



School Turnaround

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Exploring Successful Turnaround Models

Welcome to the second issue of the School Turnaround Newsletter!

In this issue, we are excited to share with you examples of turnaround schools that have successfully implemented one of the SIG models. Through interviews with our team, school and organization leaders in four locations discuss implementing school improvement plans, communicating with stakeholders, and overcoming obstacles to turn around schools. We hope this information is just the beginning of SEAs, LEAs, and partner organizations sharing information and best practices

with one another as we all move forward in this very important work of improving the lowest-achieving schools in the country.

I also want to share that in the past few months, I have had the privilege of visiting several schools that are going through the turnaround process. One school



Dr. Thelma Meléndez de Santa Ana,
Assistant Secretary

in particular, Lincoln High School in Tacoma, WA, had a program called the Lincoln Learning Center that was just amazing – impressive student achievement, incredible instruction, and supportive school leaders. It reminded me that though this work is so tough, it can be done.

I plan on visiting other turnaround schools throughout the year, to get a better sense of how this work is going on the ground. And of course, your suggestions and ideas are always welcome. We look forward to continuing to work with you to better serve our students across the country.

Regional SIG Conferences

Texas and Southeast Comprehensive Centers at SEDL Host First Regional Conference on School Turnarounds

On July 21-22, 100 SEA and LEA staff from six states in the Southeast and Texas gathered together for a two-day forum in Austin, Texas to address the issues of school improvement, turnarounds, and the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The event offered participants an opportunity to learn from and engage with school turnaround experts at the federal, state, and local levels including Carl Harris, Deputy Assistant Secretary for

Policy and State Technical Assistance and Kandace Jones, Special Assistant, from OESE at the U.S. Department of Education, who joined participants for a presentation and discussion on the Department's Blueprint for reauthorization of ESEA.

For more information on the conference and SEDL's work, please visit SEDL's website at <http://secc.sedl.org/>.

COMING UP: California and Southwest Comprehensive Centers to Partner with REL West for October Conference

From September 30- October 1,

Southwestern States will have the opportunity to participate in a two-day Bridge Event focused on turning around low-performing schools. This conference will include informative panels, keynotes, and interactive breakout sessions, all of which will focus on the research available on school turnarounds and provide valuable information on how to apply these research-based practices on the ground in local school districts. Among the invitees to the event are staff and leadership teams from SEAs and LEAs in Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, Nevada, and Utah.

For more information, please visit www.wested.org.





“It’s a leadership challenge, to send out the message constantly, but give teachers the autonomy.”

- Principal Dwan Jordan, Sousa Middle School



Sousa Middle School

Sousa Middle School in Washington, DC has long been considered one of the worst schools in the District – in 2008, only 23 percent of its students were proficient in reading, 17 percent in math. After implementing the Transformation Model in the fall of 2008, reading proficiency at Sousa rose to 39 percent, and math to 42 percent in 2009 – the biggest achievement gains of any D.C. middle school.

U.S. Department of Education (ED): Can you talk about the transition plan you implemented when you first came on board as principal?

Principal Dwan Jordan (DJ): My initial plan was to form a strong leadership team. So I brought in a new team of two assistant principals, two

instructional coaches, and a special education coordinator. We have staff focused on intervention and providing wrap around services to students.

I didn’t have the opportunity to bring in a new team of teachers when I first started, so I didn’t know exactly what I’d be getting. I set up meetings with each teacher to discuss their data.

A lot of these things, you have to learn on the fly. There are a lot of schools that set up staff development calendars for the whole year at the beginning of the year – we tried to veer away from doing that, because we want staff to have input on setting up calendar, and because you never know what’s going to happen in the year.

We did set up a structure, but we were flexible at the same time. We knew the first year that we wanted to provide more time with instruction, so we doubled time for Language Arts and math. We also tried to build on teachers’ knowledge and skills, and to make sure that the leadership was focused in supporting them.

ED: What were your most challenging obstacles to implementation of your turnaround strategy?

DJ: Getting teachers to shift their mindset was the toughest part. The first year, we had major challenges.

To read the full interview, visit www.ed.gov/oese-news/sousa-middle.

Forest Grove High School

Prior to 2002, fewer than half of Forest Grove students were meeting or exceeding standards in reading, and less than a third were proficient in math. In 2002, the school hired a new principal, who set high expectations for student achievement, emphasized data-driven decision-making and provided targeted professional development for all teachers.

By 2008-09, 76 percent of students met or exceeded proficiency in reading, 83 percent met or exceeded proficiency in math, and in both subjects Forest Grove students outperformed their peers at the state levels. Forest Grove received the state’s “Closing the Achievement Gap” Award four years in a row, and has reduced the dropout rate from 7.7 percent in 2002 to 2 percent in 2008.

ED: Can you talk about the transition plan implemented when you first came on board to Forest Grove? How did you phase in your approach?

Former Principal John O’Neill: When I first came on board, the then-Superintendent identified school improvement goals that he wanted the school to pursue. Goals included increasing the graduation rate, decreasing dropout rate, increasing reading and math scores for all students, and providing personalized learning for students. We focused on rigor, relevance, relationships, and of course, results.

I came in already having had experience in raising school

achievement at the high school level. So I did have a frame of reference of effective practices that could be pursued at this new position.

To start, we held a planning retreat that spanned 2 full days, where we brought in all major stakeholders – department chairs, building site council parent representatives, the local school committee, classified staff representatives, board members, the entire school administrative team, and a district office representative. We spent the time looking at student data and identifying growth areas.

To read the full interview, visit www.ed.gov/oese-news/forest-grove.

