

**Core Function: District Support for School Success** **Effective Practice****Improve the school within a framework of district support.**

**Overview:** Schools in need of improvement need districts that provide a comprehensive framework of support. District and school leadership teams provide a structure for collaborative decision-making, and should be held accountable, with policies and procedures made explicit. District leadership should provide a vision of high expectations for student success developed in partnership with schools and community members, and leaders must signal that they are responsible for achieving district goals. Districts must also provide timely user-friendly data from multiple sources to schools, provide training for teachers and principals in how to use this data to improve instruction, and use district data to set clear goals and achievement targets. Getting the right personnel in high-needs schools requires district policies that select and retain a pool of talented school professionals capable of improving these schools, and wherever possible, principals should be given autonomy to select their staff and make instructional decisions. Districts can also provide support through strategic resource reallocation, intervene early with schools when data show a need, and provide a framework for vertical curriculum alignment to help teachers facilitate grade level transitions.

**Evaluate your Practice:** Does your district policy specify the team structure for all of your schools? How is your district structured to assist schools in improving? How is the effectiveness of your teams determined? Do all teams prepare agendas and keep minutes, and what is done with these documents? Does your district have a clear vision of what it wants to accomplish, and how is this vision communicated? Are student learning expectations high? How are district leaders held accountable for student learning outcomes, and how is this communicated to stakeholders? How does your district ensure that data provided are useful and timely, and represent a broad variety of indicators? What professional development is provided to ensure that principals and teachers use data effectively? Does your district set annual achievement targets for the district, each school, and each student subgroup? What policies/procedures are in place to attract and retain the best leaders and teachers for your high-needs schools? How are resources reallocated to help these schools?

### *Introduction*

In a recent review of what worked within the School Improvement Grant (SIG) program, researchers concluded that effective school turnaround and improvement occurs within four key domains: turnaround leadership, talent development, instructional transformation, and a culture shift towards student learning and effort (Center on School Turnaround, 2017). Further, school improvement requires a systems approach in which a school's actions are complemented by coherent and guided district and state practices (Center on School Turnaround, 2017). Districts must develop frameworks of support that provide these effective practices in order to provide principals and schools with the direction and capacity to improve. The Southern Regional Education Board suggests that districts focus their efforts within a framework of support that includes the following components: 1) team structures; 2) vision and direction; 3) data and technology; 4) personnel; and, 5) improvement support (SREB, 2010). A discussion of each of these areas follows.

### *Team Structure*

Leadership should not reside with one individual; a team approach to planning and decision-making allows for distributed leadership, which is more effective within school and district settings (Marzano, 2003; Pederson, Yager, & Yager, 2010). According to Louis, et al., (2010):

When principals and teachers share leadership, teachers' working relationships with one another are stronger and student achievement is higher. District support for shared leadership fosters the development of professional communities. Where teachers feel attached to a professional community, they are more likely to use instructional practices that are linked to improved student learning. (p. 282)

Teams at both the district and school levels, when effectively purposed, organized, and supervised, can provide an infrastructure for continuous improvement and improved student learning. For example, when supporting turnaround schools, the district should identify a leader to lead a district team that oversees school initiatives to include principal development and support, school strategy and policy development, and district-wide data analysis (Center on School Turnaround, 2017). District leaders should be held accountable for working collaboratively with principals and their school leadership teams; this can be in part facilitated by a highly effective school board that has developed a strategic framework, mission, goals and practices that hold district and school leadership accountable for owning and solving problems (SREB, 2010). Districts should also create decision-making structures that encourage a culture of teamwork and professional community by including both principals and teachers within district-wide decisions that directly affect their work (Louis, et al., 2010). For example, developing a collaborative budget planning process that gives principals a voice can "improve district efficiency and culture by enabling each principal to articulate his or her school's unique needs within the context of the district strategic plan...[allowing] new and creative ideas to emerge from educators who are most familiar with the problems" (Lynch, 2012, p. 124). Incorporating the community into school decision-making by developing a formal structure of community partners, and involving the community in hiring principals and fundraising are also effective district practices that can foster school improvement (SREB, 2010).

