 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, which 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.

State Update

A presentation by NDE staff explained recent state legislation that changes how the state department of education will provide support for schools in years 3, 4, and 5 of program improvement (PI). NDE asked the legislature for these changes because, as the number of eligible schools increased each year, the state was nearing its capacity to field School Support Teams (SSTs) to work with them. Each SST requires a leader assigned by NDE, a highly qualified principal, a teacher, and a parent. It was noted that not everyone has the skills to carry out the role of team leader equally well, and the quality of teams has been uneven. Another reason for change was that the system did not allow for flexible or differentiated support, even though individual schools might need different intervention and support in order to meet accountability goals.

The new law is more logical and workable, according to state staff. During the 2009/10 school year, NDE will develop a differentiated support system to better meet the needs of PI schools. There will be no changes in requirements for years 1 and 2 PI schools. Year 3 schools will now complete an audit, facilitated by the district, that covers curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Beginning in 2010/11, year 4 schools will use data from their audit to develop a turnaround and restructuring plan, and year 5 schools will engage in implementation of their plan.

Schools will be required to submit only one plan to the state instead of the separate school improvement and restructuring plans required in the past.

Interactive Sessions

Jigsaw. Following the presentations, participants broke into four groups, each engaging in deeper study of a different practice guide recommendation. Facilitated by an expert with extensive background and experience in the topic, group participants discussed how the particular recommendation might play out in their own contexts, shared thoughts about barriers and solutions, and provided examples from school improvement efforts. Following these breakout discussions, participants returned to their original tables, shared what they had learned, and discussed how they might apply the strategies to their own work. They also discussed what support might be needed to implement the various recommendations and where that support might come from.

Strong leadership. Participants in the leadership breakout group discussed the importance of: choosing the right turnaround leader, open and effective communication by the leader to the wider school community, supporting staff throughout the change process, and finding ways to signal to all stakeholders that positive change is taking place.

All agreed that strong leadership starts when a district makes sure that a school in need of improvement has the right turnaround leader in place. When choosing the leader, the district should take into consideration the needs and culture of the broader school community, in addition to the specialized skills and knowledge needed to effect change at that school. The turnaround leader needs to respect the best aspects of the school's current culture while, at the same time, working to develop a new one focused on rapid improvement.

The school leader must clearly communicate the school's vision and goals to everyone, as well as expectations about how all stakeholders will contribute to the turnaround effort. Teachers and parents should be continuously informed about everything that impacts the school community. At the same time, turnaround leaders need to listen to community concerns and suggestions, especially from staff. They

must find ways to support staff through the change process, including bringing in external resources to help where needed. Participants shared examples such as asking for volunteers to help with paperwork, soliciting local businesses to provide supplies or money for celebrations of success, and other kinds of community outreach, which can serve multiple purposes: bringing in concrete help for school staff, signaling to the wider community that change is happening, and engaging that community in the improvement efforts.

Because many parents do not understand what role they can and should play in supporting or improving their child's education, school leaders must engage them carefully and intentionally, participants agreed. Parents might first be invited to participate in activities that are not necessarily related to school improvement. Then, once they have met other members of the community and become more comfortable at the school, school leaders can engage them in discussion about how they can become more deeply involved and contribute to school improvement efforts.

Focus on improving instruction. Participants in this group identified understanding and addressing teachers' data needs as an important step in improving instruction. Many school leaders do not provide teachers with data-related training or support because they do not realize teachers need it. This is partly because many teachers claim to be using data already when, in reality, they do not know what data they should be looking at or how to analyze and interpret them. The group agreed that building teachers' capacity to use data effectively is an essential responsibility of school leadership.

School staff must see their principal as an instructional leader. Many teachers need more support in the classroom, and the school leadership has an important part to play in providing it, both directly and indirectly. The ideal turnaround principal has a passion for instruction and sees regular visits to the classroom as a priority.

Another topic of discussion in this group was the importance of professional development that is managed at the school level and is targeted to specific teacher and school needs. Professional development must be an administrative commitment, and it is most

effective when it focuses on no more than one or two key areas of need.

