



# Developing turnaround leadership

## *An example from Utah's Ogden School District ▾*

by West Comprehensive Center

*When the Southwest Comprehensive Center (SWCC)<sup>1</sup> partnered with the University of Virginia's School Turnaround Specialist Program (UVA-STSP) to develop leaders who could turn around low-performing schools in the southwest, the initial cohort of schools and districts that participated made remarkable gains. One district in particular stood out: Utah's Ogden School District. Based primarily on interviews and on documents and data from the district, this paper describes Ogden's successful initial implementation of approaches advocated by the UVA-STSP program. The paper is intended to be used as a case study for exploring some of the complexities of developing leadership for school turnaround.*

### The beginnings of the Southwest Turnaround Leadership Consortium

In 2010, the challenge of turning around persistently low-performing schools weighed heavily on the minds of education leaders in the southwest states served by the SWCC: Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah. They recognized the need for stronger and more effective school leaders. At a December 2010 regional meeting with staff from the SWCC, Chief State School Officers from the five states expressed grave concerns

about the lack of a talent pipeline of leaders with specialized training and skills who could turn around low-performing schools. The five state chiefs asked the SWCC to either create a training program for turnaround leaders or to research current approaches and effective programs across the nation. To address this high-priority need, SWCC Director Paul Koehler researched current approaches and effective programs, and in the spring of 2011 he recommended UVA's School Turnaround Specialist Program. The program's distinctive training approach combines

leadership case studies with the most innovative thinking in executive education to address the "real-world" challenges of turning around the nation's lowest-performing schools. After Chiefs and their State Education Agencies (SEAs) conducted their due diligence, they agreed that the program offered the most promising option and entered into agreements with the UVA and the SWCC, thus creating the Southwest Turnaround Leadership Consortium.

The consortium provided initial training for its first cohort of districts and schools during August 2011 on UVA's campus in Charlottesville, Virginia. Twenty-two schools from seven districts in the SWCC region participated in that first week-long Summer Institute and, later, ▾

» A case study on turnaround leadership, developed by the West Comprehensive Center.



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	Profile of the Ogden School District	
<p><b>This “culture of nice” was a factor cited frequently by staff as an obstacle to meaningful reform efforts.</b></p>	<p>To learn more about these successes, the SWCC sent two staff members to visit the Ogden School District in May 2012. Over a two-day period, they interviewed 14 people: 2 board members, 3 teachers (who were school support team members), 4 principals, the district superintendent, 3 members of the superintendent’s cabinet, and the administrator who had been designated as the “district shepherd” to help guide Ogden’s turnaround process.<sup>2</sup></p>	<p>participates in ELL programs. The district also has a high percentage of students from low-income families, with over 90 percent of the student population eligible for the federal free and reduced lunch program.<sup>4</sup></p>

in a three-day Winter Retreat held in Phoenix, Arizona, in January 2012.

At the end of that first year (the 2011/12 school year), 15 of the 22 schools posted gains on their respective state assessments for language arts and mathematics. All but one school in that first cohort achieved gains in at least one subject. The largest gains occurred in language arts, with an average gain of 12 percentage points. Sixteen of the 22 schools posted gains in mathematics that exceeded the state average gains.

The strongest gains came from Utah’s Ogden School District, which had four schools participating in the first cohort of the Southwest Turnaround Leadership Consortium. Three of them posted gains in both language arts and mathematics on the state assessments; one school made no gains in mathematics but achieved a 27-point gain in language arts. One school posted extraordinary gains on both state tests: Dee Elementary School gained 13 percentage points in mathematics and 32 percentage points in language arts from 2010/11 to 2011/12.

## Profile of the Ogden School District

Located about 40 miles north of Salt Lake City, between the Wasatch Mountain Range and the Great Salt Lake, the Ogden School District (OSD) oversees 14 elementary schools, 3 junior high schools, 2 high schools, and an alternative school. It is the sixth largest school district in the state. Metropolitan Ogden has a population near 84,000,<sup>3</sup> and the OSD enrolled approximately 12,650 students during the 2011/12 school year. For many years, Ogden was a railroad town with a fair amount of diversity. The number of Hispanic students has increased significantly in recent years. Hispanic students now make up 48 percent (6,099) of the district’s total student population. As this student group has grown, so have demands for English Language Learner (ELL) programs; currently 20 percent of the total student population

Characterizing the district prior to the fall of 2011, a typical description from teachers was to say, “We were a nice district.” This “culture of nice” was a factor cited frequently by staff as an obstacle to meaningful reform efforts. This culture was characterized by an unwillingness to demand change or create discord, excuse-making, and a lack of urgency and open communication. Research-based programs were adopted and then discarded before they were given time to take hold and demonstrate effectiveness. “We did nothing well enough to institutionalize it,” said one principal.

