

**Core Function: District Support for School Success**

**Effective Practice**

**Take the change process into account**

**Overview:** When attempting to improve schools, districts must consider the entire change process and expect that it can take significant time and resources to transform low-performing schools. Leaders may review district-wide improvement strategies in terms of the degree of implementation and their success within each school's context. Districts should select change leaders that possess turnaround competencies to lead low-performing schools, and these leaders should be given autonomy within the school improvement process. Districts can expect resistance to change, and should take steps to reduce this resistance by communicating with, and soliciting input from the community regarding the change. Districts should also ensure that new teaching practices introduced are highly effective, and that teachers are provided with plenty of follow-up and support for their implementation.

**Evaluate your Practice:** What are your district's improvement strategies and how do you measure their effectiveness for school improvement planning? How frequently do you assess implementation of strategies in individual schools? Do you use turnaround competencies for the identification of principals for low-performing schools? If so, what are the turnaround competencies for leaders in your context? How are principals given autonomy within the school improvement process? How does your district identify school improvement strategies needed for individual schools, and are school community members provided with input? How are professional learning experiences selected to improve teaching? What supports does your district provide to help overcome teacher resistance to change?

*Introduction*

Districts must consider that schools in need of substantial improvement must often progress through change processes that require substantial organizational transformations that differ from the minor incremental changes needed for already effective schools (Perlman, 2007). In taking the change process into account, districts must 1) evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of already existing district-wide school improvement strategies; 2) ensure that an empowered change agent is chosen to lead each school in need of substantial improvement; and, 3) expect setbacks, obstacles and resistance to substantial improvement. Each of these areas is discussed below.

*Examine and Refine Existing District-Wide School Improvement Strategies*

District-wide improvement strategies are often useful in ensuring systematic practice across multiple school settings; however, they may vary in effectiveness from school to school and conflict with more productive practices preferred by individual schools. Schools in need of substantial improvement have already in all probability used these district-wide strategies with varying levels of success, and may have invested significant resources into the strategies and thus be reluctant to abandon them even if they have proven ineffective. The district must collect data to determine which strategies are successful in each school's context, and help struggling schools determine whether these strategies should be modified or whether new programming is necessary (Perlman, 2007).

The district must also conduct a thorough assessment of each low-performing school's strengths and weaknesses, and the degree to which they are implementing district-wide improvement strategies. State assessment results signal the need for improvement, but districts and school improvement teams should dig deeper to explore other formative and summative assessments given to students in order to get a comprehensive picture of the school (Perlman, 2007). Additional information that can be reviewed includes attendance and graduation rates (or drop-out rates), college or career readiness rates, and results of staff, parent, and student surveys (Southern Regional Educa-

tion Board, 2010; Hanover Research, 2014). Districts should collect trend data if possible across years to accurately gauge the school's performance, and should include analyses of student subgroups (e.g., special education, EL) to determine which groups are not making adequate yearly progress (Perlman, 2007). In addition the district will need to track the fidelity of implementation of district and/or individual school improvement strategies, to determine if planned processes were actually put in place (Hanover Research, 2014). School staff can review implementation of improvement strategies; this review ideally should occur periodically throughout the year to allow districts to make mid-course adjustments to maximize student outcomes. One district leader describes this process:

We have a rigorous quarterly review process of our implementation. It's a very structured evaluation during which our instructional leadership team reviews our strategy and action plan, the level of implementation achieved at that point, and any noticeable impact on other factors such as student achievement and school climate. This regular feedback ultimately helps with our goal-setting. (Hanover Research, 2014, p. 21)

Districts can then use the data collected on student performance and strategy implementation fidelity to determine the value of its school improvement strategies, and decide whether they should be continued, expanded, modified, or eliminated.

*Place Empowered Change Agents in Schools in Need of Substantial Improvement*

Districts must have policies and procedures in place to identify, select, place, retain and sustain school personnel in order to affect substantial school improvement (The Center on School Turnaround, 2017). The research literature shows that schools in need of substantial improvement need leaders (i.e., principals) who are empowered to institute dramatic change within their school context. These principals often possess common traits, beliefs, actions, and competencies that make them better able to lead more dramatic change over a short period of time, such as being open-minded yet pragmatic, and "committed to improvement without blind adherence to a specific program or approaches" (Papa, 2011). They are also highly energetic and resilient, and must often face opposition and pessimism from staff, students and the community about turning around their

schools. Their belief systems include a refusal to both accept the status quo of low expectations as inevitable (and communicate this to teachers), and to accept low-performing schools as a fixed and permanent part of public education (Papa, 2011). They maintain a "laser focus" on improving the school's culture and expectations, and communicate a "no excuses" mindset to staff, students and the surrounding community (Yatsko, Lake, Nelson & Bowen, 2012).

