

# DISTRICT READINESS TO SUPPORT SCHOOL TURNAROUND

*A Users' Guide to Inform the Work of State Education Agencies and Districts*

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## Introduction

This guide provides state education agencies (SEAs) and districts (LEAs) with guidance about how to assess the district's readiness to support school turnaround initiatives. Often, school turnaround efforts focus only on the *school's* structure and leadership. Rarely do policymakers or practitioners think about school turnaround as a system-level issue requiring fundamental changes in district-level practice to establish the conditions for school turnaround to succeed. This guide will also provide an introduction to turnaround readiness conditions that will help districts to best position resources to enable turnaround schools to succeed.

While leadership selection is certainly a critical, symbolic, and time-intensive change that the district spearheads, it is actually just the beginning of a series of changes that comprise the larger turnaround initiative, which the district should facilitate. To illustrate how turnaround from a district's perspective might unfold in practice, and to consider some of what the district can do to create conditions for a new principal so that his or her turnaround efforts have the *greatest* chance for success, the following hypothetical vignette examines one district's quest to support a school.

*After many years of substandard achievement, Grant High School (GHS) needed dramatic improvement. Over the years, Grant transitioned from being a suburban school to an urban school. Most recently, it served large populations of economically disadvantaged students. The district's superintendent, John, had always hoped the school would improve if it just had the right leader in place. Five years earlier, he replaced the principal with a very promising candidate. But after two years, little improvement could be seen. John blamed his choice of a principal and hired a new principal who also showed great promise. A year later again there was little improvement and, spurred by burnout, the principal resigned to accept a position at a suburban middle school. It became clear to John that he could not rely on the replacement of school leadership alone to make the changes necessary at GHS. He then asked himself a critical question: What can the district do to create conditions for a new principal so that his or her turnaround efforts have the greatest chance for success?*

*John's district had the benefit of a state turnaround office designed to support districts in school improvement. John initiated contact with his state's turnaround office. Not long after, turnaround office representatives visited the district to gauge the conditions in the district that would support effective turnaround. They spoke with John and his leadership team to understand better how the district operated. The state representatives met with principals from some of the district's other schools to understand the relationship between the schools and the district. They observed the data systems, curricula, and other supports available to district schools. Throughout the visit, the representatives from the turnaround office listened carefully and noted areas of strength and those in need of improvement. At the conclusion of their two-day visit, the representatives met with John to discuss their findings. After addressing some of the areas in which the district was doing well, they highlighted areas they saw for improvement. For example, the representatives noted that there was no cycle of regular accountability and support for principals, which slowed change and created*

*general confusion about goals and objectives. At the same time, accountability without support made schools feel overwhelmed. The two had to go hand in hand to keep GHS on a forward moving trajectory.*

*The representatives also explained that the district could take other proactive steps to improve how GHS recruited and retained its talent. They recommended that the Human Relations Department should find ways to give GHS early access to applicants and perhaps implement some sort of incentive structure to attract the most promising candidates to fill vacancies. Grant's position relative to other schools in the hiring process was going to be a critical factor.*

*Another area for improvement was to provide a way for GHS to understand how well the school's efforts were reflected in student achievement. The representatives recommended implementing regular common, interim assessments in collaboration with district instructional personnel. Waiting for the end-of-year state test to assess progress was too late to address student needs, and relying on the school-developed assessments lacked rigor and created unnecessary work for teachers. Checking the pulse of student achievement would allow principals to help teachers adjust their approaches and identify students in need of special attention.*

*As John met with the representatives, he began to recognize changes the district could implement to help schools focus their efforts. These changes could create a cycle of positive outcomes that would energize schools to continue the hard work of school turnaround. In fact, it was probably time to reexamine the state of the district's vision. And, once the district became clear about the need to support Grant, John knew that implementing these types of changes would call for a willingness to adjust the allotment of important district resources, including the current use of money, time, and people.*

*John did not have all the answers, and there was not just one recipe for improvement. And the work would likely encounter resistance. But the new insight that he gleaned about changing the way the district approached the turnaround of its schools was intriguing and illuminated multiple ways to reframe the issue of how to transform GHS. The state turnaround office pledged its support to help the district implement the necessary changes.*

This fictional story is in many ways representative of the challenges districts face. While the beginning of this story is familiar, the conclusion is unusual. Districts often overlook or do not fully recognize the critical role they play in providing schools with the support structures necessary to bring about the type of change that turnaround requires. Instead, districts continue to provide turnaround schools with a carousel of promising leaders who lack the resources and support needed to sustain turnaround efforts. The recommendations in this guide are based on the research literature as well as the experience of the University of Virginia's School Turnaround Program (UVA-STP). This guide is specifically tailored to help assess district-led turnaround initiatives or broader turnaround zone initiatives where a lead partner (in this case the "district") is directing efforts across multiple schools.

