

March 17, 2009

## Turning Around Low-Performing Schools: Evidence-Based Practices

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

Tempe Mission Palms Hotel and Conference Center  
Tempe, Arizona

Eighty administrators from state departments of education, local districts, and school sites in Arizona, Nevada, and Utah met in Tempe, Arizona, to expand their knowledge and understanding of evidence-based strategies for turning around chronically low-performing schools. The Regional Educational Laboratory West (REL West) at WestEd sponsored the event in partnership with the Southwest Comprehensive Center (SWCC).

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 good research evidence 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 its Doing What Works website ([dww.ed.gov](http://dww.ed.gov)). Participants learned about and discussed ways to apply research findings and website resources to state, district, and school support systems and improvement plans.

### Background

In a needs survey conducted by REL West in 2008, respondents identified school improvement as the most critical issue for states, districts, and schools in the western region. Each of the states served by REL West is now in the process of developing and 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. A key partner for three of those states — Arizona, Nevada, and Utah — the SWCC is providing technical assistance and resources to state departments of education as they build their support systems for low-performing schools.

In July 2008, REL West published an analysis of districts and schools in program improvement in Arizona. A presentation of the findings to state teams during a subsequent SWCC meeting on school improvement generated a request for assistance, specifically for research-based strategies to help turn around schools in program improvement. Regional educators and leaders wanted to know what research says about effective levers for school improvement and the conditions necessary to effect positive change. They requested support to build high-performing school systems that accelerate achievement gains for all students. The March 17 event, jointly planned by REL West and the SWCC, was designed to address that need.

### Presentations

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

First, Michael Ponza, senior fellow at Mathematica Policy Research and director of operations for the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), provided a brief introduction to IES practice guides. These guides are developed to provide specific and coherent evidence-based recommendations for addressing current education challenges. Guides are developed by an expert panel made up of researchers who have examined strategies for addressing the issue and practitioners who have had experience with the issue in their district or school. Each recommendation in a guide is presented with three key features: (1) concrete steps explaining how to implement the recommendation, (2) an assessment of the strength of the evidence underlying the recommendation, and (3) solutions to common roadblocks or barriers to carrying it out.

The relative strength of the evidence for any given recommendation may be categorized as strong, moderate, or low, based on the panel's review of current research.

Evidence is ranked as

- » **strong** if a 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 a 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 a 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 should not be adopted.

Next, Dr. Rebecca Herman, principal research scientist for American Institutes for Research (AIR) and panel chair for the featured practice guide, presented an overview of *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools*. Dr. Herman previously directed the WWC and has overseen the development of several practice guides. Her address highlighted 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.

In the third presentation, 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 that support the evidence-based recommendations contained in the WWC practice guides for educators at all levels of the system. With a goal of helping 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.

### **Interactive Sessions**

Following the presentations, participants divided into four breakout sessions, each focusing on one of the four recommended practices through a jigsaw activity. Facilitated by an expert with extensive background and experience in the given topic, each group spent an hour in deeper study of a recommended practice, discussing its implications for participants' own contexts, sharing barriers and solutions, and providing examples from school improvement efforts.

**Strong leadership.** Participants in the breakout session on leadership discussed a number of issues related to district support for turning around failing schools. A key topic was districts' need for the same level of support, mentorship, professional development, and accountability that schools need. Also discussed was the need for much closer coordination and collaboration between the school board, district, and school. It can be hard for a school to overcome reform roadblocks when the district and its board seem to be "stuck" in their own way of thinking and are not in sync with what the school is trying to accomplish. Participants wrestled with the dilemma of trying to create innovation at the school level when alignment and collaboration with the district are missing. For example, one school-level participant described the challenge of trying to innovate while having to ask district permission and meet district expectations that are not consistent with what the school is trying to do.

The need for more training and support for principals to prepare them to be instructional leaders was stressed, as was the problem of the "revolving door" for principals

that often plagues failing schools. Participants argued that principals should be left in place long enough to accomplish their goals and see the change process through, thus increasing the probability of changes being sustained if leadership changes.

Another key topic was the importance of a school communicating its goals and vision for change to its wider community as an important step toward engaging community members as advocates and supporters in the improvement process. Participants agreed that a clear vision is an essential guiding component that must be supported by all stakeholders.

**Focus on improving instruction.** In this breakout session, participants discussed the importance of building teachers' capacity to understand and respond to data, as well as to identify appropriate interventions for students based on the data. In addition to time for collaboration, participants agreed, teachers need a program monitoring process that enables them to collect, analyze, and use data effectively. The importance of establishing common instructional approaches and ensuring the alignment of the curriculum was also stressed.

