

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANT (SIG) PRACTICE: TURNAROUND LEADERSHIP

HUNTSVILLE CITY SCHOOLS ♦ HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA

District leaders in Huntsville City Schools (Huntsville) identified school leadership as the key to turning around the district’s lowest performing SIG schools. The challenge of hiring leaders who possess the necessary skills and experience to turn around SIG schools prompted the district to improve its principal recruitment strategy and begin building the skills of current Huntsville educators and administrators. Now, the Huntsville leadership pathway strategically features multiple entry points for both aspiring turnaround principals and current administrators to participate in individualized, group, and districtwide leadership development supports. The effort that began as a need to identify leaders in the SIG schools expanded as an effort to ensure the quality and fit of school principals in all of the district’s Title I schools.

THE STRATEGY: A Professional Pathway for Growing Turnaround Leadership Capacity in the District

Huntsville seeks potential school turnaround leaders who have the following key characteristics: demonstrated experience using data to make decisions; evidence of setting high academic standards for all students; evidence of improving student outcomes, including improved academic performance, increased attendance, and reduced behavioral infractions; and demonstrated ability to engage the community in efforts to support improved student outcomes. With these characteristics framing the leadership development efforts, Huntsville uses four strategies to nurture and grow turnaround talent within the district:

- *Principal recruitment and placement decisions* focus on identifying current district principals and new hires who exhibit the potential to become turnaround leaders based on their success in improving student outcomes in previous schools. Less experienced principals with promise are placed in smaller schools and are provided with support.
- *Teachers on Special Assignment* is a program that allows teachers who aspire to become administrators to spend a year or more working side-by-side with principals who are obtaining results—including high academic student proficiency and growth as well as improved student attendance and behavior. The most successful teachers in this program become principals or assistant principals.
- *Individualized turnaround leadership development opportunities and support* are offered to administrators in all 41 Huntsville schools. District-level directors of instruction supervise and offer differentiated support to all

Huntsville City Schools at a Glance

Start of SIG Implementation: 2010–11

Locale: City, Midsize

Enrollment: 22,974

Free or Reduced-Price Lunch: 46%

Racial/Ethnic Composition: 47% White, 42% Black, 6% Hispanic, 2% Asian, 2% Other, 1% American Indian

English Learners: 3%

Students With Disabilities: 10%

Cohorts 1 and 2 SIG Schools in Huntsville

SIG Model	# of Schools	School Level	# of Schools
Transformation	2	Elementary	1
Turnaround	0	Middle	1
Restart	0	High	0
Closure	0	Other	0

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principals. Also, principals report on their schools' progress at quarterly quality-assurance meetings and receive customized support.

- *Districtwide professional learning opportunities* supplement Huntsville's more intensive leadership development supports. Professional learning opportunities include monthly principal networking and administrative conferences.

Principal Recruitment and Placement. Huntsville's strategy for building turnaround-leadership capacity within the district began with hiring veteran principals for its two SIG schools. Huntsville recruited veteran principals who had acquired the key characteristics of school leadership during their tenures in the district's Title I schools with demographics similar to its SIG schools. Before hiring these principals, Huntsville's superintendent and deputy superintendent met with candidates in their previous schools throughout the school year to determine whether they had the capacity to support the SIG schools. Huntsville determines the readiness of new principals by monitoring the administrators throughout the year through school visits, review of assessment data, feedback from staff and other principals, and participation in a district leadership academy.

To further the vetting process, Huntsville asks principal candidates to review achievement data for their potential SIG schools and describe the measures and methods they would use to improve the schools. Evidence of their past achievements at the Title I schools, coupled with clarity about the measures and methods they would employ at SIG schools, proved to be a successful hiring approach for Huntsville. As a result, Huntsville uses the same leadership hiring practices in all of its schools. In recruiting principals from within the district, Huntsville identifies a subset of existing principals who demonstrate promise and then provides training to prepare them for placement in schools with the greatest need. The strategy is to place new principals in the district's smaller schools and move the veteran principals to the district's larger, more challenging schools. As part of the recruitment process, the district asks these principal candidates to review student achievement data and to discuss the changes they enact in the SIG schools.