## School Turnaround Is a *District* Issue

It is intuitively logical that school turnaround efforts often focus on the *school's* structure and leadership. After all, the problems associated with persistently low performance, including low student achievement, poor academic progress, high dropout rates, and high incidence of disciplinary problems, appear at the school level. In fact, in many unfortunate cases, schools may view the district as an impediment to the dramatic improvement necessary. Schools and districts should partner to co-create success. As the literature on both effective leadership and effective turnaround practices suggests, successful school turnaround calls for the district and the schools to use collaborative tools, routines, and strategies.

Despite the relatively light policy focus on the *district's* role in school turnaround, it is easy to see the critical gatekeeper role a district plays in determining a school's success. The district has influence over many key resources essential to turnaround, including school leadership, instructional quality, personnel policies, budget, assessments, and curriculum. A school turnaround initiative will face an uphill battle if a district is not ready to provide a range of support in these areas. Some researchers have stated it even more strongly: "Successful school turnaround also requires district turnaround—fundamental changes in the way that districts think about and provide support for schools" (Baroody, 2011, p. 1).

This guide first describes four focus areas that should be assessed before a district begins a turnaround initiative. Each focus area includes examples based on visits with districts before they embarked on significant turnaround efforts. The guide concludes with some practical advice on how to conduct a district turnaround initiative readiness assessment.

### Indicators of Readiness: A Summary

If we know the critical nature of district participation in school turnaround, it makes sense to consider the ways the district might contribute. The following four levers are essential to the district's turnaround preparation:

- Leadership
- Infrastructure to provide differentiated support and accountability
- Conditions for effective talent management
- Effective instructional infrastructure

### Leadership

One of the clear keys to successful turnaround is strong leadership at all levels (Herman, Dawson, Dee, Greene, Maynard, & Redding, 2008). The objectives for both school and district leaders are to articulate a clear and compelling vision, create attainable short-term goals, define high performance expectations, hold faculty and staff accountable for those expectations, and continually celebrate wins (Leithwood, 2012). Research points to the importance of having a strong leader who can change culture and influence staff efficacy (Duke, 2008) and demonstrates an intense focus and direction on academic outcomes (Picucci, Brownson, Kahlert, & Sobel, 2002). In addition, the district needs to embrace the turnaround effort as a district-led initiative. One study finds that the "district instructional leadership builds capacity by coordinating and aligning work of others through communication, planning, and collaboration" (Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, p. 318). Throughout the turnaround process, the district must coordinate the work by

setting high performance expectations, sharing those expectations in a transparent way, continually checking progress on those expectations, and co-developing with the school further interventions as needed for the school based upon the school's progress (Leithwood, 2012).

## **Infrastructure to Provide Differentiated Support and Accountability**

The UVA-STP has found that most schools in need of turnaround have leadership teams that rarely receive the type of coaching, problem-solving support, and accountability they should have. Similarly, one report recommends that districts reduce their “span of control” (Gill, 2013). This means that principal supervisors ideally should be able to deliver meaningful one-on-one coaching and accountability to principals. This reduced span of control is important because, depending on their context, turnaround schools require various and highly individualized supports. Districts must first identify turnaround schools' diverse needs and then provide support based on that diagnosis. Evidence from high-performing districts indicates that support systems must be effectively aligned with the district leadership's vision (Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010; Petersen, 1999). Schools should know clearly when and how to seek district support. The district should also have an executive-level person who provides regular support to the turnaround principals (Honig et al., 2010). This approach also requires rethinking the district's resource allocation to prioritize coordinated implementation support over instructional, compliance, and operations departments, which frequently function in their own silos. Evidence from five “instructionally focused superintendents” suggests that district organization is key for supporting the district's purpose as an instructional leader (Peterson, 1999).

One way to implement accountability is to formalize the internal reporting structure and intensify support with a person or team. This district-based team should be able to provide both guidance and accountability for the school-based leadership teams through the turnaround process. Given the rapid pace necessary for results within the turnaround endeavor, schools should report directly to the individual charged with monitoring and supporting dramatic improvement. Schools that regularly report to multiple people and departments may not develop the rapport and understanding needed to monitor the turnaround. In fact, time can be wasted when too many departments require updates from schools. Identifying or creating a district office for school turnaround provides the necessary attention that leads to continual assessment and monitoring. This approach yields feedback and formative accountability to help schools stay on track while they navigate the turnaround process (Yatsko, Lake, Nelson, & Bowen, 2012; Perlman & Redding, 2011).

The staff and faculty at each school need to experience the district support. Holding schools accountable during the turnaround process is not a new idea, nor is it new to the research on effective leadership at the district and school levels (Leithwood, 2012). Such clear organization also helps the district to add internal accountability for rapid response to school needs and performance goals. It is important to note that those individuals charged with supporting and monitoring turnaround principals often need tailored training to help them more effectively coach principals.

