



Incorporating Early Learning Strategies in the School Improvement Grants (SIG) Program

How three schools integrated early childhood strategies into school turnaround efforts to improve instruction for all students

Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO)
Center on School Turnaround (CST)

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The School Improvement Grant (SIG) program, first authorized in 2001, provides formula-based federal funds to states that competitively award these funds to districts to implement comprehensive reforms that improve the performance of their low-performing elementary and secondary schools. In response to the unprecedented increase in SIG funding in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, the U.S. Department of Education issued regulations designed to ensure that SIG funds are used for rigorous interventions to turn around states' persistently lowest performing schools. The new requirements initiated a national dialogue on school turnaround efforts and focused attention on the role of state educational agencies in supporting local efforts to improve schools.

Introduction

A significant body of research shows that achievement gaps evident in persistently low-performing schools, in many instances, manifest prior to children entering kindergarten. High-quality early learning programs have proven to demonstrate positive effects on closing academic gaps both for individual children and in the aggregate for the school.¹ Further, research indicates that the impact of high-quality pre-kindergarten (PK) on children's development is sustained when children experience a high-quality, aligned early elementary experience.²

The Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO) and the Center on School Turnaround (CST) collaborated to develop case studies of three selected schools receiving SIG funds that have, with the support of their districts, promoted the use of early childhood programming (PK–3) as a key strategy in their schools' turnaround models. The goal of this document is to increase the awareness and understanding of how to effectively embed PK–3 strategies in school turnaround efforts within the SIG program. Thus, we sought schools where specific practices in the PK–3 years aligned with and accelerated promising turnaround efforts through the implementation of the SIG models.

Through a review of data on all elementary schools that received SIG funds to implement interventions beginning in school year (SY) 2010–11 (referred to as “Cohort 1 schools” as they were the first group of schools to receive SIG funds under the new requirements), three sample schools were selected for this report. The schools—Orchard Gardens K–8 School in Boston, Massachusetts; Horace Mann Elementary School in St. Louis, Missouri; and Elliott Elementary School in Lincoln, Nebraska—were selected based on growth in their preschool populations and improved student achievement data. The practices implemented by these three elementary schools were examined through research literature and school data reviews, combined with interviews with school, district, and state leaders from both early learning and school improvement offices.

¹ Barnett, W. S. (2011, September 26). *Preschool education as an education reform: Issues of effectiveness and access*. Retrieved from <http://www.nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/NRC%20Preschool%20Report%20Rev%209%2026%2011.pdf> | National Institute for Early Education Research. (2013, December). *Expanding access to quality pre-k is sound public policy*. Retrieved from <http://www.nieer.org/publications/nieer-working-papers/expanding-access-quality-pre-k-sound-public-policy>

² The Anne Casey Foundation. (2003). *The first eight years: Giving kids a foundation for lifetime success*. [Policy Report: Kids Count] Retrieved from <http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-TheFirstEightYearsKCpolicyreport-2013.pdf> | Tout, K., Halle, T., Daily, S., Albertson-Junkans, L., & Moodie, S. (2013). *The research base for a birth through age eight state policy framework*. [Publication # 2013-42]. Retrieved from http://earlysuccess.org/sites/default/files/website_files/files/B8%20Policy%20Framework%20Research.pdf

The findings from the resulting case studies underscore that the principles of good practice in school turnaround may look different from grade to grade and in different contexts, which vary by state, district, and school. However, the improved student achievement in each of these schools speaks to the promise of implementing aligned early learning strategies as part of an overall school turnaround plan. Across the nation, schools, districts, and state education agencies are working to transform schools that have been identified as the lowest performing schools. In each example, it is clear that tremendous gains have been made. However, each site would also affirm that the work is not complete.