Teachers on Special Assignment. Huntsville offers teachers a career pathway for becoming school administrators by allowing them to apply to be Teachers on Special Assignment, a model the district created to grow its own leaders. Principals or district instructional staff recommend teachers for participation, and the teachers then must go through an application and screening process.¹ After being selected, Teachers on Special Assignment are placed in schools with strong principals and spend a school year (or, in some cases, two years) working side-by-side with their principals. Teachers on Special Assignment perform all duties of a principal except for evaluations, and they do not teach during this time. Principals working with Teachers on Special Assignment are turnaround leaders who have demonstrated results in their schools, including high academic student achievement and growth coupled with improved student attendance and behavior.

Teachers on Special Assignment attend a district-led leadership academy² that offers information about the district, instructional practices, and expectations for school leaders. Some Teachers on Special Assignment become assistant principals or principals.³

Individualized Leadership Development Support. To strengthen turnaround leadership capacity across its 41 schools, Huntsville offers all principals two individualized leadership-development supports: differentiated support by district-level directors of instruction as well as opportunities for principals to report on turnaround challenges at quarterly quality-assurance meetings and receive customized support.

Differentiated Support for Principals by Directors of Instruction. Three district directors of instruction work with principals at all Huntsville schools.⁴ These directors of instruction, who have been in this role for three years, previously served as principals in Huntsville. The support that directors of instruction provide to principals is based on the schools' improvement plans and the instructional targets, which clarify the expectations for teaching and learning.⁵ Directors of

instruction review these plans, assess the alignment of the instructional targets with the district's targets, and monitor the schools' implementation of the plans.

To support principals' growth and ability to implement the school improvement plans, the directors of instruction employ two main strategies:

- *Targeted Support.* Directors of instruction provide principals with targeted, one-on-one and small-group help focused on individualized professional needs. For example, a director of instruction might direct a principal to use the district's online tool designed to build competencies of highly effective school leaders or might bring in one or more support directors who specialize in areas such as special education, Title I, pupil services, or accountability and assessment. In addition, directors of instruction meet with principals each week to discuss professional growth. They conduct 15- to 25-minute school walk-throughs to develop a firsthand understanding of each school's particular needs. During each walk-through, instructors use principal-created walk-through forms to focus on the instructional targets and structure ongoing feedback to principals.⁶
- *Convening of District Principals.* Directors of instruction convene principal groups once a month for approximately two hours on topics such as the Common Core State Standards and school support needs. For topics such as the Common Core standards in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics, directors of instruction also invite curriculum specialists and literacy coaches to attend meetings.

Quality Assurance Meetings. Principals report on turnaround progress at schools through quarterly quality-assurance meetings, which are convened as webinars.⁷ Each principal presents a 30-minute update on how his or her school's data compare with district instructional targets in student attendance, student suspensions, student discipline, teacher absences, high school graduation rates, and achievement scores in reading and mathematics for all grade levels. District administrators, including the principal's director of instruction, deputy superintendent, federal programs director, special education director, and superintendent (when available) attend these meetings. Principals also may invite members of their leadership teams and key instructional leaders. Other Huntsville principals are welcome to join.

The webinars also give the principal an opportunity to request support. Following a principal's presentation, the director of instruction identifies areas of need at the school and provides the principal with support in specific highlighted areas. Principals receive written feedback from the district regarding successes, challenges, and next steps. The directors of instruction also receive the feedback provided to the principals. As follow-up, directors of instruction meet with the principal during school visits and work with them on identified challenges.

Districtwide Professional Learning Opportunities. Huntsville supplements its intensive leadership development supports with other professional learning opportunities, including monthly principal networking and administrative conferences.

Principal Networking. Huntsville convenes monthly K–12 principal networking meetings for all schools, organized by grade levels served. The deputy superintendent leads these monthly meetings and invites other district staff, including the directors of instruction, to attend. Networking meeting agendas are determined at the beginning of the school year, when the directors of instruction meet with Huntsville's professional development department to discuss the district's focus for the year. After each monthly principals' meeting, principals can provide feedback to the district on the effectiveness of the session through an online feedback system. To extend the networking of these monthly meetings, principals have the option to use the last 30 minutes of the school day (on the day of the sessions) to discuss urgent issues with other principals.