Students were taught below grade level, instruction was compliance-based, and there was no self-reflection among teachers and staff, according to interviewees. Teachers knew there were problems, but they were not made aware of the district’s and many of its schools’ low-performing status. In fact, the OSD was Utah’s lowest-performing district in 2010/11 and had 6 of the state’s 10 lowest-performing elementary schools that year. Ogden’s students had struggled academically for years, and, since 2004, proficiency rates on the state language arts assessments had hovered around 60 percent.<sup>5</sup> One

turnaround principal described the urgent need for improvement this way: “There was a constant battle, a disconnect. Everyone was jumping on different band-wagons in an attempt to find the silver bullet.”

Interviewees indicated that such unsuccessful efforts facilitated a downward spiral of achievement in the district and led to a “Needs Improvement” designation for seven consecutive years, based on requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind legislation. As one administrator bluntly said, “We couldn’t catch up once we hit the spiral downward.”

2010/11 was the first year of the federally funded School Improvement Grant (SIG) program. That year, three Ogden elementary schools received three-year SIG grants which totaled \$5 million through the Utah State Office of Education. The following year, a total of \$2 million in SIG funds was allocated to two high schools. The schools received these federal funds because each had failed to meet increasingly higher academic targets for up to seven years in a row. With SIG money came greater expectations for student success and increased pressure to perform.

Basic strategic and SIG-required changes were initiated first in the OSD, with funding applied to increased instructional time, professional development, and the hiring of additional full-time teachers, instructional coaches,

and school support team members. Much of the research on how to successfully turn around low-performing schools also recommended that districts with such schools hire a district-level turnaround leader to oversee and shepherd the successful implementation of SIG efforts. Sandy Coroles, OSD’s Executive Director of Curriculum and Federal Programs, became the district’s turnaround leader in 2010/11.

Having been an administrator in other districts as well as OSD, Coroles says she knew that many of the district’s functions needed attention if they were to successfully support turnaround of its SIG schools. Although she had to make sure that the district complied with SIG requirements, her overarching commitment was to ensure that student achievement became the laser focus of all change efforts. As she spoke with OSD staff, she realized that many attributed declining achievement to what, in her view, were “symptoms” rather than root causes. For her, the lack of parental involvement, student behavioral issues, lack of a clear reform strategy, and a struggle with what many felt was a top-down management approach by the district, masked larger and deeper issues. For example, the lack of parental involvement was a symptom of the language and cultural barriers that existed between the district and a significant portion of its community, according to Coroles.

Coroles knew that Ogden was a data-rich district, one where data were referenced frequently to determine the direction in which the district should head. Perhaps data could also inform instruction and help increase student achievement. As for staff resistance to change, she remembered how she herself had felt as a principal when the rationale or purpose for various reforms and policies seemed arbitrary or unclear. She empathized with the staff’s desire for greater transparency and communication at and between all levels of the district.

### **University of Virginia’s School Turnaround Specialist Program**

In 2003, the University of Virginia’s Darden School of Business, world-renowned for its executive leadership development program, and Curry School of Education joined forces to establish the Darden-Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education (PLE). This partnership was formed to strategically combine the most innovative thinking in business and education, thereby providing education leaders with the knowledge, tools, skills, and resources necessary to address the demanding challenges of leading and managing schools and school systems. In 2004, the PLE launched UVA’s School Turnaround Specialist Program (UVA-STSP), now the most ▶

established school turnaround program in the country. It is also the only school turnaround program in existence that takes a systemic approach to change by working with school, district, and state-level leadership teams to help them build the internal capacity necessary to support and sustain effective school turnarounds. This vertical integration puts state, district, and school leaders on the same page about the key tools for reform. It gives these teams a common foundation and common set of expectations and understandings for implementing reforms: For example, the program emphasizes data assessment and analysis in turnaround efforts, something that is neither a SIG requirement nor a tool that many state teams have fully utilized.

The UVA-STSP faculty apply a case-based training approach. Using case studies of business leadership, the program examines the challenges of leaders charged with turning around the nation's lowest-performing schools. Participants learn to foster effective interactions among schools, districts, and SEAs to pursue purposeful, bold changes based on their unique context. The desired result is the creation of a cohesive leadership system that supports dramatic and continuous improvement.

Three core principles underlie the UVA-STSP school turnaround philosophy:

1. *A systemic approach and district ownership are key to success.* The UVA-STSP partners with districts to help build the district capacity and conditions necessary to initiate, support, and enhance transformational change. This includes intentional efforts by the district to establish the instructional, accountability, talent management, and support conditions that turnaround schools need in order to thrive; the district must prioritize turnaround efforts. It also means working with state leadership to help build the capacity necessary to work collaboratively with districts and establish practices aligned to effectively support, enhance, and sustain district/school turnaround efforts.