Effective turnaround principals must also possess key competencies necessary to rapidly rally support for school improvement from students, staff and the community, and implement new targeted instructional programs to improve achievement. Competencies are defined as thinking, feeling, acting or speaking patterns that cause one to be successful in a job or other role (Steiner & Hassel, 2011). The Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education uses a model first developed by Public Impact that addresses key competencies that turnaround principals possess and that typically lead to effective turnaround actions and student achievement:

- Focuses on sustainable results: Motivates change with early success and perseverance to overcome obstacles (Gayef, 2014);
- Engages the team: Engages core staff to develop change vision and launch effort; distributes leadership opportunities;
- Impact and influence: Engages reluctant stakeholders by broadly communicating rationale for change;
- Holds people accountable for school performance: Consistently reinforces high expectations and follows through to change course if necessary;
- Commitment to student learning: Alters organizational norms by taking initiative and risks, including shifting staff and resources to deliver results;
- Conceptual thinking: Can communicate complex data clearly for others, and constantly adjusts course based on results and new learning; and,
- Analytical thinking: Can effectively establish data-driven cycles of improvement that lead to effective problem solving (Southern Regional Education Board, 2010).

Use of these competencies can be beneficial for hiring, evaluating, and providing targeted development of turnaround principals (Steiner & Hassel, 2011; The Center on School Turnaround, 2017). For example, some districts are using selection techniques such as a behavioral event interview that is based on the key competencies as part of the selection process. This interview asks candidates to walk through past incidents regarding school leadership and describe and explain what they were thinking, saying and doing, and gives insight on how they will use their competencies on the job (Steiner & Barrett, 2012). The Minneapolis Public School System and others have reported success with using competency models for turnaround principal selection (Steiner & Barrett, 2012). When incorporated as part of a broader evaluation plan, these competencies can yield information as to why a turnaround leader is succeeding or failing, and provide areas that may be targeted for further development (Steiner & Hassel, 2011). Once a powerful school leader is selected, research shows that they should be given “defined autonomy” that allows them flexibility in addressing challenges in their own buildings while still being aligned with other district schools (Marzano & Waters, 2009). Districts should give principals the authority to hire their own staff, and provide effective and flexible human resources support (Campbell, DeArmond & Schumwinger, 2004; Sigler & Kashyap, 2008).

*Expect Resistance to Change*

Change management is the process of “continually renewing an organization’s direction, structure, and capabilities” (Moran & Brightman, 2001, p.111) to meet its changing needs over time. Every organization must build the ability to identify its future needs and manage the changes required to get there (By, 2005), and districts and schools are no different, in this regard, from other kinds of organizations. Rapid school improvement that necessitates major changes will likely encounter setbacks, resistance, and obstacles along the way (Perlman, 2007). For example, parents may object to new curricula, or teachers may be resistant to changing well-ingrained instructional practices. In many cases this teacher resistance is well-justified; for example, many teachers have been exposed to “one and done” professional learning with little to no follow up or support, and many have been used to ever-changing district mandates on new approaches (Guskey, 1999; Knight, 2009). Change leaders seeking school improvement may benefit

from the following strategies for decreasing the potential for teacher resistance to change (adapted from Knight, 2009):

1. Ensure that new teaching practices introduced are powerful and proven by education research;
2. Select and monitor the impact of practices using data specific to individual schools and teachers;
3. Provide support for new practices through ongoing quality coaching that includes precise explanations, modeling, and feedback;
4. Balance precise explanations of desired teaching practices with provisional comments that allow and encourage teachers to use their professional judgment to adopt the practices to fit their teaching approach and/or the needs of their students;
5. Provide choices and value the voices of teachers when adopting new teaching practices;
6. Focus professional learning on just a few critically important practices, and work together to ensure successful implementation;
7. Align all professional learning activities (e.g., coaching, PLCs, observations, etc.) to focus on critically important teaching practices; and,
8. Create opportunities to build relational trust between change agents and teachers.

Change leaders can also reduce resistance to change by collaborating with school improvement teams to develop improvement plans and select appropriate strategies for improvement, and involving the whole school community (parents, support staff, students and community members) in the change process by soliciting their input and keeping communication lines open (Perlman, 2007).

<b>Indicators to Support the Effective Practice</b>
The district operates with district-level and school level improvement teams.
The district examines existing school improvement strategies being implemented across the district and determines their value, expanding, modifying, and culling as evidence suggests.
The district ensures that school improvement initiatives include research-based, field-proven programs, practices, and models.
The district ensures that an empowered change agent (typically the principal) is appointed to head each school that needs rapid improvement.

### Indicators to Support the Effective Practice

The district ensures that the change agent (typically the principal) is skilled in motivating staff and the community, communicating clear expectations, and focusing on improved student learning.

The district ensures that the school improvement plans include “quick wins,” early successes in improvement.

The district is prepared for setbacks, resistance, and obstacles on the path to substantial improvement.

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