## **Conditions for Effective Talent Management**

Turnaround schools must be staffed with teachers and leaders who are willing and able to make the necessary changes. Prior case studies of successful turnaround schools have highlighted the importance of strategic hiring practices to build a committed and capable staff



(Picucci et al., 2002). Districts must demonstrate the commitment to school turnaround by redeploying some of the most talented teachers and leaders. However, effective talent management is not just about getting the right people in the seats but about creating conditions where the majority of staff can rapidly enhance their effectiveness. This strategy requires building processes for effective and ongoing two-way communication between teachers and school leaders, providing meaningful professional development that is aligned with adult learning theory, leveraging high-performing teachers so that their impact may be seen beyond their classrooms, and creating authentic accountability through processes such as meaningful evaluation.

## **Effective Instructional Infrastructure**

High-quality teaching is essential to school turnaround, and student data analysis is a sizeable part of developing and continually adjusting classroom instruction. To maintain an intense focus on student achievement, districts must have or be prepared to implement data structures that support the regular use of student data to inform instruction (Lachat & Smith, 2005), so that data analysis may clarify and illuminate instructional expectations (Rorrer et al., 2008). The nature of the data should be such that schools and the district have regular, ongoing insight into student progress.

Utilizing well-designed, rigorous, common interim assessments as formative assessments, aligned to a clear, rigorous curriculum, is one way to accomplish this continual monitoring. Adjustments can be made throughout the year based upon these formative assessments to help schools meet their year-end goals. This strategy provides an early diagnosis of areas that need attention prior to the state testing, giving the schools and their leaders multiple opportunities to anticipate and address areas of concern. For example, in its work with partner districts, the UVA-STP team experience is that most districts believe they have an effective instructional infrastructure in place, but almost all districts need to adapt critical aspects of their systems to prepare for robust implementation. These aspects could include the responsiveness of the data system, the clarity of data reporting, the rigor and alignment of the assessments, teacher understanding of rigor expectations or how to leverage assessments, and a district calendar that prioritizes time to leverage a data cycle to drive instruction.

## **Indicators of Readiness: An In-Depth Look**

Having summarized the key components of each of these focus levers, the following further elaborates upon the summaries and provides examples of what they look like in practice. The following examples are based on actual schools.

### **Leadership**

To successfully embark on turnaround, district leadership must:

- Demonstrate a will to do what is necessary.
- Have the capacity to orchestrate intensive turnaround work.
- Have a clear and compelling turnaround strategy.

### **Demonstrate a Will to Do What Is Necessary**

District leadership must acknowledge an urgent need for change and the district’s critical role in initiating that change. A public and vocal commitment to success and change, accompanied by bold goals, is often necessary to empower others to overcome barriers. A well-prepared district will view low-performing schools as a *district* challenge, not just an issue for the ailing school to address. A district that places all the blame on schools (administrators, teachers, and/or students) or conditions presumably out of their control (policy, unions, and/or poverty) is typically not prepared to make the necessary district-level investments that will yield sustainable turnaround. A well-prepared district is willing to prioritize the needs of turnaround schools and provide them with the resources they need, even if it means adjusting entrenched district structures and norms.

### **Have the Capacity to Orchestrate Intensive Turnaround Work**

The district administration must be structured in a way to support turnaround efforts. The superintendent must be available for and willing to invest in turnaround work. The district must be stable enough to make the turnaround initiative one of its top priorities. The district must also have dedicated turnaround team members, including a highly competent point person to whom the principals report. This person must have sufficient time, expertise, and organizational capacity to focus on turnaround efforts. The demanding nature of turnaround requires that the team’s attention must be protected from other unrelated responsibilities. If the team is not buffered, its efforts will be less likely to bear fruit; it may view its role in the turnaround process as yet another responsibility that is being added to the already lengthy list of expectations. To pull off such challenging work, the district team must include credible, powerful, and organized leaders.

### **Have a Clear and Compelling Turnaround Strategy**

Before a district can help support turnaround efforts, it must define a workable strategy with a coherent direction, clear goals, and aligned supports. The district should also demonstrate that it has the support of key stakeholders, including the school board. It must have evidence of readiness to prioritize giving turnaround schools additional resources for a period of time, and then disseminate information to the broader system about the successful innovation and learning piloted in turnaround schools.



### ***Strong Leadership in Practice***

One district that exemplifies strength in leadership is Acorn Public Schools (APS)<sup>1</sup>. APS is an urban district that serves a diverse student population. It has more than 150 schools and an enrollment of nearly 150,000 students.