2. *School leadership makes the difference in turnaround.* High-impact school leaders are crucial to success. The UVA-STSP provides executive education that helps develop key leadership capabilities of school and district leaders.

3. *Sustained change requires ongoing support and accountability.* As with any type of reform initiative, there is often a gap between learning and doing. The UVA-STSP partners with districts to ensure that there is regular, customized, and embedded support to meet key needs.

Participating districts and their schools commit to a two-year

program.<sup>6</sup> Districts must commit to channeling additional funding, resources, and efforts to their lowest-performing schools. They must also make significant changes at the district level. To do this, a "district shepherd" must be assigned to oversee the entire process. Ideally, this individual is well respected within the district, has a leadership role, and believes that student achievement can and will improve. Following initial assessments to determine whether the district is ready for the program, district administrators and school principals attend a week-long institute at UVA each summer for the two-year period of the program.

## **Southwest Turnaround Leadership Consortium**

State chiefs from the southwest region believed that the UVA-STSP offered a promising resource to meet their common challenge of developing turnaround leaders. SWCC staff, SEA leadership, and the UVA-STSP team met to design a new program, specifically geared to the region's needs. The requisite agreements were reached to launch it in July 2011. What emerged was the Southwest Turnaround Leadership Consortium, created with the goal of developing a pipeline of talented leaders in each state, specifically trained to turn around low-performing schools through programming provided by the UVA-STSP.

In August 2011, 22 school teams representing seven school districts from the five states in the southwest region attended their first training on the UVA campus in Charlottesville, Virginia. SEA staff in the five states had recommended the districts and schools that should be considered for participation in the UVA-STSP from the list of SIG recipients in their respective states. Districts with SIG schools had been invited to attend after UVA-STSP staff conducted on-site district readiness assessments to determine whether or not each district could and would support the UVA-STSP work.

Once the UVA-STSP staff identified the districts that were ready to participate in the program, principals of SIG schools in these districts were interviewed to determine their readiness to benefit from the UVA-STSP program. UVA-STSP staff conducted "Behavioral Event Interviews" (BEIs) to identify each individual's competencies. BEIs invited the interviewees to discuss personal successes and events; trained interviewers asked probing questions to elicit responses that would indicate whether or not applicants possessed the competencies necessary to be a turnaround leader. Defined by Public Impact<sup>7</sup> as "...a pattern of thinking, feeling, acting, or speaking that causes a person to be successful in a job or role," competencies have been found to accurately predict the future performance of people in leadership positions.<sup>8</sup> These leadership

competencies are grouped into four clusters: Driving for Results; Influencing for Results; Problem Solving; Showing Confidence to Lead. Each cluster has one or more individual competencies, and some are more critical than others. "Achievement, the drive and actions to set challenging goals and reach a high standard of performance despite barriers" is one of the critical competencies. "Impact and Influence, acting with the purpose of affecting the perceptions, thinking, and actions of others" is a second critical competency.<sup>9</sup> These two competencies usually require people to have and use high levels of many other competencies, and, without these two competencies, a person is not likely to be a successful turnaround leader.<sup>10</sup>

Ogden School District participants attended the week-long Summer Institute, which began Sunday evening with dinner in the campus dining hall and a motivational speaker from the Darden School of Business. The OSD group included the superintendent, principals of its three SIG schools and one non-SIG school, as well as Sandy Coroles, the newly designated "district shepherd." Classes started early Monday morning and every morning thereafter through the following Saturday; formal classes ended in the late afternoons. Participants received materials to read before they arrived on campus and had homework assignments every evening. Sometimes the homework required them to read and

**Using case studies of business leadership, the program examines the challenges of leaders charged with turning around the nation's lowest-performing schools.**

analyze a case study, and other times they were required to work with their colleagues to create deliverables such as a 90-day plan for what they would do to jump-start change in their home schools and districts. Each participant's name appeared on a name tent in front of them, and instructors called on individuals at random during the sessions. Instruction focused on topics such as trust building, data, and root cause analysis.