Quick wins. While the term “quick wins” was new to some of the group, once it was explained participants shared a number of examples from their own experiences. Among them were making a narrow hall one-way in order to improve transitions; creating and protecting teacher planning time; implementing a positive behavior system; and improving the school environment. A specific example of something one high school had done to improve its environment was to make the school more inviting by having staff greet students as they came into the building in the morning and by not chasing them out of the building right after the last class of the day.

Quick wins may be academic or non-academic and they may vary by grade level, but whatever their focus, quick wins need to fit into the context and culture of an individual school. Participants suggested that when considering what to attempt as a quick win, there is much to be gained from choosing things that matter to staff. To find out what staff would like to see changed, they proposed conducting a survey or putting a jar on the table during staff meetings where teachers can leave comments and concerns anonymously. Following through on staff suggestions signals that leadership is actually listening and that things are, indeed, going to be different.

There was group agreement that, while sustaining the progress made with early quick wins is key, there is also value in going after quick wins throughout the change process, not just at the beginning. To help ensure that this happens, school leaders should consider including some quick-win efforts as action steps in the school improvement plan, along with the more challenging, long-term strategies that must be included.

Finally, it was noted that when targeting something for a quick win, leaders need to be sure that it is both “winnable” and sustainable; if the proposed change does not succeed, then how can the leader be trusted to actually turn the school around? Quick wins can also help engage the “middle third” of teachers who may be fence sitters, and their engagement can serve as a tipping point for building a committed staff.

Building a committed staff. This group began their discussion of the recommendation by wrestling with the question, “What does a *committed* (vs. not committed) staff look like?” Conflict and barriers to improvement efforts can happen when all staff members are not focused on the same goals and moving in the same direction. Teachers in low-performing schools may well be working hard, but at what and toward what?

Participants also discussed the issue of teacher evaluation and, specifically, the disconnect that often exists between a teacher’s ratings on a formal evaluation and the achievement of the teacher’s students. The group facilitator shared results from two studies of large, urban districts conducted by the New Teacher Project, which found that 90 percent of teachers scored a 3 or 4 on a 4-point evaluation scale. When such a high percentage of teachers are receiving scores like these, it can be difficult for a school leader to suggest that they need to improve their teaching skills. Instead, it was suggested, leaders should use student data as a vehicle for having honest conversations with teachers who need to improve.

The education community has not yet adequately dealt with the question of how to effectively evaluate teachers’ strengths and weaknesses, the group agreed. The state and districts need to commit to developing and implementing more meaningful and useful evaluation processes. In the meantime, leaders need to build more supportive school climates in which teachers can become more comfortable with making their practice public—participating in peer observations and coaching to improve their practice, for example.

Redeploying teachers is another issue for turnaround principals. Traditionally, teaching assignments are more likely to be based on seniority, for example, than on teacher strengths and best fit. This discussion highlighted the importance of providing appropriate professional development, support, and coaching to redeployed teachers. As one participant commented, “We don’t really guide teachers into new positions; we throw them into a new grade level and don’t help them.”

Removing and replacing staff can be difficult, largely because of the collective bargaining process. One important step in turnaround efforts, the group

agreed, is engaging the teachers' union in planning and implementing any new policies related to reassignment and restructuring. It was also pointed out that replacements for departing teachers are not always readily available, especially in more rural areas, although the current economic climate may have changed this somewhat.

Role-alike discussion groups. For the final activity of the day, participants met in role-alike groups (i.e., state department staff, district staff, and school administrators) to discuss and consider how to apply what they had learned. Groups then shared key points of their discussion with the entire audience. A REL West or SWCC staff member facilitated each group, using four guiding questions:

- » What are some specific take-aways or highlights from today's presentations and activities that can assist in your work?
- » What are some roadblocks you discussed and what solutions did you share?
- » What are some specific next steps you can take to move toward using more evidence-based practices in your setting?
- » What recommendations do you have for strengthening state and/or district support for low-performing schools?