AUSL and Chicago Public Schools

AUSL, originally a non-profit organization that focused on teacher training, began its work of turning around low-performing schools with an agreement with Chicago Public Schools (CPS) to run Sherman Elementary in 2006. Today, AUSL manages 8 schools within CPS, and the schools that AUSL has managed for more than two years have nearly doubled their achievement on overall ISAT scores.

ED: How was the restart model implemented in the schools chosen for turnaround by AUSL?

Don Feinstein, Executive Director of AUSL (DF): AUSL has very a strong relationship with CPS. In conjunction with AUSL, CPS selected the schools they wanted us to help turn around, which included Harvard Elementary, one of the 5 lowest-performing schools in the state.

The responsibility for restarting a school should be shared between the state and districts, and the organization that will manage the turnaround school. The State and the districts have to have the facts and figures on the front end; organizations should come in with vision of how the schools should operate.

Obviously, politics play a key role in turning around a school. To manage change, you need to solicit input from the parents and the community. You need to ask them, what is their vision? When you have a chance to start over again, you want to put in place what's best in meeting the needs of parents, students, and communities.

So, we reached out to public officials and state officials, and worked with faith-based and community organizations. We

worked to get board and district approval for the turnaround plans. It's about communicating and over-communicating the reason why you want to do this, and build anticipation of what a better day would look like, because change is hard. Most gravitate to the status quo.

CPS and AUSL each had person who owned the turnaround process, who managed relationships. For Harvard Elementary, we held a community meeting across from the school at a local church, where we had parents talking to parents. In these kinds of situations, you're only as good as your district CEO or superintendent, and how good your community engagement process is.

To read the full interview, visit www.ed.gov/oesse-news/ausl-chicago.



Hamilton County Schools: The Benwood Initiative

In the late 1990s, 9 of Hamilton County's elementary schools were ranked among the 20 lowest-performing schools in Tennessee. In 2001, the Benwood Foundation and the Public Education Foundation (PEF) formed a partnership with Hamilton County schools to turn around these schools, and the Benwood Initiative was launched. Though one Benwood school closed in the early years, the remaining 8 saw great improvements in their scores: the percentage of third graders passing the state reading exam jumped from 53% in 2003 to 78% in 2009. In the same year, 69% of third graders scored proficient or advanced in mathematics, up from 50% in 2003. In 2007, the Benwood Initiative expanded to include 8 additional schools.

ED: What were the biggest

challenges to implementing your strategy?

Dan Challener, President, PEF: First, there was a belief system in our community that this work can't be done. One of the stories I've told too many times is that when the editor of the local newspaper called me about the Benwood Initiative, he told me reactions were split, and some people thought it was a waste of money – one person even said that it would have been better if they lit the money on fire since it'll provide some heat and light! But the belief has to be there for reforms to work.

Second, the fundamental issue is capacity. This is really hard in our state – actually it's hard in most states, but in our state in particular.

Over the years, we raised the standards, and things just got harder for students. We needed to be more about helping teachers teach all children to that level, and build capacity.

ED: What is your process for recruiting highly effective teachers to your schools? How do you continue to build their capacity?

DC: There is actually a misperception out there, that success in turning around our schools is about recruiting effective teachers. It's not.

To read the full interview, visit www.ed.gov/oesse-news/benwood.



Selecting a School Turnaround Provider

The Center for Innovation and Improvement offers helpful tips and guides for states and districts interested in hiring external partners to help with school improvement efforts.

Whether hiring a school turnaround provider to assess needs, restart or operate schools, or provide technical assistance, states and districts need to establish structures that will allow them to recruit, select, establish relationship terms, manage, and evaluate the providers. In addition, rigorous evaluation of the partner's capacity is essential to fully leveraging the potential expertise of external partners to support focused and dramatic school improvement efforts.

The following steps provide a blueprint for states and districts interested in creating a rigorous system to attract, select, manage, and continuously evaluate external providers:

1. Identify unambiguous reasons for hiring an external partner;
2. Engage stakeholders about the need to hire external providers and ensure the entire process is transparent and fair;
3. Articulate specific goals of the relationship with the external partner, including measurable expectations and criteria for selection of external partners to meet these goals;
4. Create conditions to attract multiple high quality external partners.
5. Budget adequate funding to support relationship with external partner for duration of contract.
6. Develop a rigorous process to select an external partner whose experience and qualifications match the specified goals.
7. Negotiate a contract outlining roles and responsibilities of the external partner as well as the district and relevant schools, and if applicable, state department of education, as well as explicit and measurable outcomes, including interim indicators of growth.
8. Provide support as needed and appropriate but do not micro-manage external partner
9. Evaluate the external partner's progress toward goals; and



Looking for more details or tips on selecting a high-quality school turnaround provider? Try one of these resources:

- The Center for Innovation and Improvement's Handbook: www.centerii.org/handbook/Resources/5_E_Hiring_Evaluating_External_Partners.pdf
- CSRQ Consumer Guide: www.financeproject.org/publications/CSRQconsumerguide.pdf
- Education Northwest's Lessons Learned: Choosing a School Turnaround Provider: educationnorthwest.org/resource/1294



The Department of Education is focused on promoting student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by

fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access. The Office of Elementary and Secondary Education strives to enhance educational opportunities and equity for all America's children and families as well as improve the quality of teaching and learning by providing leadership, technical assistance, and financial support.

Other Resources

- Sign up to be a part of the online professional learning community for school turnarounds by emailing us at school.improvement.grants@ed.gov. We will be sharing more information on how you can get involved in the near future.
- Missed the last issue of the newsletter? It can be found online at <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/summary/sig610newsltr.pdf> and features multiple resources on school turnarounds.
- E-mail any questions or concerns concerning SIG or school turnarounds to askdrt@ed.gov.