### Sudden changes in OSD leadership

Soon after the OSD team returned from the Summer Institute in Charlottesville, the district faced an unforeseen crisis. On the third day of the 2011/12 school year, the Ogden superintendent submitted his resignation, citing family matters. His abrupt departure left the school board scrambling to find a replacement.<sup>11</sup> September is not the most productive »

**Smith had quickly and clearly demonstrated one of the most critical competencies that characterize a turnaround leader: the drive and actions to set challenging goals and reach a high standard of performance despite barriers.**

time to recruit traditional school leaders; school leaders who are seeking a change make the decision to move and begin their search in January or February. However, Ogden's search did not take the board beyond its meeting room. Brad Smith, a school board member and former trial attorney, stepped forward and was appointed as the new superintendent. He says that he embraced his new role, knowing that he would face many questions and substantial criticism. He was a non-traditional choice whose previous experience in education was as a school board member. The OSD's new "CEO" was stepping into a different world.

Though well-regarded by district administrators, Superintendent Smith knew when he took over that the OSD was not heading in the right direction. With a working knowledge of the data from his school board experience and

a commitment to making the dramatic changes that he knew the community expected, Smith dedicated himself to improving the district. Although Smith was not part of the first Summer Institute in 2011, he quickly demonstrated several of the most critical competencies for turnaround leaders.

Working with Coroles and others in the district, Smith constructed an action plan that aimed both to improve student achievement and create a long-term vision and road map for sustained reform. Following a fall UVA site visit during which district and UVA leadership observed a lack of coherence and clear expectations, Smith established vigorous new expectations for the district and published a set of "Guaranties, Standards, and Attitudes," or GSAs (Figure 1), that became prominent throughout OSD. These GSAs were quickly communicated across the district as a set of high expectations that would be supported by appropriate and effective systems. Everyone at all levels of the district was expected to be guided by them. Smith had quickly and clearly demonstrated one of the most critical competencies that characterize a turnaround leader: the drive and actions to set challenging goals and reach a high standard of performance despite barriers.<sup>12</sup>

With a clear focus on student achievement as a priority, administrative changes

followed. Twenty-two of 46 school-site administrators were replaced. Some incumbents retired, and others were placed in positions within the OSD where they could be more effective. The administrative changes sparked parental concerns and controversy, as exemplified in the following comments from the local press:

You are supposed to respect the principals. They are leaders of the schools, for kids especially. Administrative changes send a message to the students, to the faculty, and to the parents that something was wrong and needed to be fixed, which may be true, but we'd like to know what.<sup>13</sup>

If there was any doubt that the "culture of nice" was over, this public outcry confirmed the shift. It brought the community and the district head-to-head on the critical problem of school leadership. Many parents did not easily accept the personnel changes. At one school where a new principal had been named, some parents requested a private meeting with Superintendent Smith to discuss the issue. This private meeting involved many of Smith's neighbors because his own child attended that school. Smith prevailed, drawing on both his skills as a trial attorney and his community standing to help convince his neighbors that this administrative change was in the best interests of their children. The new principal remained, and the previous

### Figure 1. Ogden School District's Guaranties, Standards, and Attitudes (GSAs)

Guaranties, Standards, & Attitudes		
<b>Our Guaranties:</b>		
<p><i>A Guaranty is an understanding or commitment to answer for the performance of another. We are willing to undertake to answer for the performance of our students to each other, our students, the public, and future students.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Achievement:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. For the 2012 and 2013 CRT testing years, the district average and school scores will be above the state proficiency average for language arts, math, and science.</li> <li>b. By the 2014 CRT testing year, Ogden will have the highest CRT proficiency scores of districts on the Wasatch Front.</li> <li>c. Every student enrolled in the district for a minimum of 160 days will make at least one year's growth as measured on state CRT exams beginning with the 2012 CRT scores.</li> <li>d. 90% of high school graduates will complete at least two years of post-secondary college or career training beginning in May 2015.</li> <li>e. 95% of Kindergarten through third grade students will be at grade level in reading by May 2013.</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. Attendance: Each school will maintain an average attendance above 93% beginning in the 2011-12 school year.</li> <li>3. Graduation Rate: The district cohort graduation rate, as calculated by the state, will exceed 90% by the 2012-13 school year.</li> <li>4. Enrollment: Student/parent choice in-district enrollment will exceed out-district enrollment by the 2013-14 school year.</li> <li>5. Participation:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. 90% of students will participate yearly in some form of extra-curricular activity or performance by 2014.</li> <li>b. All students will participate in community service yearly by May 2013.</li> </ol> </li> </ol>		
<b>Our Standards to Achieve These Guaranties:</b>		
<p><i>A Standard is a conspicuous object to mark a rallying point during battle.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. 80% of students will master concepts during tier one instruction.             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Lesson objectives will be clearly indicated.</li> <li>b. Formative assessments will be used to measure mastery.</li> <li>c. Lessons will be intentionally designed to assure 80% student mastery during initial instruction.</li> <li>d. Students will be engaged in instruction. Engagement will be monitored and reported.</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. Students not mastering concepts during initial instruction will participate in tier two interventions.             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. A minimum of 15% of students will master the concepts as a result of tier two interventions.</li> <li>b. Diagnostic assessments will be administered in reading and math to all students not at grade level.</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. All students will participate in non-fiction writing a minimum of 20 minutes daily.</li> </ol>		
<b>We are committed to these fundamental precepts:</b>		
<p><i>In rallying to our Standard and fulfilling our Guaranties, we are committed to fundamental precepts about the manner in which we function.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Our Guaranties and Standards are neither negotiable nor discretionary.</li> <li>2. Every student can learn, succeed, and excel in our schools.             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Intelligence, ability, and desire are independent of race, income, or other demographic factor.</li> <li>b. Improved instruction by teachers and improved leadership by principals and by district leaders can improve outcomes for students.</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. We will make no excuses for student performance. We are committed to rigorously reviewing, evaluating, and improving our performance. We will not use poverty, race, funding, morale, or prior history to excuse things within our control.</li> <li>4. We will fully engage in a new birth of commitment and educational excellence in our District. We know this will take courage, hope, and steadfastness. We know that history is not destiny.</li> </ol>		
<p>one moved on. Without naming or even knowing it, Smith had once again demonstrated a critical competency for turnaround leaders: "Impact and influence, acting with the purpose of affecting the perceptions, thinking, and actions of others."<sup>14</sup></p>	<p><b>Critical shifts within OSD</b></p> <p>Interviewees from the district identified a number of challenges to implementing reforms, including: teacher resistance and denial that anything was wrong; large achievement gaps among and</p>	<p>between sub-groups of students; a tendency to blame the children; poor leadership in some schools; instruction, especially in high schools, that focused more on compliance than on mastery; and teacher transiency. Many of the reforms that the district</p>

