

**Core Function: District Support for School Success** **Effective Practice****Clarify district-school expectations**

**Overview:** District leadership is critical to supporting struggling schools, and clarifying expectations for who is responsible and what supports will be provided is imperative to promote school improvement. Districts must ensure close communication and progress monitoring through a well-trained central office liaison assigned to each school to provide structured, real-time support as a facilitator rather than compliance officer. Regular communication of school's progress to the superintendent and school board allows them to detect needs areas early so that resources can be provided appropriately. Districts must balance site-based decision-making with guidance; however giving principals "defined autonomy" to incorporate school changes while still addressing district goals can be an effective practice for low-performing schools. Districts must explicitly communicate to schools that they must use district-approved standards-aligned curricula and participate in district-wide professional development (including non-instructional school staff members); however, they should also be encouraged to also select training to benefit their individual school's needs.

**Evaluate your Practice:** Does your district have an established reporting process for schools to document their progress, and how are these reports shared with the superintendent and school board? Do school leaders meet regularly with district personnel to review their school's progress? Are liaisons provided to each school and if so, what are their roles in supporting struggling schools? Do your district policy and procedures documents clearly state the scope of decision-making granted to schools, their leaders, and their teams? Does your district provide schools with a standards-aligned curriculum guide, and how is this guide developed and updated? How does your district balance district-wide goals for professional development with school-specific needs? Do your district and school schedules include sufficient time for training of all staff that is focused on ways they can serve as school ambassadors?

*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). District leadership is key to improving student achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2006). To sustain a system of continuous improvement, schools will need extensive district support as well as a thorough understanding of which decisions are to be made at the district level and which are to be made by the school (Redding, 2007). Substantial school improvement requires the district to clarify with schools how they will be monitored to ensure they are on-track to improve, how decision-making will occur, and what district policies and practices will be in place to support schools within the change process. Often this clarification may take place within a letter of understanding between district and school that describes the support for change provided by the district, expectations of frequency of contact and reporting, expectations of decision-making authority, and any required district policies or programs of relevance to the school (Redding, 2007).

*Ensuring Close Progress Monitoring and Communication*

Low-performing schools require more attention from district staff in the form of resources, support and monitoring, and a tight relationship with district personnel can foster improvement. Partnering each low-performing school with a central office staff member (or members) who is responsible for monitoring the school and responding to its needs within the improvement process redefines the role of central office from one of oversight to support (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2007; Knudson, Shambaugh, & O'Day, 2011). This central office liaison should be specially trained to

assist with school turnaround and should serve as a resource, rather than as a compliance officer (Perlman, 2007). Having a skilled district leader or liaison who can facilitate turnaround schools' navigation of district policies and procedures, monitor and assess implementation fidelity of turnaround initiatives, and provide constructive feedback to school leaders and staff, contributed to positive gains in low-achieving schools in Massachusetts (Lane, Unger, & Rhim, 2013). Lane, Unger, & Souvanna (2014) describe how these district systems to support turnaround have evolved:

“Specifically, districts have reorganized and re-tasked central office staff to work directly with schools, developing systems that allow for monthly and sometimes weekly monitoring of turnaround efforts. An important distinction is that the “monitoring” provided by district leaders is predicated on having a solid relationship with the school principal, to the extent that district/school interactions are supportive and intended to promote professional improvement and growth, rather than focusing solely on monitoring the implementation of a written plan.” (p. ii)

These new district structures suggest that this reorganization and repurposing has led to an increased district capacity, in that districts have created systems that can monitor and support low-performing schools as well as disseminate innovative ideas and strategies to other low-performing district schools (Lane, et al., 2014). This increased capacity allows districts to provide customized, targeted, and real-time response to support low-performing schools (Knudson, et al., 2011; The Center on School Turnaround, 2016).

Districts must also establish expectations for frequency of contact and communication with school decision-makers at low-performing schools; communication is key to ensuring that everyone is cognizant of school goals, roles, and expectations so that they can be accountable for progress (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2007). Regularly scheduled meetings (minimum of twice a month) to discuss progress communicates the urgency for change; these meetings may be between the school's leadership team and district liaison, or the liaison and principal (Redding, 2007). More frequent contact may be desirable; in low-achieving schools that were able to exit improvement status in Massachusetts, district staff worked weekly with schools to monitor, support implementation, and facilitate communication (Lane, et al., 2014).