Conclusions and Concerns

1. Learning about and implementing evidence-based practices is essential to the turnaround process.

The event helped validate some practices participants are already engaged in and helped them understand the need to revise others. It also encouraged them to dig even more deeply into turnaround research. Participants agreed that resources like the practice guide and the Doing What Works website, which provide information about evidence-based practices, can be immensely helpful in their work with low-performing schools, as can the services of organizations like REL West and the SWCC. One important message that emerged from the day's presentations was that all four recommendations have to work together, that picking and choosing among them will not yield the needed results. Professional development for leaders and teachers alike should be grounded in such research- and evidence-based best practices. As one participant aptly put it, "Doing things the way we've always done them" might be the biggest roadblock of all to successful turnaround; school turnaround requires new ways of thinking and acting,

grounded in research evidence.

2. More needs to be done to develop and support effective turnaround leaders.

At all levels of the system, more thought needs to be given to developing turnaround leaders; the effort to quickly improve a low-performing district or school cannot be led effectively by someone with minimal background or leadership experience. Yet many current administrators have been in their positions for less than three years, with no broad base of experience to inform critical turnaround decisions. There was participant consensus that turnaround leaders need additional training, support, and resources, as well as opportunities for mentorship by and apprenticeship to district and school leaders with experience in successful school improvement. Many teachers currently participate in professional learning communities (PLCs), and administrators should have similar opportunities to regularly share ideas, learn with and from each other, and provide mutual support as they undertake turnaround efforts.

Another concern expressed by principals of schools in program improvement is the number of additional responsibilities placed on them without any prior responsibilities being removed. They suggested that districts provide some help, specifically with tasks like required paperwork, so that a principal can really concentrate on turnaround efforts.

3. Staff redeployment and training are difficult aspects of school improvement.

Participants saw effective implementation of the four recommended practices being inhibited by some key staffing-related issues. They identified the need to develop better methods for assessing teachers' strengths and weaknesses and, based on that assessment, to be able to redeploy staff in such a way that the best people are in the roles where they are most needed. Some school administrators shared the fact that they lack the knowledge and skills to effectively coach teachers into a different role for which they might be better suited or, in some cases, to leave the profession entirely; they would appreciate more training and support to meet this challenge.

One of the biggest roadblocks to redeploying, releasing, or replacing staff in order to best meet turnaround needs, participants pointed out, is collective bargaining and associated employee contracts. Too often, it is difficult

to move ineffective staff, so it is important to work with teachers unions from the very beginning of turnaround efforts to enlist their support in the process.

Participants also indicated interest in learning more strategies for getting teachers to buy into the turnaround process, and the “quick wins” recommendation was further discussed as one strategy for effectively engaging teachers.

4. Systemic issues related to communication and consistency need to be addressed.

In light of all the changes going on at the state, district, and school levels, good communication is essential to successful turnaround efforts. Participants spoke particularly of the need for clear, open communication that reflects a real alignment of vision, goals, and strategies throughout all levels of the system. To that end, they strongly recommended developing a framework for better communication among the Nevada Department of Education, School Support Teams, districts, and schools.

Coherence in statewide school turnaround efforts might be enhanced, participants suggested, if the state could provide equitable support, including financial support, for Title I and non-Title I schools. While the new state system that will differentiate intervention for schools with different needs is a step in the right direction, providing differentiated resources based on specific needs was suggested as a next step. Participants also strongly recommended that NDE provide targeted preventative support to schools in year 1 or year 2 of program improvement.

Finally, participants expressed concern about lack of coherence between districts and School Support Teams, which inadvertently can result in pulling a school in different directions. A School Support Team and a district need to clearly agree on goals and actions so that they are united and consistent in their approaches to working with schools. When all levels of the system work together, teachers see that both their district and the state are there to support them, and they are more likely to buy into and actively contribute to turnaround efforts.

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Over the next months, SWCC staff will continue to work with NDE staff to plan specific action steps and refine state support system processes for low-performing districts and schools. Additional REL West events are being planned to continue to bring research evidence to practice for state department, 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 may be accessed at <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 may be accessed at <http://www.wested.org/cs/we/view/pg/11>
- » The Southwest Comprehensive Center website may be accessed at <http://www.swcompcenter.org/cs/swcc/print/htdocs/swcc/home.htm>
- » The Nevada Department of Education website may be accessed at <http://www.doe.nv.gov>

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