implemented focused on providing support for instructional changes. In particular, Coroles (the “district shepherd”), backed up by Smith, began to implement the training and direction that she had received from the Southwest Turnaround Leadership Consortium in the fall of 2011. For example, they ensured that teachers engaged in professional development opportunities on the new, more rigorous standards that Utah had adopted; that site-level leaders were more actively supported by the district in their drive for improved student achievement; and that each low-performing school was given additional instructional coaches and a school support team member (or members) to help implement the multiple changes under way. One teacher noted that OSD teachers “can’t go anywhere else in Utah and receive more professional development.”

Superintendent Smith personally experienced the UVA-STSP for the first time at its Winter Retreat in Phoenix, Arizona, in January 2012. There, the OSD team consisted of principals and a few teachers from the three SIG schools and the one non-SIG school, Coroles, and Superintendent Smith. School and district teams from all five southwestern states attended. Paul Bambrick-Santoyo, Managing Director of Uncommon Schools Newark (New Jersey), and author of several books, including *Data-Driven Instruction*, conducted multiple interactive sessions on

how to analyze and use data to improve instruction.

Empowered by the new processes they had learned to deliver data-driven instruction, the OSD principals began working with teachers to create common formative assessments, encouraging their use as a tool to identify students’ academic weaknesses during the second semester of the 2011/12 school year. They re-arranged schedules to support re-teaching techniques that provided more opportunities for students to master content. The district purchased a new test-item bank appropriate for each grade level and made it available districtwide, thus reducing cross-school variance in assessment rigor and technique. A critical transformation in data use occurred through weekly data meetings among grade level groups and subject matter groups of teachers at each school. While OSD had long been a data-rich district, this abundant information had not been consistently or effectively targeted to meet individual student needs and to differentiate instruction, according to interviewees in the district. During these weekly teacher meetings, data were analyzed and used differently to collaboratively plan curriculum, common formative assessments, and re-teaching.

Smith described this new approach: “We take an intentional look at data now, instead of autopsies of the last class.” New applications of data also led

to greater transparency in the district. Assessment data were posted on the walls of the schools participating in the program. Parents, teachers, and students could clearly see how well each class was doing and compare performance across the school.