These strategies play out in varied ways and are supported across the grades. Key components of effective school turnaround practices were prevalent in each of the schools we studied:

- Strong leadership
- Effective teachers
- Redesigned schedules for additional time
- Rigorous and aligned instructional programs
- Use of data for continuous improvement
- Safe and healthy students
- Family and community engagement

Due to a variety of reasons, including the urgency to improve a school identified in the bottom percentile of performance in a state, the national conversation to turn around schools has not, to date, included the integration of early childhood strategies. These three case studies signal a new approach to school turnaround and raise awareness of integrating long-term strategies in an effort to influence systemic change.³

3 At the time of publication of these case studies, the Department of Education had proposed new regulations for the SIG program that would, among other things, allow school districts to use SIG funds to implement an early learning intervention model in an elementary school. Under the proposed requirements, a school district would be permitted to choose from among this model and other permitted intervention models, including the four intervention models in current SIG requirements (i.e., the turnaround, restart, closure, and transformation models) from which the districts of the case study schools have chosen. These regulations, once final, would apply beginning with the competitions for SIG funds that states conduct in 2015 to support initial implementation in SY2015–16.

Orchard Gardens K–8 School—Boston, Massachusetts

Like many SIG counterparts, Orchard Gardens K–8 School in the Boston Public Schools (BPS) district started its turnaround journey lagging far behind other Massachusetts schools. Its success story has received a great deal of attention locally and nationwide, garnering proud visits from the Boston mayor and the Massachusetts governor, and student visits to the White House. Even President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan have toured the facility at different times, both touting varied aspects of the learning on display for four year olds through eighth grade. Orchard Gardens still has some distance to travel, but the progress made by Orchard Gardens in the past few years provides a pathway for all to consider.

Enrollment: 833 (PK–8)
 African American/Black: 40.8%
 Hispanic: 54.3%
 White: 1.0%
 English Language Learner: 56.8%
 Special Education: 15%
 Low Income: 73.2%

Source: 2013–14 Orchard Gardens Teaching and Learning Report (BPS)

Background

Orchard Gardens Public School is a large K1–8 school⁴; in school year (SY) 2012–13 it served more than 800 children in the very diverse neighborhood of Roxbury, which is part of the Boston Public Schools (BPS) System in Massachusetts. Opened in 2003 as an “innovation pilot school,” it now serves a virtually all-minority student population: 57% are English language learners (ELL); 15% have Individual Education Plans (IEPs); and 73% are eligible for free and reduced price lunch. In its earliest days, Orchard Gardens held a dubious position among the five poorest performing schools in the entire state of Massachusetts, careening through six principals in seven years.

In 2010, Orchard Gardens was named among the state’s 12 School Improvement Grant (SIG) Cohort 1 Turnaround Schools, receiving close to \$4 million to implement significant reforms.

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE)

The Office of District and School Turnaround (ODST) coordinates the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s (ESE) work to build partnerships with the lowest performing districts and schools to turn around student performance. The ODST theory of action asserts that if the district uses a continuous cycle of improvement to turn around its lowest performing schools, it will strengthen its systems of support necessary to continuously improve overall district and school performance. The ODST works closely with the 10 largest urban school districts to provide customized support through a network of six district and school assistance centers (DSACs). Each DSAC is led by a regional assistance director—a recently retired superintendent selected based on his or her prior record of accomplishment. The state-district support system relies heavily on the *District Analysis and Review Tools* (DARTs) report on more than 40 quantitative indicators to allow all stakeholders to gauge the overall health of a school or district, as well as on online models and self-assessment tools for district and school improvement. The DSACs offer varied professional development programs to support school turnaround, including ESE’s foundational professional development course menu, train-the-trainer models, online webinars and courses, and a heightened emphasis on new, more rigorous criteria for professional development providers in literacy and mathematics. All of these professional development opportunities are designed to build educator effectiveness in five critical content areas: (1) instructional leadership, (2) sheltering content for English language learners, (3) inclusive instructional practices for students with disabilities, (4) mathematics, and (5) literacy.

⁴ In BPS, K1 classrooms serve four-year-old preschoolers, and K2 is the traditional kindergarten year for five year olds. K0 classrooms serve three year olds; in Orchard Gardens, the K0 services are provided to a small number of three year olds with identified disabilities or developmental delays.

