

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANT (SIG) PRACTICE: DEVELOPING STATE-LEVEL PRINCIPAL PIPELINES

KENTUCKY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Faced with a limited number of principals who have the skills and competencies to turn around low-performing SIG schools, the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) developed short- and long-term approaches to address this need. These approaches focus on improving the skills of current principals as well as increasing the number and availability of programs that focus on building the skills of future school turnaround leaders. Together, these efforts are building the expertise of school turnaround leaders throughout Kentucky.

THE STRATEGY: Short and Long-Term Approaches to Increase School Turnaround Leadership Expertise

To increase the number of qualified and skilled school turnaround leaders in Kentucky, KDE relies on Education Recovery Teams and a Turnaround Think Tank.

- Education Recovery Teams focus on the immediate need for training and on-site leadership coaching for current SIG Tier I and Tier II school principals.
- The Turnaround Think Tank serves to train a cadre of turnaround leadership experts from universities, districts, and schools who will serve as trainers and coaches of future school turnaround principals.

These two efforts represent a concerted strategy to develop and support a training pipeline for current and future principals in Kentucky.

Education Recovery Teams. KDE's short-term approach to increase turnaround expertise is to provide each SIG Tier I and Tier II school with three years of direct support from an Education Recovery Team. The Education Recovery Team consists of a team leader and two content specialists. The team leader is responsible for mentoring and guiding each principal to implement change at his or her school. The content specialists support school staff with an emphasis on literacy and mathematics. Under the direction of the team leader, the Education Recovery Team conducts assessments, monitors progress, and provides professional development as needed.

Selection and Preparation of Education Recovery Team Leaders. Continuous improvement is embedded in the selection, training, and contract renewal of Education Recovery Team leaders. Recognizing limitations in the availability of individuals with turnaround expertise, KDE has a rigorous selection, training, and renewal process for Education Recovery Team leaders. These team leaders are carefully selected and must have a minimum of five years of experience, a master's degree, and principal certification or consultant endorsement. Once selected, team leaders

Kentucky Public Schools at a Glance

Start of SIG Implementation: 2010–11

Enrollment: 681,987

Free or Reduced-Price Lunch: 54%

Racial/Ethnic Composition: 81% White, 11% Black, 4% Hispanic, 2% Other, 1% Asian, <1% American Indian

English Learners: 3%

Students With Disabilities: 15%

Cohorts 1 and 2 SIG Schools in Kentucky

SIG Model	# of Schools	School Level	# of Schools
Transformation	9	Elementary	0
Turnaround	13	Middle	3
Restart	0	High	19
Closure	0	Other	0

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receive training from turnaround experts on state initiatives, such as the Common Core State Standards, formative assessments, and data analysis. In addition to this training on state initiatives, team leaders may receive additional coaching from one of the regional Centers for Learning Excellence,¹ university-based centers that support SIG principals and Education Recovery Team leaders. Team leaders receive approximately 20 hours of training or coaching per month, have an annual contract, are evaluated annually, and are held accountable for the impact of their work in the school. For example, team leaders are held accountable for enabling schools to improve student achievement. If unsuccessful in providing structures and processes that support improvement strategies and contribute to improved student performance, a team leader will not be asked to return to a school.

Turnaround Coaching. Education Recovery Teams use a “basic toolkit” that includes a set of data questions; an approach for looking at curriculum, instruction, and assessment to determine next steps; a process for conducting continuous improvement; and a management approach to identify ways to improve problems.² During the three-year assignment, under the direction of the team leader, Education Recovery Teams use this toolkit as well as diagnostic and planning tools to tailor support to the specific needs of the principal, teachers, and the school as a whole. In addition, the team leader helps the principal develop instructional leadership skills. For instance, the team leader may work alongside a principal to conduct joint observations of classroom instruction or may monitor and assist the principal in providing professional development to teachers. The team leader coaches the principal on interpreting and using data, setting goals, evaluating staff, and developing organizational strategies. The team leader also supervises the school’s progress on required 30-, 60-, and 90-day school improvement plans jointly developed with the entire Education Recovery Team.

The frequency of the Education Recovery Teams’ engagement with their assigned schools varies, depending upon the needs of the school. Some teams or team members may be in their assigned schools on a daily basis, and others may visit only once per week. The majority of schools engage with the full Recovery Team every day, especially during the first year. After the change process is under way in the second year, the content specialists may spend less time in the school; at minimum, however, they have weekly check-ins with the school.

Turnaround Think Tank. KDE’s long-term approach to increase turnaround expertise is to develop and train members of a Turnaround Think Tank, who in turn will help to train other school turnaround leaders. The Turnaround Think Tank model, developed by an external provider, is customized by KDE to align with state initiatives and needs. Upon selection, Turnaround Think Tank members (which include university faculty and state support staff) participate in a turnaround executive training program. After they complete the program, members are tasked with building their own school turnaround leaders training programs or providing professional development to principals in their region through collaboration with universities.

K–12 and Higher Education Partnership. The Turnaround Think Tank is the result of a partnership between KDE and postsecondary education agencies. The president of the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education approached the KDE Commissioner of Education with the idea for collaboration. Together they met with several institutions—including the University of Louisville, the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, Jefferson County Public Schools (the state’s largest school district), and KDE—to design the new program. The group decided to implement a turnaround executive training program that focuses specifically on school turnaround leadership. In 2012, KDE and the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education launched an initiative to train a cadre of 26 individuals in methods for turning around low-performing schools, with the goal that these 26 individuals would comprise the state’s Turnaround Think Tank and would broaden as well as deepen school turnaround expertise throughout the state.