*Strengths.* Prior to beginning its turnaround effort, APS demonstrated a commitment to bold change through the district leadership’s actions and responses. The district had a well-developed turnaround plan and began launching several initiatives that prioritized the lowest performing schools. Leadership at the board and executive level demonstrated a commitment to innovation and openness to taking risks associated with innovative reform. For example, the district adopted a strategic staffing initiative that prioritized the staffing needs of the lowest performing schools and worked to get some of the best teachers and leaders to move to the targeted schools. APS also had a proactive approach to adopting a new curriculum, a willingness

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<sup>1</sup> Schools names have been changed for the remainder of this document.

to reconfigure schools' schedules to expand learning time, and partnerships with the business and philanthropic communities that exemplified its forward-thinking mindset.

District employees at all levels appeared to respect the executive-level leadership and recognized it as highly capable. One positive indicator for APS was that personnel at both the central office and school could all clearly articulate district priorities, which reflected that the turnaround message and vision were effectively conveyed throughout the district. District staff members shared personal performance goals linked to the district priorities.

*Areas for improvement.* The district communicated a clear vision that district members at all levels understood. However, there was room for greater buy-in and trust building between the district, the school board, and the broader community. Including these stakeholders was critical to enacting and sustaining the desired reforms and improvements. The district also needed to expedite and prioritize efforts to further recruit and develop the district-level positions for support and oversight of the school-based teams. Without a strong team with the competencies needed to drive the change, stakeholders would not see the vision as authentic.



## **Infrastructure to Provide Differentiated Support and Accountability**

The concept of differentiated support for students has grown rapidly over the past decade. Under a typical model of differentiated student support, experts carefully assess students who are well behind grade level to identify the root cause of any deficiencies and formulate a specialized plan to address those deficiencies. The students' improvement is monitored regularly as they progress through the instructional plan.

Similar to differentiated student support, school turnaround work requires targeted support that relies upon the careful execution of two equally important components: school accountability and school support. When isolated, each component is insufficient to bring about turnaround. The effective use of both levers requires a regular "embedded" district presence in turnaround schools to help assess needs, monitor progress according to school improvement plans, and provide schools with the support they need in the following ways:

- School accountability
- School support
- Defined authority to drive change

### **School Accountability**

The district must be willing to hold schools and their leaders accountable for high expectations and focused implementation of improvement plans. The accountability a district demands must go beyond student performance on the annual assessments that state and federal policies require. Instead, districts must be willing to monitor performance and hold principals and teachers accountable for progress throughout the year, including defined expectations for what principal excellence looks like and what types of systems need to be in place. The district thus must be willing, based on an understanding of school and initiative needs, to develop common foundational expectations for all turnaround schools that are often more explicit and deep than the expectations for other schools. These expectations must communicate the initiative's rigor and focus. Typically, this approach requires at least one person from the district to regularly visit each turnaround school to monitor clear expectations, help brainstorm how to

overcome barriers standing in the way of expectations, and provide formative feedback to the school leaders.

By holding schools, particularly the school leaders, responsible for meeting the high expectations, districts must be aware that they are likely calling for principals to engage in courageous decision-making regarding personnel. Principals must be willing to do what is necessary to closely monitor teachers' performance, document and address deficient practices, develop plans for growth, and monitor teachers' improvement. If teachers' practices do not improve after these interventions, districts need to support principals in removing underperforming teachers from the turnaround schools. Such support encourages principals to insist that their teachers meet expectations. Effective teachers who remain derive much satisfaction from attaining professional goals, and they appreciate being surrounded by other teachers who are striving for excellence.

### **School Support**

Accountability without complementary support creates an adversarial divide between the district and the turnaround schools that will inhibit turnaround progress. School support comes in several forms. Above all, districts must recognize each turnaround school's unique needs and provide individualized support according to those needs. Districts must help struggling schools carefully diagnose the root cause of their failures and then make plans to address those issues. The district provides the resources—including instructional support or material resources—that will help meet the school's needs and ensure that the support across the district is aligned. This support often requires the district leaders to embed themselves in the turnaround work and help school leadership solve its most pressing challenges. Helping schools through the hard work of achieving initial and ongoing success is necessary to create an environment of hope where committed teachers want to work and grow. District leaders should prove through their actions, such as spotlighting promising practices and celebrating successes along the way, that turnaround schools are a place for exemplary practices to be developed and then spread throughout the district.

### **Defined Authority to Drive Change**

When appropriate, districts must also give school leaders authority to act with autonomy. If coupled with accountability in foundational expectations, defined autonomy can permit school leaders to address needs in a way that best suits their school's situation. For example, a district might give a principal the flexibility to make changes to the district's standard schedule or professional development plan if the change better meets the needs of the school's teachers and students. Districts may also find it advantageous to give principals, who are ready for the responsibility, more flexibility in determining how to construct their budgets and staffing plans to better align with their turnaround objectives. The opportunity to be creative in leading school turnaround and solving problems helps engender greater commitment to the initiative and empower all staff to develop innovative solutions.



### ***Infrastructure to Provide Differentiated Support and Accountability in Practice***

One district that exemplifies strength in this area is Brown Public Schools (BPS), a small rural district with a total enrollment of approximately 3500 students in six schools.