In partnership with the ODST and with these supports, the Boston Public Schools (BPS) enlists the same key strategies to strengthen teaching and school leadership, and to redesign district services for effectiveness. Centering on stronger teaching and school leadership, better use of data, extended days, intensive instruction during vacation weeks, and out-of-school partnerships has been essential to school turnaround. Early learning is viewed as a crucial approach for both student and school success, enlisting early childhood programming in its achievement acceleration agenda by














implementing uniform mathematics and literacy programs across early learning programs and including teacher training and coaches. Internal and independent studies reveal that the BPS early learning efforts have paid off with positive effects on student performance in both the short and long terms. These positive effects on student achievement apply to all students, including English language learners and students with disabilities, and are pronounced in successful turnaround schools like Orchard Gardens.

Evidence of Success

Since initiation of the SIG turnaround process, Orchard Gardens has moved from a Level 4 designation—among the lowest performing schools in the state—to Level 1. This rise commends the school’s success in implementing promising new practices, in turn narrowing proficiency gaps among almost all risk factors (see Chart 1).

In addition to the academic gains that have resulted during the turnaround time frame, the school has realized significant improvements in school climate, including measured improvements in student attendance, school safety, and family engagement.

Chart 1. Orchard Gardens Accountability Information

Accountability and Assistance Level		■ = School's Goal	
Level 1*	Meeting gap narrowing goals		
	*Pending approval of Level 4 exit assurances		
	-		
	-		
	-		
This school's overall performance relative to other schools in same grade span (School percentiles: 1-99)			
All Students:		28	
This school's progress toward narrowing proficiency gaps (Cumulative Progress and Performance Index: 1-100)			
Student Group	Less Progress	On Target = 75 or higher - ■	More Progress
All Students		86	Met Target
High Needs		88	Met Target
Low income		86	Met Target
ELL and Former ELL		80	Met Target
Students w/disabilities		88	Met Target
Amer. Ind. or Alaska Nat.			-
Asian			-
African American/Black		70	Did Not Meet Target
Hispanic/Latino		99	Met Target
Multi-race, Non-Hisp./Latino			-
Nat. Haw. or Pacific Islander			-
White			-

Source: BPS 2012–13 Report for School on Teaching and Learning.

How Orchard Gardens Succeeded

The substantial influx of federal turnaround resources leveraged with state and district supports, as well as those provided by multiple private stakeholders, enabled Orchard Gardens to make remarkable progress during the time span of the program. In 2010, the new principal, **Andrew Bott**, had the authority and funding in hand to alter the core conditions needed to support school effectiveness; he started by replacing 80% of the teaching staff and hiring new administrators.

Strong Leadership

A basic strategy of school turnaround is the application of strong leadership at all levels of the school. In the early years of a turnaround effort, knowledgeable principals and directors observe early learning teachers, provide them actionable feedback, and offer and support ongoing professional development in the context of an appropriate early learning environment.

Jocelyn Lumley is just such a leader. She now serves as assistant principal of the K–8 school. In 2010, Lumley was brought aboard as the director of the Bethune K1–2 Grade Academy—one of the three academies in Orchard Gardens at that time, serving grades K1–2, 3–5 and 6–8.

Early learning is a key driver in the turnaround process because it places four and five year olds in our building and allows us to see their growth in grades 3–5.

— Jocelyn Lumley

The academies have since been eliminated to increase alignment, and Lumley was made assistant principal for the entire K1–8 continuum. She arrived at Orchard Gardens following a two-year stint as an instructional coach and early childhood specialist in the BPS Office of Early Childhood Education. Lumley asserts that early learning is important to the turnaround efforts because it allows the school to chart progress from children from four years old through the tested grades and beyond.

Principal Bott was keen to support his leadership team and to expand its reach. Early in the process, he hired a new director of professional development and data inquiry, **Toby Romer**. Together, the two administrators implemented instructional leadership teams with both grade-level leaders for all grades and content-area leaders along the full learning continuum. Though the Orchard Gardens administrators shepherded much of the turnaround design and implementation, it is the teacher leaders who now regularly facilitate grade-level and content academic meetings and drive the instructional program.