Program Design. The Turnaround Think Tank’s executive training program is held over a 15-month period, with a mix of online and face-to-face training. The program is structured in 13 two-day units that focus on turnaround leadership, strategic planning, measurement and analysis, human resources, processes, and outcomes. The participants meet for two days each month and complete assignments between meetings. As part of the program,

participants must complete homework and special projects. The cost of the program is \$15,000 per person and is paid for by KDE.

Participant Selection. Participants from institutions of higher education, leaders from the state’s largest school district, and Education Recovery Team leaders were selected to participate in the training. Several of the institutions of higher education from across the state were asked to nominate participants. As a result, half of the 26 participants include university deans and faculty members from the University of Louisville’s College of Education and Human Development and leaders from Jefferson County Public Schools. The other participants are Education Recovery Team leaders from a unit of the KDE state office that oversees low-performing schools (called District 180), with experience and a history of successfully improving student achievement. Participants, including state staff from District 180, retain their positions while engaged in the program. State education agency staff, including KDE’s District 180 staff, are required to remain in KDE for three years after completion of the program and commit to train at least two additional cohorts of turnaround specialists for the state.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

KDE faced several challenges in addressing the need to grow turnaround expertise for trainers, coaches, and principals in the state. First, KDE met obstacles to revising leadership preparation programs that focus on the needs of turnaround schools. The state’s Education Professional Standards Board, for example, rejected several designs submitted by universities and KDE for turnaround certification for principals because they did not adequately address the standards of the board, and the process for getting these approved was delayed. In response, KDE chose to focus on developing the skills of current principals by providing direct coaching through the Education Recovery Team leaders and by increasing the number of qualified trainers (in universities and as coaches) in the state through the Turnaround Think Tank.

Second, KDE had difficulty finding higher education faculty with the range of relevant expertise to train turnaround principals. Therefore, through the Turnaround Think Tank’s executive training, KDE sought to train faculty who have a full complement of expertise in organizational systems management; data analysis; curriculum, instruction, and assessment; differentiated instruction; coaching of adults; behavior systems; and system tools.

Third, KDE learned from past experience that the intensity of turnaround support is an important consideration. The concept of using coaches to support school turnaround was not new to KDE. Prior to SIG, in fact, the state relied on a group of Highly Skilled Educators, who were trained by KDE. These individuals were responsible for many tasks across many schools and districts; as a result, they were in the schools only once or twice per month. KDE found that this low-intensity support proved inadequate. The federal SIG funds afforded KDE the opportunity to increase the intensity of support through more time with schools and by providing schools with a range of skills and expertise offered by the Education Recovery Teams.

SUSTAINABILITY

In 2010, the Kentucky state Legislature passed a law³ that aligns with the intent of SIG. This state law requires continued focused attention on the bottom 5 percent of schools and continued supports after the SIG funds end. KDE redirected approximately \$6 million to sustain the work through Title I and state improvement funds. In addition, KDE also presented data to the Legislature to encourage funding for additional positions. In two geographic areas of the state, KDE identified priority schools that have made exemplary strides. KDE wants to turn these schools into laboratory schools to illustrate to others in their regions how to set up systems, embed continuous improvement cycles, and use data effectively. If no funding is allocated for this purpose, a school in each region would be staffed by KDE support teams to facilitate learning experiences for all schools in their area.

CONCLUSION

The Kentucky Department of Education implemented a two-pronged strategy designed to build the expertise of SIG school principals to become effective turnaround leaders in low-performing schools. The strategy consists of building the capacities of principals directly through Education Recovery Teams and indirectly through Turnaround Think Tank leaders, who are tasked with increasing the number of turnaround school leadership training programs and professional development programs available to principals throughout the state.

SOURCES

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

IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

¹ To ensure alignment between the regional training centers and the Education Recovery Team’s work, each regional Education Recovery Team leader is housed at a university-based Center for Learning Excellence. These centers provide training and support to the SIG principals and team leaders. After principals receive training, team leaders work with them to implement state initiatives and monitor progress using student performance data. Each center is located in a different region of the state. Each has an executive director and an Education Recovery Team director; the latter provides oversight for the Education Recovery Teams that work with the schools in the region and for the professional development offered to leaders. The Education Recovery Team submits weekly reports to these directors detailing areas of school concern and success.

² Two of these tools—the School Leadership Assessment and the Diagnostic Review—are influential in the direction of the Education Recovery Team leader’s work with the principal:

- **School Leadership Assessment.** The School Leadership Assessment identifies areas in which the principal needs improvement. This tool directs the work of the Education Recovery Team leaders. Information from this tool becomes part of the 30-, 60-, 90-day school improvement plan, which sets the direction for support. The team collects data for the School Leadership Assessment during a one-week period, which includes classroom observations; reviews of assignments and assessments; and interviews with staff, students, and parents. For example, one School Leadership Assessment found that a principal did not ensure that “teachers deliver student-centered, rigorous, and differentiated instruction that meets the learning needs of all students” and recommended more frequent monitoring of instruction, with feedback and support to teachers. The team leader subsequently supports the principal in such work.
- **Diagnostic Review.** Two years after the School Leadership Assessment is administered, an external provider conducts a diagnostic review of the school’s progress. The diagnostic review team conducts classroom observations; hosts interviews with students, parents, teachers, and other school staff; and reviews school portfolio data. The review team uses these data to assess the status of the school in meeting five standards: governance and leadership, purpose and direction, teaching and assessing for learning, resources and support systems, and using results for continuous improvement. In this document, the external provider identifies the extent to which the principal made progress addressing the leadership deficiencies previously identified in the School Leadership Assessment. This report is made available publicly.

³ Kentucky law related to persistently low performing schools was amended by House Bill 176 and signed into law by the governor in January 2010.