*Strengths.* BPS recently hired a new superintendent and four new principals. Prior to beginning an intensive turnaround effort in some of its lowest performing schools, BPS began to

hold all schools, principals, and teachers accountable to specific indicators based on higher expectations. Simultaneously, BPS began to implement district-level supports to help schools meet the loftier expectations. Several district personnel who had been in the district prior to the superintendent's arrival commented that previously, there had been a perception across the district that basic proficiency was acceptable.

In contrast, the new superintendent made it clear that his expectations were much higher than the status quo. It was no longer sufficient for the district's schools to continue with tradition for tradition's sake. The district relocated several strong leaders to the central office so they would be in a position to help all schools. The district staff became more visible in the schools by regularly visiting sites and implementing professional development programs for teachers on site. The district also developed plans for a more rigorous teacher evaluation system. After interviews with district personnel, it was clear that the district's school staff had begun to recognize the increased standards to which they were being held, and they appreciated their purpose. Many school employees also commented that there was better communication and support from the district to complement the drive for excellence.

BPS's increased accountability and supports positioned it to be able to buttress school turnaround. As the effort began, the turnaround schools had clear expectations about what would be required of them. The district was also ready to provide differentiated support to the schools, depending on their various needs.

*Areas for improvement.* The district had taken steps to improve support and accountability in all schools. However, it had not laid out a clear vision for how it would identify the specific focus areas for the turnaround initiative and needs of each turnaround school, while simultaneously providing the turnaround schools with tailored, intensive support. Thus, support, though well intentioned, was based too much on ingrained preferences rather than data and root-cause analysis. The district had also not examined the barriers to innovation that its policies were creating for school leadership teams and had not considered how becoming more flexible could have multiple positive effects. For example, district flexibility on staffing formulas and role definitions could then lead to attracting top talent to fill teaching and school leadership positions.



## Conditions for Effective Talent Management

Creating conditions for effective talent management is vital to growing and sustaining effective school leadership. Successful turnaround schools have highlighted the importance of strategic and meaningful hiring practices in building a committed and capable staff (Picucci et al., 2002). How schools attract, manage, and develop talent is an important factor to consider before implementing a district-led turnaround strategy. The following comprises the ways that talent is addressed:

- Effective management of teacher talent
- Intentional school leadership selection
- Principal development

### Effective Management of Teacher Talent

Districts should maintain a robust talent management structure that enables the district to recruit, place, develop, and retain highly effective teachers. By using clearly defined competencies and skills, districts can match high-quality teachers to high-priority schools.

Districts often need to prioritize turnaround schools to receive staffing advantages that other schools may not receive. Effective districts will also monitor teacher performance so that appropriate future action can be taken, including increased accountability for specific teachers. Most underperforming schools have significant room to grow in creating an environment where teachers receive the individualized support and accountability they need, and it is thus critical for the district to identify common, high-leverage areas to improve teacher talent management and make those areas a focus of the initiative. District human resources ideally function as a strategic partner that works to improve hiring, development, and accountability.

### **Intentional School Leadership Selection**

The district must be intentional in choosing leaders who will meet the school's needs. Rigorous, competency-based principal selection that takes into account past performance will help ensure that skilled leaders staff high-priority schools. Competencies refer to the underlying characteristics of people that may relate to their success in a job and can be used as an additional indicator in the selection process. District leaders should make placement decisions that match the needs of the schools and community the school serves, with principals' strengths identified through the interview process. Districts should also base decisions and actions regarding development and performance management in turnaround schools on clear accountability criteria aimed at improving those schools. This process often requires overhauling the recruitment and incentive strategy to find leaders who are attracted to turnaround situations and making these critical positions the most attractive in the district. The districts most prepared for turnaround initiatives extend this intentional recruitment and placement to the entire school leadership team.

### **Principal Development**

Districts should provide principals with opportunities to develop their leadership. Leadership for learning includes addressing not only the needs of students and teachers, but also those of the principals who in many ways maintain responsibility for the schools' overall success. Given that turnaround schools should be prioritized, the process of bringing principals together to practice the work of data-driven leadership and share their innovations can help create learning for an entire district.



### ***Conditions for Effective Talent Management in Practice***

Clay Public Schools (CPS), a midsize suburban district with more than 7000 students in 14 schools, demonstrates relative strength in this area.

*Strengths.* CPS demonstrated its commitment to filling its schools with strong teachers. CPS hired a new chief of human resources and a recruitment and retention specialist to improve the district's recruitment of teachers who were prepared to serve students in underperforming schools. The district introduced a much more rigorous teacher selection instrument to screen initial candidates and a more in-depth selection interview. The screens were specifically chosen for their focus on the competencies and predispositions of teachers who were likely to be successful serving at-risk students in challenging educational environments.