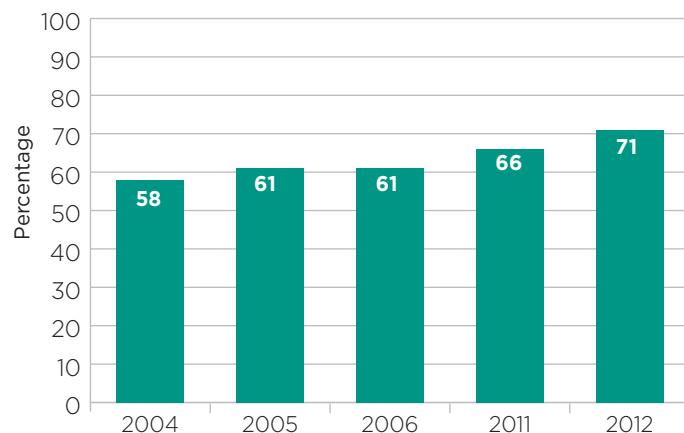
Smith further encouraged regular data analysis by requiring weekly reports of high school seniors who were at risk of not graduating at the end of the year and who needed additional support. Required of every teacher of seniors, the reports were compiled by high school principals and submitted to the superintendent who reviewed them weekly. If a report was incomplete, Smith returned it to the principal who had submitted it and requested the additional information that he needed. Teachers acknowledged that the requirement actually enhanced their effectiveness with students. Equipped with lists of at-risk students, teachers could adjust a student’s path well before graduation and attain measurable success in each classroom. This process also contributed to a significantly higher graduation rate in the first year that it was used, compared to the previous year’s rate.

Ogden also embarked on the creation of school “zones” that gave rise to a new reporting structure and focused more attention and resources on low-performing schools. Ogden schools were split evenly between two zones, North and South, with low-performing Turnaround Schools

dispersed between them. An executive director, identified from the pool of district-level administrators, was assigned to each zone to closely attend to the needs of these schools.

As Ogden began to implement these broad systematic changes that were described and expected by the Southwest Turnaround Leadership Consortium, other new procedures and processes emerged in the district. A new communication plan increased transparency and established mechanisms to facilitate better parent interactions with district staff. For example, a translator participated in Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and school meetings, and announcements were prepared in both English and Spanish. Not only did this increase parent involvement in their students' education, it also led to Ogden's first Hispanic PTA president. This PTA president also served as an English-to-Spanish translator for events, as needed. These high-visibility activities gave the district greater opportunities to express the urgency with which change needed to take place. As Smith told a local newspaper: "First and foremost is the focus on the intense urgency of any turnaround project. It's not enough to turn around a school in three to five years. There are children suffering now, and if you're saying you will fix things in three to five years, you're saying we have children we are not serving in an appropriate fashion. There's a perpetual demand for urgent action now."<sup>15</sup>

**Figure 2. Students Proficient in Statewide Language Arts Assessments**



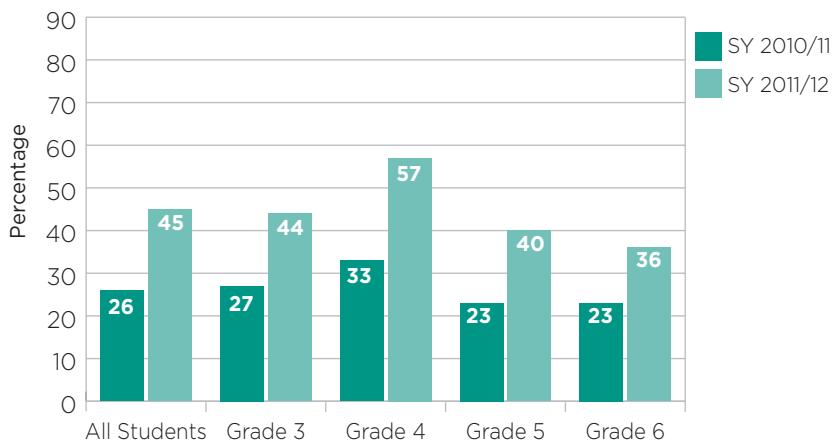
The need for urgent change was reinforced in each school on a regular basis. Coroles and Smith made weekly visits to school sites to meet with teachers, an essential method for taking the pulse and evaluating the progress of the district. The weekly visits during the school day were unannounced and structured to gather authentic insights from teachers about the school and its functioning. Smith hired substitute teachers to accompany him so he could free up individual teachers to interview for an hour or so. These visits increased the visibility of district administrators within schools. The interviews presented opportunities to converse about new developments, and the whole process provided tangible evidence of authentic district support for school improvement. Smith visited every school and 300 of the district's 700 classrooms that first year.

Based on results of state assessments at the end of the 2011/12 school year, the OSD made significant achievement gains. As Figure 2 indicates, 66 percent of students were proficient in the statewide language arts assessment in 2010/11, and 71 percent were proficient in 2011/12.<sup>16</sup>