Superintendents and school boards play a critical role in school improvement, and must be willing and able to publicly recognize schools' challenges, collaboratively develop with key stakeholders reform goals and plans that focus on high student achievement, and build supportive structures for change (Waters & Marzano, 2006; Cawelti & Protheroe, 2007). The superintendent should also receive monthly updates on low-achieving schools' implementation of reforms and progress, and these updates should then be reported to school board members (Redding, 2007). School boards can then work with the superintendent and district leaders to determine where changes are needed; clear communication policies enable the district and board to problem solve quickly and efficiently (Corbett & Morando Rhim, 2016).

#### *Scope of Site-Based Decision-Making Conveyed Through District Policies and Programs*

While districts must provide clear expectations for school accountability, they must simultaneously create a balance between district control and school-level flexibility to incorporate change; this flexibility should involve explicit efforts to build and spread leadership skills to school staff (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2007; Knudson, et al., 2011). Districts must establish clear expectations for schools, and determine and communicate the types of decisions schools are authorized to make regarding resource allocations and staff assignments; however, the focus on district goals must be nonnegotiable (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Waters & Marzano found in their meta-analysis on superintendent leadership that effective superintendents provided principals with “defined autonomy.” This defined autonomy involved setting non-negotiable achievement goals for schools but providing school leadership teams with the responsibility and authority for deciding how to meet these challenging goals, and resources to achieve them. Lane et al., (2013) and Lane, et al. (2014) found that providing school leaders with flexibility around staffing, resources, and structuring the school day (e.g., schedules, meeting, common planning time, extended time) was an effective way for districts to build school's capacity for turnaround.

Districts must strike a balance between providing guidance and encouraging site-based decision-making, and this balance will likely vary from school to school depending on need (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2007). However, all districts have expectations that schools use district-

approved curricula and participate in research-based professional development that targets district goals; these expectations must be clearly stated in agreement documents between the district and schools. Curriculum alignment and mapping should be comprehensive and integrated across grades; for example, cross-district and cross-grade teacher teams can be assigned to align content taught across grades and develop pacing guides. In some cases, districts must shift from site-based curricular decision-making to more centralized direction about what will be taught to ensure uniformity for students who may move between district schools (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2007). Providing “a coherent curriculum that aligns with standards and related training by establishing curriculum and curriculum maps and offering training to support implementation of core curriculum” are key district practices that support school turnaround (Lane, et al., 2013, p. 15).

District-wide professional development initiatives should be linked to district goals for achievement, and should be job-embedded and include components such as in-class coaching, group lesson planning, or groups analysis of student work (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2007). Districts policies that support school improvement include allowing teachers to participate in professional development that advances them as instructional leaders or master teachers, making continued learning part of the teacher contract, and offering incentives and support for schools to provide and evaluate job-embedded professional development opportunities for their teachers (Croft, Cogshall, Dolan, & Powers, 2010). Schools should also be given autonomy and resources to select professional development based on their own particular needs (i.e., based on classroom observations), while still being geared towards district learning goals. Districts should also ensure that principals of persistently struggling schools receive training to help them support improvement efforts (Knudson, et al., 2011). Districts should also plan professional development for non-instructional school staff to ensure a positive and welcoming school climate. For example, district training could include ways to ensure that everyone in the school community serves as a positive school ambassador by providing training on ways to offer a welcoming environment to students and their families (Redding, Murphy, & Sheley, 2011).

<b>Indicators to Support the Effective Practice</b>
The school reports and documents its progress monthly to the superintendent, and the superintendent reports the school’s progress to the school board.
The district designates a central office contact person for the school, and that person maintains close communication with the school and an interest in its progress.
District and school decision makers meet at least twice a month to discuss the school’s progress.
District policies and procedures clarify the scope of site-based decision making granted a school and are summarized in a letter of understanding.
The district provides a cohesive district curriculum guide aligned with state standards or otherwise places curricular expectation on the school.
The district provides the technology, training, and support to facilitate the school’s data management needs.
Professional development is built into the school schedule by the district, but the school is allowed discretion in selecting training and consultation that fit the requirements of its improvement plan and its evolving needs.
Staff development is built into the schedule for support staff (e.g., aides, clerks, custodians, cooks) as well as classroom teachers.

**References**

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