In addition, the district examined the local teacher preparation programs to identify the ones most likely to produce high-quality teachers who also matched well with CPS's priorities and then actively recruited from those programs. It also made changes to improve its ability to strategically staff schools with high-quality teachers. For example, the district began to offer financial incentives to encourage departing teachers to declare their intentions earlier in the year

so vacancies could be more quickly identified. CPS could then mobilize and more successfully recruit better-qualified applicants because it had “first pick” in the recruitment process. In addition, by partnering with professional associations’ job fairs to design and implement an in-state recruitment strategy and program, CPS was able to onboard new teachers who more closely resembled the CPS community’s diversity.

The strides CPS took to staff its schools with high-quality teachers indicated a strong start and also represented its commitment to supporting its low-performing schools. CPS’s actions acknowledged the importance of a cadre of strong teachers, and it knew that without professionals who are both dedicated and prepared to implement necessary changes, a turnaround was unlikely to be successful.

*Areas for improvement.* The district devoted significant time and energy to improved teacher hiring, but principal hiring was not emphasized in the same way. The district needed to be more strategic in determining who would lead the turnaround schools and how it would attract strong leaders to turnaround schools. Quality teachers expect quality leaders. Without a strong leadership team, the teachers whom the district worked so hard to recruit and retain might not stay for the long term. If quality teachers do not stay, and the school’s human capital deteriorates again, the same downward cycle could repeat.



## **Effective Instructional Infrastructure**

A school can successfully turn around only if its students are receiving daily, high-quality instruction. Often, students in turnaround settings have individualized needs that can only be identified through careful diagnostic assessments and/or deep item analysis of interim assessments. Districts set the conditions for effective instruction by providing an infrastructure that allows for clear, coherent, data-driven strategies that are aligned with district and state learning objectives. If a district is unable to provide schools with this instructional support, it is unlikely to see the kind of dramatic improvements in learning that are the hallmarks of a true turnaround. The following are processes that facilitate effective instructional infrastructure:

- High-quality assessment strategy aligned with the curriculum
- Robust and user-friendly data tools in place
- Data-driven culture

### **High-Quality Assessment Strategy Aligned with the Curriculum**

Districts should provide schools with access to interim and formative assessments that correspond closely to the learning objectives and are tied to career and college readiness rigor. Assessments define the rigor of expectations and should be built to align with clear, coherent, and quality curriculum. Interim assessments should be common across turnaround schools to promote rigor, cross-curricular learning, progress monitoring, and instructional adaptation. Interim assessments should be scheduled far in advance, allow for deep item analysis, and result in teacher action plans. Too often, districts and schools use only predictive assessments that can predict student performance on state assessments but do not provide teachers with the insight needed to determine how they will adjust instruction to better meet student needs. To complement interim assessments, formative assessments or organized check-ins for understanding should be given regularly, and the district should provide schools with tools and capacity-building to help determine their formative strategy. Student progress and success

depends greatly upon a teacher’s ability to engage in a cycle of individualizing, monitoring, and adjusting. Formative assessments enable teachers to continually understand their students’ progress toward instructional goals and reveal essential insight into student strengths and limitations before the administration of summative assessments.

### **Robust and User-Friendly Data Tools in Place**

Teachers and leaders must be able to quickly access student data, including current and historical achievement, attendance, and discipline data. Interim and diagnostic assessment results should be generated with very short turnaround times (less than 48 hours). The systems should be relatively easy to access and understand.

### **Data-Driven Culture**

Above all, a culture must exist in the district in which teachers and leaders see data as a critical tool to accurately diagnose and then address student needs. Districts should be using data to understand the overall trends in schools; principals should be using data to understand and address individual teacher and classroom performance; and teachers should be using data to monitor each child’s performance intervention action plans. Districts can effectively support data use by providing opportunities for professional development, as well as the technical infrastructure for timely and accurate data collection and analysis. This infrastructure will include time and expectations for regular data meetings among teachers that focus on outcomes.



### ***Effective Instructional Infrastructure in Practice?***

Davis Public Schools (DPS), a midsize district serving 7500 students in 11 schools, demonstrates some strength in this area.

*Strengths.* DPS effectively implemented instructional infrastructure by establishing an assessment system that includes interim and formative assessments. The district was using these tools to inform instructional practices and influence broader programmatic decisions. DPS noticed that many students in the district regularly changed schools, which necessitated the implementation of more consistent instruction throughout the district to counteract the effects of piecemeal instructional sequences that these mobile students experienced. Collecting formative assessment data across schools enabled consistent tracking of student progress, even for students who changed schools midyear. Teachers were involved in developing common goals and curriculum pacing guides for all elementary schools. The elementary schools tailored instructional and intervention efforts to individual students’ needs. The district also provided schools with instructional tools and supplemental curricula to support instruction.