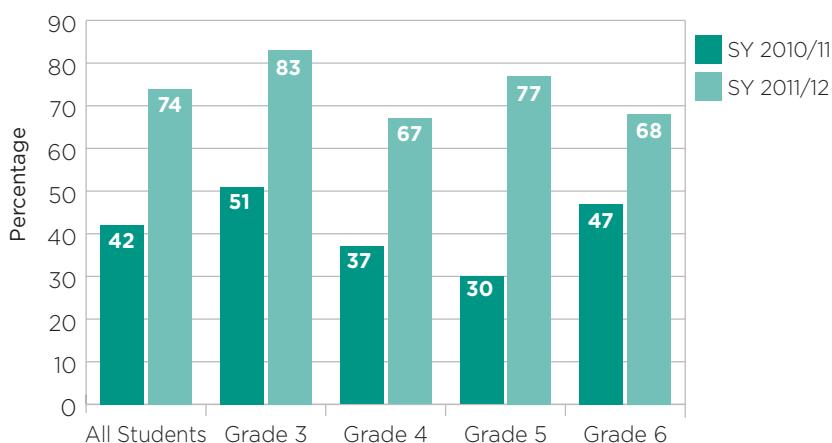
### School leadership in OSD

Dramatic changes at the district level were mirrored at the school level. One school, in particular, embraced and implemented the changes required by the SIG grant and extolled by the Southwest Turnaround Leadership Consortium. Data use made a significant difference at Dee Elementary School where the principal, Sondra Jolovich-Motes, recalls that she initially had doubts about whether teachers would accept the collaborative planning ▶

**Figure 3. Percentages of Dee Elementary Students Proficient in Statewide Mathematics Assessments**



**Figure 4. Percentages of Dee Elementary Students Proficient in Statewide Language Arts Assessments**



sessions. She was pleased to see teachers embrace and facilitate the sessions, even organizing some independently. This collaboration made it possible for Dee's teachers to rapidly implement new ideas for targeted and data-driven instruction. Other research-based practices implemented by Dee faculty over the

past few years were becoming more visible in classrooms.

At the end of the 2011/12 school year, Jolovich-Motes examined the school's interim assessment results on Measures of Academic Progress (MAP). All the hard work to change practice was paying off. As she reviewed preliminary results for Dee students on statewide assessments during

the summer of 2012, she became increasingly excited. Students in every grade level had made impressive proficiency-score gains in mathematics (Figure 3) as well as language arts (Figure 4). Performance across the entire school had increased by large margins compared to the previous year's results. Fourth grade showed the greatest gains in mathematics: The number of students demonstrating proficiency in mathematics jumped from 33 to 57 percent. Performance in language arts was nearly as impressive. As Figure 4 shows, the percentage of all tested students who demonstrated proficiency in language arts increased from 42 percent on the previous year's statewide test to 74 percent on the 2011/12 assessment. The largest gains were for grade 5, with the percentage of students attaining proficiency in language arts rising from 30 to 77 in one year.

Knowing that schoolwide and even grade-level averages can mask poor performance of students in historically underperforming sub-groups, Jolovich-Motes examined the performance of ELL students more closely. As Figure 5 indicates, the 2011/12 performance of ELL students at Dee on the reading portion of the MAP test far outpaced the performance of that student subgroup districtwide and statewide. Approximately 65 percent of Dee's ELL students demonstrated proficiency, compared to 35 percent in the district and

37 percent in the state. Dee's ELL students also out-performed their district peers in mathematics and science, but remained slightly below the statewide averages for ELL students in those subjects.

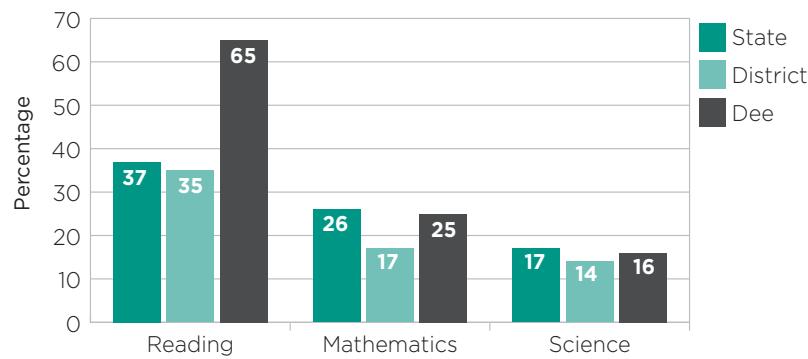
Jolovich-Motes began to reflect on all the possible factors that could have contributed to these remarkable gains. Perhaps the improvement started with the district's participation in the Southwest Comprehensive Center's Turnaround Leadership Consortium; and perhaps it was strengthened by the new research-based practices that her teachers had implemented in classrooms. The faculty had undertaken intense curriculum-mapping efforts and had developed and administered common weekly assessments. On top of that, professional learning communities (PLCs) at Dee focused on student achievement data and curriculum/lesson planning.

Although Jolovich-Motes was unable to isolate one particular strategy that contributed to the dramatic improvement in student performance at her school, it was clear that 2011/12 had indeed been a very good year.