District leadership and supports are also evidenced in the structural changes implemented during Orchard Gardens’ turnaround initiatives. BPS early childhood director, **Jason Sachs**, has led the expansion of full-day kindergarten to every five year old in the district and increased the focus on access and quality of preschool through uniform standards and curricula in math and literacy, along with expanded teacher training and use of instructional coaches. BPS helped to move 35 schools toward accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and in 2011, Orchard Gardens was among the first in BPS to attain accreditation for its preschool and kindergarten classrooms. This was due, in part, to the concerted attention to low-poverty, low-performing schools from BPS, but also to the compounded commitment garnered by Lumley.

The full leadership at Orchard Gardens also benefited from the direction set by the State Department of Education’s Office of District and School Turnaround’s theory of action, relying on the following “Continuous Cycle of Improvement” sequence: (1) regular assessment and analysis of data, (2) setting the turnaround direction and strategic objectives, (3) developing and revising the turnaround implementation plan, (4) monitoring implementation through multiple sets of evidence, and (5) evaluating success at regular intervals.

With these supports, Orchard Gardens leaders built a culture and climate at the school that was concentrated on the following strategies:

- Teaching teams focused on child data
- Thoughtfully planned professional development focused on the results of analyzing data
- Supportive student learning environments appropriate for each grade level
- Instruction tailored to the individual needs of children
- Strategic use of community partners

Effective Teaching | Strengthening Instruction

Sachs noted, “[Who the teachers are matters, as does how they teach, but WHAT they teach is also important.](#)” This is evident along the learning continuum of Orchard Gardens, where, with BPS early childhood supports, they are revitalizing the K0–K2 curricula and have implemented new frameworks for reading and math throughout the school. Applying for NAEYC accreditation was an example of the supports and momentum provided by the district. The yearlong accreditation process is both rigorous and intensive. It engages teachers and school leaders in focusing on brain and developmental science research, developing a fluency with the state and district early learning standards, aligning curricula and assessments, and developing high-quality early learning classroom environments. In the first year of the SIG grant, Orchard Gardens concentrated on this accreditation process in the earliest grades, examining and implementing the NAEYC standards. They attained NAEYC accreditation in 2011, achieving the highest scores in the district.

*Who the teachers are matters, as does
how they teach, but WHAT they teach is
also important.*

—Jason Sachs

A central component of strengthening teaching in the school involves ongoing, intensive, and job-embedded professional development, combined with team time dedicated to pouring over multiple sources of information about the children. Grade-level teachers meet for a class period (50 minutes) every week, and the entire school shares 100 minutes of common planning time weekly. The school sets aside 90 minutes for concentrated professional development on a biweekly basis, sometimes working on a particular identified school-wide curriculum issue, such as effective teaching strategies targeted to the large group of students who are ELL. All of these meetings are planned and facilitated by the grade-level teachers. In the earliest grades, PK teachers meet with their kindergarten counterparts during the grade-level meetings.

From the beginning of the turnaround process, the school’s administrators spent a lot of time in the classrooms providing regular feedback to the teachers, and as a climate of trust was built, the process afforded increasing opportunities for peer observations. Lead teachers who, according to Lumley, are the “resident experts” in the building, shared video clips of their best practices, allowing the early childhood teachers to witness the curriculum and instruction in action. As time went by, more teachers asked to be videotaped so that their peers could examine their work.

The bedrock of the Orchard Gardens turnaround effort was the concentrated attention to data. Aligned with the state turnaround improvement plan, the school administrators have set benchmarks that define success

for every month during the school year. These include such measures as formative and interim standard assessments, attendance, and behavior. The grade-level leads meet with the administrators the week after the report is issued to discuss data trends and to plan for follow-up professional development. During the teacher time described above, there is a school-wide examination of monthly progress reports. This attention to data has provided new structures for comparing and providing supports to at-risk children, allowing teams and teachers to differentiate needs not only for different children, but also for different classrooms and teachers.

Time and Learning

The academic school day for Orchard Gardens children includes not just language arts and math, but also music, art, theater, dance, and physical education, and the younger children engage with their older peers through the arts. Expanding learning time allows for the school to provide a continuum of academic and enrichment services throughout the day for the full school year across the age and grade continuum. At Orchard Gardens, this translates to full-day pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, and thanks to several external partnerships, the school provides free afterschool programs until 5:15 every school day for all grades. The extended day for the early grades provides intentional curriculum-focused activities along with structured and unstructured opportunities to play.