In addition, Huntsville established a principals' social media site for ongoing networking that includes alerts about other professional development opportunities. One outgrowth of this networking approach is the creation of a

principal-formed group that meets to review student achievement data and ensure consistent policies and approaches across Huntsville schools. This venue helps support principals' implementation of discipline policies consistently from elementary through high school.

Administrative Conferences. Huntsville holds a two-day, off-site administrative conference each summer for all principals, assistant principals, and district leadership. This conference provides an opportunity for the deputy superintendent and the superintendent to share information on the past year's successes, challenges, and the focus for the next year. The conference also provides training on the Common Core State Standards in ELA and mathematics. At the July 2013 conference, the superintendent opened with the district's vision for the upcoming year and then discussed instructional targets, professional learning opportunities, grade-level priorities, and standards-based report cards. Participants also could discuss any needed ongoing support (e.g., job-embedded professional development) as they move forward with the Common Core.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Huntsville uses feedback from principals and other administrators to assess and adjust strategies to meet its goals for building school turnaround leadership throughout the district. For example, when the directors of instruction were first introduced, one director was assigned to all the Title I schools and one director was assigned to all the high-performing schools. After recognizing that this approach did not allow for learning across these two groups, Huntsville created heterogeneous groups with principals from high-performing and low-performing schools grouped together.

Another example of refining the strategies comes from principal feedback. The conferences for current principals originally were scheduled for two consecutive days late in the summer. Principals noted that this scheduling limited their ability to use the information from the conferences with their leadership teams to plan for the next school year. In response, Huntsville created two 1-day conferences—one on the first day in June and another in July.

CONCLUSION

Huntsville City Schools designed a leadership development strategy based on a set of characteristics that district administrators use to identify potential school turnaround leaders and build current school turnaround leaders. Through this strategy, Huntsville identifies potential leaders, implements strategies to nurture and grow turnaround talent, and creates a professional culture that reflects and reinforces the skills and approaches that lead to success.

SOURCES

Data for the tables on page 1 are from the following sources: District at-a-glance data are from the NCES Common Core of Data (2011–12); and SIG information is from SIG-Awarded Schools (2010–11, 2011–12, 2012–13) located at <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/index.html>.

IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

¹ Each Teacher on Special Assignment goes through a screening process overseen by the district's talent management department. The process includes a committee interview, submission of a writing sample, and committee review of the achievement data from the candidate's classrooms. Committee members—including principals, district administrators (e.g., director of staff development and deputy superintendent), and directors of instruction—rate each candidate. Huntsville sends a list of the candidates who have passed the screening process to principals who are seeking to hire a Teacher on Special Assignment, and principals and leadership teams interview candidates at the school level.

IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS (continued)

² Leadership academies for Teachers on Special Assignment are held every Saturday for one year—or during the summer and a few Saturdays during the school year.

³ After teachers complete the year-long Teacher on Special Assignment program, Huntsville identifies teachers who are immediate candidates for assistant principal or principal positions and invites them to interview with their director of instruction, the deputy superintendent, and the superintendent. Huntsville decides on each candidate's school assignment. Nine of the 12 Teachers on Special Assignment in the previous school year moved into administrative roles—primarily assistant principals, although in two cases as principals.

⁴ Each director of instruction supports a group of 13–15 principals, which includes principals from elementary, P–8, and high schools.

⁵ Instructional targets for all grade levels are determined each summer and are primarily in reading and mathematics for all grade levels.

⁶ Topics on the walk-through form include (1) classroom environment, such as classroom arrangement, displays of student work, and curriculum materials; (2) materials, such as evidence that program materials are being used as designed; (3) teacher instruction, such as evidence that K–3 teachers follow selected instructional strategy routines as designed and that grades 4–12 teachers follow content teaching strategies; (4) small-group, differentiated instruction for grades K–3; (5) classroom climate and teacher-student interactions, such as evidence that the teacher provides students with opportunities to learn; (6) student actions for grades 4–12, such as evidence of student engagement; and (7) strategies observed during the walk-throughs. The district also created a one-page document on instructional targets tied to these topics, which became a focus for individualized support.

⁷ For these meetings, the district provides principals with a slide presentation template based on the district's goals. The template contains slides that focus on the achievement gap, indicate if that gap is decreasing or increasing, and provide percentiles for student achievement growth.