*Areas for improvement.* The district has not yet established a regular cycle to improve the rigor and alignment of the assessment process each year. Additionally, all schools needed to improve the process by which teachers received feedback following interim assessments so that the teachers could subsequently adapt instructional plans based on the data. Thus, the district needed to identify a model practice, train all principals in that process, and identify proof points within the district to aid in building capacity of all teachers to be data-based problem solvers. Furthermore, the middle and high schools were not moving as quickly as the elementary schools to align their instruction. The district still needed to strengthen the culture of data use among teachers and leaders at the secondary level.





## Questions to Consider in Assessing District Readiness

District readiness to support turnaround falls along a continuum, and few districts with turnaround schools will be fully “ready” in any one area, let alone all four. For example, each of the districts highlighted in this guide had some very positive things happening, but each also had room for improvement and needed to better understand how changing system-level practice was essential to prepare for sustainable school improvement. This situation is typical for districts ready to embark on turnaround. If a district is truly exemplary in all four areas, it is unlikely that it will have schools in need of turnaround. With this in mind, it is important to approach a district readiness assessment as an opportunity to better understand a district’s strengths and weaknesses. A readiness assessment helps identify where the district would most benefit from piloting or changing practice to effectively prioritize and drive bold change in turnaround schools. The process of assessing district readiness can have important implications for how useful the data are. The following are some key questions for consideration in conducting a district readiness assessment.

### Who Benefits from the Assessment?

The assessment process benefits districts and SEAs in several ways. First, it allows SEAs to have a baseline diagnostic that can guide their support and resources. The assessment process also helps districts recognize how their strengths can be leveraged, and it identifies issues that should be addressed. Finally, the readiness assessment process helps build mutual understanding and trust between the SEA and district as they begin the school turnaround process.

### Who Should Conduct the Assessment?

A leadership team from the SEA or from an external partner can conduct the readiness assessment. It is best to use interviewers who will be working with the district throughout the turnaround process. The team should be relatively small. It should include four or five members at most, interviewing in teams of two or three, so that the process does not overwhelm the district. A small team also allows the interviewers to more readily compare notes and triangulate the data collected.

### How Should the Assessment Be Conducted?

The assessment’s purpose is to collect rich data that reflect reality. A blend of both interviews and focus groups allows for variation in depth and breadth of information.

#### Interviews

One-on-one, semi-structured interviews usually allow the interviewees plenty of time to express and expand upon answers. Because of the confidentiality afforded by an interview format, the interviewees provide insightful responses; they are not concerned with how their peers might perceive their answers, as they might be in a focus group, discussed next. During interviews, interviewers should ask a mix of pre-determined “scripted” questions and unscripted follow-ups to better uncover nuances in the interviewees’ responses. Scripted questions are an important part of the interview. They provide structure for the interview and ensure open-ended (rather than leading) questions that maximize insight and ensure that the interviewees are able to cover predetermined topics. In semi-structured interviews, interviewers have the discretion to

adjust the interview's focus based upon what the interviewee shares. For example, if an interviewee does not understand a question as intended, the interviewer can rephrase it. Or if in answering a question, the interviewee shares information that is relevant, the interviewer can ask further probing questions. In these ways, semi-structured interviews are more flexible, responsive, and accurate than other data collection methods.

### **Focus Groups**

While beneficial in terms of the depth of information provided, interviews do not allow for the dynamics of a group setting that a focus group promotes. Often, during focus groups, participants' responses trigger the thinking of another participant in ways that a single interviewee would not have considered. This approach results in a broad spectrum of responses from multiple participants. The focus group's social setting can lead to more conversational interaction, with the moderator asking predetermined questions. Much of a focus group's value is in the interaction around the questions. Moderators can access multiple perspectives and see and hear others' reactions. Focus groups also make it possible for the moderator to observe intrapersonal dynamics and professional relationships among participants.

### **Other Data Collection**

Beyond interviews, the SEA should consider other data collection methods. It might be more enlightening to ask someone to demonstrate how teachers access student data in the district's data system in addition to asking about it in interviews. Likewise, strategically chosen document reviews and observations might yield important insights.

### **What Tools Should Be Used?**

Protocols for these interviews and focus groups provide a framework for interviewers to make sure they ask the essential questions. Development of protocols also encourages the assessors to be clear about what they are listening for in each interview. As the interviewers conduct sessions, they can monitor whether their questions are yielding the breadth and depth of information they are seeking. At times, it may be necessary to rephrase or adapt questions. For this reason, protocols should not be regarded as an exhaustive list of questions. In fact, the most accurate and in-depth interviews and focus groups are led by interviewers who are trained to make decisions about when to ask the questions and how to best formulate follow-up questions. Since the subject matter of participants' responses cannot always be predicted, interviewers must quickly identify potentially insightful responses and then develop questions to encourage participants to explain more specifically their experiences, beliefs, and perspectives. Interviewers should be inquisitive and focused while conducting interviews.