Districts must also lead the way by clearly defining the purposes, expectations, and ways teams will be evaluated. Effective practices include:

- Address district and school team structures and expectations in official district policy, and expect teams to continue to operate even through district and school leadership changes;

- Provide professional development on effective teaming for district and school personnel, as well as adequate time for teams to meet, conduct business, and fulfill district policy expectations;
- Require teams to develop and maintain documentation of meeting agendas, minutes, and work plans and products; and,
- Evaluate district and school administrators on their successful engagement of teams and evidence of their productivity, and systemize regular reporting of this work to the school board (Perlman & Redding, 2011).

#### *Vision and Direction*

Districts that are highly supportive of school improvement articulate and communicate to the community both a vision and a set of goals and practices that send a clear message of what district schools are to be about (SREB, 2010). These districts involve the entire community in developing this vision, and elicit principal and teacher-leader input on major district policies, instructional and curricular changes, and district budget decisions such as how professional development monies are to be spent. School boards play an active role in setting vision and direction for school reform by communicating and selling the vision for improvement to the community, talking with community members to gather perspectives and ideas, and using these ideas in collaboration with the superintendent and other district leaders, to refine the improvement plan (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2007). Supportive districts also must ensure that vision and goals reflect high expectations for all groups of students (SREB, 2010). In fact, district leaders that emphasize goals and programming initiatives that target student learning beyond minimum state expectations are likely to work in districts where levels of student learning are high (Louis, et al., 2010). Research on the California Collaborative on District Reform demonstrated that dramatic changes in expectations frequently are necessary in schools where teachers and staff have become accustomed to persistent low student performance, and that these higher expectations must come from district leadership, including the superintendent and school board (Knudson, Shambaugh, & O'Day, 2011).

Districts should also create a culture of trust in which principals trust the central office to provide meaningful

support, and make them partners in defining and achieving the goals targeted within the strategic plan (SREB, 2010; Knudson, et al., 2011). This culture of trust will in part be fostered by district leadership assuming responsibility for achieving district and school goals, with superintendents and other district leaders explicitly and publicly signaling their willingness to be held accountable for outcomes (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2007). District leaders and staff should be held accountable for collaborating with principals, their school’s leadership teams, and faculty for implementing strategic school improvement plans (SREB, 2010). As districts improve, the superintendent and other district leaders must celebrate individual, team, and district/school successes, in particular those relating to student learning outcomes (The Center on School Turnaround, 2017).

### *Data and Technology*

Data-based decision making has been identified across multiple studies as a key element of school reform; districts that have shown substantial improvement frequently embed data use within improvement efforts, and use it to justify decisions about programs and resources (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2007). Districts must “provide high-quality data that link student achievement to school and classroom practices, and assist schools to use data effectively” (SREB, 2010, p. 32). Principals and leadership teams within schools must have timely access to data, and districts must develop a responsive system that provides users with training in use of the system and the opportunity for frequent and continuous access (SREB, 2010; Knudson, et al., 2011). In fact, data competency is a job requirement for principals, with some districts requiring prospective principal candidates to demonstrate proficiency during job interviews (SREB, 2010) Additional effective practices include:

- Provide and encourage use of multiple data sources. While annual state tests provide critical information for school improvement and accountability purposes, leaders in effective turnaround schools expand data to include sources such as benchmark and formative assessments, school climate surveys, school observations, attendance, post-secondary readiness, and teacher participation in professional development (Knudson, et al., 2011). Data dashboards offer a way for districts to examine these sources in a timely manner, as Knudson, et al., describe:

Fresno has developed a data dashboard that chronicles the district’s performance throughout the school year using indicators like student proficiency rates, EL re-designation rates, attendance rates, and student perceptions of their school. The Cycle of Review that takes place around the dashboard four times per year allows Fresno to address problems without waiting for state test scores that arrive in late summer. Furthermore, the superintendent’s evaluation is tied to the dashboard, ensuring accountability at the highest levels for the district’s ongoing improvement. (p. 13)