Another topic in this session was the use of instructional coaches. Many low-performing schools are putting coaches in place, but participants recommended that to optimize their effectiveness their role must be clearly defined and they must be adequately trained and supported, with clear expectations for both coaches and teachers.

Participants also emphasized the essential role of the principal as a strong instructional leader. They discussed the value of having principals conduct regular classroom walkthroughs, but they also identified the need to provide principals with ongoing professional development, support, and resources to enhance their effectiveness in maintaining a schoolwide focus on instruction.

**Quick wins.** The key conclusion from this jigsaw session was "win small, win early, win often." Participants discussed various aspects of a school that might be ripe for immediate and noticeable changes, such as student discipline and school environment. They also suggested the potential value of implementing a system of pre- and post-testing, the results of which could be used in two ways: to guide instruction for an individual teacher and to generate and focus schoolwide teacher discussion and action. Another suggestion for a possible quick win in the eyes of teachers was to protect their instructional time from frequent interruptions.

**Building a committed staff.** Participants discussed ways to deal with three kinds of teachers typically found in low-performing schools: those who are not well suited for quick change and should be redeployed; weak teachers who need more training; and those who are committed to and excited about participating in the change process. It was agreed that, because teachers have the biggest impact on students, getting and keeping quality instructional staff is key to school and student improvement. It only takes a few naysayers to stall the change process, so building a truly committed and focused staff is critical. Participants discussed the principal's important role in recruiting and retaining good people, in assessing staff strengths, and in dispersing talent appropriately to maximize those strengths.

Two broad approaches to building a strong staff were discussed: (1) reconstitution and (2) working with the same staff but guiding them in a new direction. Participants highlighted the importance of building teams, mentoring, and open dialogue among staff about what is and isn't working.

Following these breakout discussions, participants returned to their original table groups, shared what they had learned, and discussed ways they might apply the strategies to their own work, including what support would help a school leader to implement them and where that support might come from.

### **Common Concerns**

In the final activity of the day, participants first met as state teams, facilitated by a SWCC staff member who works with that state's education agency on building and implementing the state system of support, to apply what they had learned to their own contexts. These state team discussions were organized by four guiding questions:

- » How do our state system of support and local improvement efforts currently reflect the recommendations in the practice guide?
- » How can the Doing What Works website be used in our work to support improvement efforts?
- » How can the current system of support be strengthened to impact improvement efforts?
- » What does the state see as priorities and next steps to address them?

All participants then came together to share what they had discussed, consider what they had learned, and plan next steps. The state team reports reflected several common concerns across the three states:

- » More coherence is needed at the state level, including more cooperation and communication among departments, and more consistent state-directed messages to districts and schools. One state, for example, is creating an intermediate regional structure to improve communication, coherence, and collaboration, with the aim of facilitating better networking and delivery of services to districts and schools.
- » There needs to be more district buy-in and support to create real partnerships with schools in the improvement process. Too often, district and school priorities are not in alignment and seemingly work at cross-purposes.
- » More training and support is needed for staff at all levels, but is especially critical for state staff that are supporting schools and for those who are approved to work with low-performing schools as part of the state system of support. States need to ensure that their approved support providers (e.g., coaches, principals, intervention teams) have the necessary expertise and training to help bring about real change and improvement.
- » Principals working to turn around low-performing schools want more training and support in data analysis, effective instructional strategies, and use of existing resources to support change.
- » Staff at every level of the system — state, district, and school — would benefit from more opportunities for districts and schools to network, link, and learn from each other. Participants were interested in exploring more web-based and virtual opportunities to network as a way to deal with current budget and travel difficulties.

- » States need to differentiate the type and intensity of support provided based on the needs of a district and/or school; one size does not fit all. For example, a school that is in program improvement because the percentage of students that took the required tests was off by 1 percent needs a different level and intensity of support than a school that missed numerous targets, including student achievement.

Over the next months, SWCC staff will be working with state department of education staff in Arizona, Nevada, and Utah to plan specific action steps and refine state support systems for low-performing districts and schools. Additional events are being planned to continue to bring research evidence to practice for state, district, and school staff struggling with the difficult task of improving outcomes for the region's most at-risk students.

### 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 is located at <http://www.swcompcenter.org/cs/swcc/print/htdocs/swcc/home.htm>

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