### **Who Should Be Interviewed?**

The readiness assessment is intended to collect data from all levels of the organization, including interviews with the superintendent, all of the staff reporting directly to the superintendent who have management oversight responsibilities, and anyone else who might play a critical role in the turnaround initiative. The focus group should also include some principals, other key leaders who the superintendent nominates, and teacher leaders.

## How Long Do the Interviews Take?

The data collection process is a critical part of any district readiness assessment. It will yield more insightful information if the interviews are not rushed and allow sufficient time for follow-up from the participants. The length of the interview might depend on the respondent. It is usually advisable to schedule at least an hour with most respondents and at least 90 minutes each with the superintendent and any focus groups.

## How Long Does the Whole Assessment Take?

The assessment's duration depends on the number of interviews and the staff available to conduct the assessment. Generally, visits to small and medium-sized districts take two days, while large district visits may take three days. Although less costly, a single day generally produces only limited and somewhat one-dimensional data. A longer duration allows for checking of data and triangulation from multiple sources within the district structure and hierarchy.

One advantage of a multiple-day visit is that it allows time to build trust between the interviewers and interviewees. This trust is particularly important if the interviewers are representatives from the SEA or another entity who will be assisting the district with its turnaround effort. Over time, interviewers are seen less as outsiders and more as part of the team. As districts become more familiar with the interviewers, the amount of information, levels of insight, authenticity, and willingness to share will increase. The time investment on the part of the assessment team also signals to the districts the genuine interest the interviewers have in helping the districts prepare for turnaround. As trust develops, the districts will begin to be less concerned with presenting an ideal image (giving the “right” answers) and more interested in sharing their genuine strengths and shortcomings.

## How Do You Arrive at a Consensus?

At the conclusion of the interviews, interviewers should meet and confer about themes that emerged from the interviews. They should also compare notes for the consistency of answers across respondents. At this point, the interviewers should also collectively assess the “big picture” areas of strength and weakness for each of the focus areas and what commitments would likely be necessary to ensure success of a turnaround initiative.

## What Happens at the End of the Assessment?

Following a readiness assessment, the SEA readiness assessment team should schedule a meeting with the district leadership team to share its findings. The findings will help the district to implement changes that will put it in a better position to support an effective turnaround effort. The assessment's results contribute to a dialogue about what commitments from both the district and SEA leaders would be necessary from each entity to embark upon and realize a successful turnaround. This process can be useful to specifically identify contributions and commitments that will enhance alignment and partnership between districts and SEAs.

## Implications for SEA and District Collaboration

School turnaround is a challenge for not only schools, but also districts and SEAs. When districts utilize key anticipatory processes to prime the system for school support, turnaround becomes a much more achievable goal. SEAs can partner with districts during this process to facilitate review and consideration of current practices to determine which adjustments may need to be made. Districts may not be able to best identify and develop solutions in isolation without the SEA's guidance.

The term "school turnaround" implies that change only happens at the building level, but this view clearly is too narrow. However, the nature of school turnaround is such that districts are often unsure how to provide meaningful support to schools. Sometimes districts take a well-intentioned, hands-off approach, when what schools really need are actively engaged district leaders who take the initiative to remove traditional bureaucratic barriers for improvement. This guide discusses some of the ways SEAs can help districts anticipate schools' needs through change and adjusting systems, procedures, and practices. SEA leaders interested in assessing and facilitating their districts' preparation for turnaround can encourage the districts to utilize the four key levers outlined earlier as anchors during their discussions and planning for school improvement within their particular contexts.

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## Appendix A

### Sample Interview Questions

Below are a few sample questions that can be used as a starting point for designing a district readiness assessment protocol.

1. Leadership
  - Describe the district’s plan for raising achievement in high-needs schools.
  - What do you see as the strengths and barriers to a successful turnaround initiative?
  - What support do you have from the school board regarding this initiative?
  - What are the district leaders’ greatest strengths?
2. Infrastructure to Provide Differentiated Support and Accountability
  - Describe the district’s role in improving schools.
  - What support structures are currently in place for schools that need help?
  - What financial or material resources are available to turnaround schools?
  - Who will oversee the turnaround initiative? How do you see their day-to-day responsibilities?
  - How is the principal’s performance currently monitored during the school year? Is this monitoring due to change as the district embarks upon school turnaround?
3. Conditions for Effective Talent Management
  - Describe your process for recruiting and selecting school leaders.
  - How does the district identify the top performers?
  - How will you make turnaround schools attractive to the best talent?
  - What is the process for identifying and addressing underperformance?
4. Effective Instructional Infrastructure
  - Describe your district’s assessment strategy.
  - How does the district view its role in ensuring effective instruction?
  - What data systems are in place, and how do they inform practice?
  - How do teachers and principals use data in the district?
  - Are data analyzed to understand differences between teachers?
  - How are curriculum maps and pacing guides used in the district?