- Extend data use to the school level. Data must be readily available at the school level, and principals must have access to data so that they will share ownership and accountability (Bottoms & Fry, 2009; SREB, 2010). Effective districts also build school staff’s capacity to use data to improve instruction and student learning. For example, districts can “develop teachers’ capacity to use formative assessments of student progress aligned with district expectations for student learning, and to use formative data in devising and implementing interventions during the school year” (Louis, et al., 2010). This practice can help teachers see that data use enables them to improve their teaching practice by working together continuously and collaboratively, rather than simply providing information about learning outcomes (Knudson, et al., 2011).
- Use data to set clear expectations and achievement targets. Districts should set short- and long-term achievement targets for the district, individual schools, and student subpopulations (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2007). Short-term targets provide ongoing measures of progress while “loftier” goals (e.g., all students that graduate are ready for college) demonstrate the longer view of what the district is working towards. Goals must be clearly written and measurable, and address school and district challenges using high quality data (SREB, 2010). Student learning goals should also be ambitious and go beyond standardized test proficiency levels (Louis, et al., 2010). These goals must target student subgroups in order to gauge the effectiveness of programs for all students. For example, goals must target EL student performance, and data disaggregated for this group of students should be used to improve programming.

### Personnel

Districts must choose strong school leaders and high-performing teachers capable of achieving school reform; hard-to-staff schools which need improvement often find it hard to attract and retain effective personnel, particularly in rural or urban schools and in areas such as math, science and special education (National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, 2011). These shortages frequently contribute to an inequitable distribution of quality teachers, with students from poor and minority backgrounds having less access to highly qualified and experienced teachers than their peers from low-poverty, non-minority backgrounds (Imazeki & Goe, 2009; Goldhaber, Lavery, & Theobald, 2015). 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). NCCTQ (2011) suggests that districts:

1. Identify school/district characteristics that are attractive to teachers and market them for recruitment.
2. Identify schools with teacher recruitment challenges and set goals for quality and quantity, particularly for high-poverty/high minority schools where student may not have equitable access to high-quality teachers.
3. Establish university/community college partnerships that deliver teacher preparation, particularly for recruitment of teachers in high-needs areas (e.g., special education, ELL). For example, California State at Long Beach trains the vast majority of teachers within the local school system, and has worked to align its teacher preparation with expectations and student needs within the district (Knudson, et al., 2011).
4. Establish “grow-your-own” programs to recruit future educators from the pool of current high school students, paraprofessionals, teacher aides, and community members.
5. Provide financial incentives (e.g., salary increases, bonuses, housing assistance, loan repayment, etc.) for educators willing to work in high-needs schools or subject areas (Kowal, Hassel, & Hassel, 2008).
6. Use “information rich” recruitment and hiring processes by creating, for example, a model of selection

and placement of teachers and school leaders with turnaround competencies, and ensure that high-needs schools have preferential access to those with these competencies (The Center for School Turnaround, 2017).

Research also shows that principals 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).

### Improvement Support

School districts must provide additional supports to enable school improvement and turnaround. Effective practices include:

- Reallocate resources (e.g., time, staff, professional development) regularly, and consider giving the school autonomy and flexibility to make some reallocation decisions; whenever possible leverage community resources to address students needs (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2007; The Center on School Turnaround, 2017).
- Use benchmark and formative data to intervene early when schools aren’t making adequate progress; low-performing schools require ongoing monitoring and review of school data by district staff. Timely intervention is not possible when schools wait for state testing data; frequent formative and diagnostic mini-assessments can allow teachers to determine students’ mastery and provide appropriate interventions (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2007). Districts should also develop protocols for teachers to assist with “drilling down” on individual student learning needs, and creating instructional plans that are aligned with student needs (The Center on School Turnaround, 2017).
- Allow school leaders reasonable autonomy to adjust curriculum, instruction and schedules in order to help more students be successful (SREB, 2010).
- Provide a framework for vertically aligning the school curriculum from one grade to the next and for transitions (e.g., elementary school to middle school).

Teachers must have understanding of what their students were expected to learn during the prior year, and what they are expected to learn in subsequent years (SREB, 2010; The Center on School Turnaround, 2017).

- Elevate the importance of professional development and continuing education (see Gray, Fry, Bottoms, & O’Neill, 2007; Villani, 2006). Districts should work with instructional leadership teams to provide ongoing professional learning opportunities that refresh, update, and bolster teachers’ content knowledge. District staff should also participate with building principals in job-embedded professional learning opportunities centered on research-based effective school turnaround strategies (The Center on School Turnaround, 2017).

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