## Conclusion

In looking into the successes that the Ogden School District experienced in its first year with the UVA-STSP leadership program, SWCC staff found many positive factors, with

**Figure 5. Percentages of English Language Learners Proficient on MAP**



the leadership program being only one. The abrupt change of leadership when Brad Smith became superintendent was unforeseen and turned out to be fortuitous. He made significant reforms and brought key competencies that were not the direct results of the district's involvement with the UVA-STSP leadership program, but did exemplify some of the key leadership competencies promoted by the program. And as the year went on, the program supported him in more strategically developing and applying his competencies to promote positive reform in the district.

For his part, Superintendent Smith explicitly attributes much of the district's success to participation in the Southwest Turnaround Leadership Consortium. "UVA is a cultural shift, not a program. UVA is in a class all by itself," he says. He believes that the emphasis on data-driven instruction, leadership,

and collaboration—skills that OSD participants learned from the UVA-STSP—contributed to a fundamental shift in district culture. As evidence, he notes that students themselves are now driving for results.

Another concept from the UVA-STSP experience that has resonated for him is communication: He believes he must explicitly articulate that the district is focused on outcomes. In addition, he has realized the importance of thoughtfully matching the skill sets of personnel with the identified needs of schools and the district. Finally, he learned the importance of demanding achievement. For Smith, the most important lessons learned from the UVA-STSP experience are regarding the importance of collaboration, holding people accountable, using data district-wide to inform decisions, and supporting leaders.

Although the OSD has made huge gains in student achievement ▶

across the board and disproportionately in the performance of ELL students, Smith feels his work is not done. OSD spent the 2012/13 school year implementing difficult systemwide initiatives, including more rigorous interim assessments, more specific expectations for teacher collaboration, and more emphasis on professional development in mathematics. As of early 2013, Smith continues to drive for even higher achievement, in every aspect of the district's operations. OSD still needs a better process for targeted hiring and placement of personnel, he adds, and there are small pockets of resistance where data is not being used effectively to inform instruction. On a larger scale, he knows that continuing to demand improved performance from all district employees is the best way to achieve the results that his community wants and deserves.

## Endnotes

1 Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, the Southwest Comprehensive Center was part of a network of regional and content centers providing state education agencies with high-quality, relevant technical assistance. From 2005 to 2012, the SWCC was operated by WestEd. In 2012, the SWCC was replaced by the West Comprehensive Center (WCC), also operated by WestEd.

2 Unless otherwise indicated, quotes and observations by OSD personnel are taken from these interviews.

3 U.S. Census Bureau. (2011 population estimate). *State & county QuickFacts*. Retrieved from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/49/4955980.html>

4 Utah Department of Education. (2011). *District accountability report, 2010–11: AYP grades 10–12*. Retrieved from <http://www.schools.utah.gov/data/Educational-Data/Accountability-Reports.aspx>

5 Ibid.

6 Since Ogden's initial participation, the program has expanded to 2.5 years.

7 Public Impact is a national policy and management consulting firm, based in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

8 Hassel, B., Hassel, E., & Steiner, L. (2008). *School turnaround leaders: Competencies for success* (p. 8). Chapel Hill, NC: Public Impact.

9 Ibid.

10 The UVA-STSP is conducting research to more specifically validate/identify potentially high-impact competencies.

11 Stecklein, J. (2011, August 24). Ogden School District superintendent announces resignation. *Salt Lake Tribune*. Retrieved from <http://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=16749110&type=storyID>

12 Hassel, B., Hassel, E., & Steiner, L. (2008). *School turnaround leaders: Competencies for success* (pp. 9–11). Chapel Hill, NC: Public Impact.

13 Van Valkenburg, N. (2012, May 13). Ogden district administrative changes prompt parental worry about students, teachers. *Standard-Examiner*. Retrieved from <http://www.standard.net/stories/2012/05/13/ogden-district-administrative-changes-prompt-parental-worry-about-students-teachers>

14 Hassel, B., Hassel, E., & Steiner, L. (2008). *School turnaround leaders: Competencies for success* (p. 19). Chapel Hill, NC: Public Impact.

15 Van Valkenburg, N. (2012, May 13). Ogden School District puts UVA training to work. *Standard-Examiner*. Retrieved from <http://www.standard.net/stories/2012/05/13/ogden-school-district-puts-uva-training-work>

16 Data from 2007–2010 are not available.

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Suggested citation: West Comprehensive Center. (2013). *Developing turnaround leadership: An example from Utah's Ogden School District*. San Francisco: WestEd.

For more information about the West Comprehensive Center and its work on turnaround leadership, please contact Paul Koehler at [pkoehler@WestEd.org](mailto:pkoehler@WestEd.org).



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