Improved School Environment | Engaging Families and Communities

The changeover in staffing occurring at the onset of the SIG process ensured that veteran teachers—those convinced that Orchard Gardens students could perform and learn at high levels—formed the faculty of the school. Bott was credited early on with reducing security staff and using those resources to add the arts to the curriculum. Classroom management and behavior supports are a regular part of the ongoing professional learning opportunities. These investments in school climate have yielded positive outcomes and, in addition to gaining accreditation in 2011, Orchard Gardens was also named one of nine turnaround arts schools by the Obama Administration.

Among the core values expressed by all three of the Orchard Gardens administrators was that the data that drive school turnaround need to be accessible to all—not only to the teaching staff but also to the families. BPS worked with Romer in designing the shared monthly progress monitoring reports so that families can easily understand them. Through monthly newsletters and individual academic progress reports, Orchard Gardens provides families with useful information for supporting their children’s learning.

In addition, every few months parents are invited to “publishing parties” showcasing the stories or writings of the students, and twice a year the school hosts art shows featuring the children’s work and performances.

Beyond the strong partnerships that these monthly events provide, the school also deploys family coordinators to identify specific needs and to link families with health, social, and community services. These parenting supports are provided to ensure children have nurturing and stable relationships with caring adults and the connections to the comprehensive services that vulnerable children and families need to ensure healthy development. The resulting improvement in school climate parallels those realized in positive child outcomes.

BPS conducts student climate surveys annually, querying children and families about their perceptions and experiences. Orchard Gardens respondents in SY2012–13 gave high marks to the school on maintaining a friendly

environment, identification with the school, and school safety. The highest measures on the survey went to those qualities most associated with improving achievement and consequent school turnaround, such as student enthusiasm for learning, teacher and principal effectiveness, and strong structure and routine for students.

Looking Forward—Sustaining Success at Orchard Gardens

One of the greatest challenges for turnaround schools is that tremendous resources are focused on the poorest performing schools but not much is applied to those that are newly improving. The substantial turnaround grant through the SIG program concluded in 2013 and other significant changes are looming. Administrative turnover is a common challenge in all schools. Although Bott led the school throughout the turnaround process, it was announced in May 2014 that he would begin a new tenure as principal in Brookline, Mass., beginning in the fall of 2015.

The proven components of school turnaround are solidly in place at Orchard Gardens, and the infrastructure that has supported its remarkable improvements remains. The deliberate focus on providing time for ongoing professional learning has been transformative. As a result, teachers now regularly examine information and data, using them to change classroom practices and to design the school day for individual children. Says Lumley, *“The commitment to improving the quality of the early grades has paid off in the ensuing years, and the district and school supports for this will continue.”*

Conclusion

The SIG turnaround initiative combined with strong administrative leadership and a new faculty changed the core culture of Orchard Gardens and brought about rapid change to the school. To accomplish this, even among new staff, required building trust at all levels of the community. Of strategic and critical importance was a commitment to ensuring high-quality teaching and learning in the early years, which continues to extend throughout the older grades.

Key Takeaways

- **Teacher leadership is key to success, and this is as true in the early grades as it is in the upper grades.**
- **Data is the essential driver, and making it available and owned by all members of the school community is essential.**
- **Rigor is important at all grade levels but looks different in the early years, involving social and emotional supports and developmental practices specific to young learners.**
- **Focused and visionary leadership matters and is essential to creating a community of learners dedicated to continuous improvement at all levels.**
- **Continuous improvement requires time—not only several years of effort, but also daily, weekly, and ongoing professional learning for teachers.**
- **School-wide change requires the school to meaningfully interact and exchange information with families, engaging them deeply in children’s learning.**

Additional Resources

- Orchard Gardens Website: <http://orchardgardensk8.org/about-us/>
- Boston Public Schools School-Based Reports—Orchard Gardens: <http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/Page/899>
- Boston Public Schools Early Learning Division: <http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/Page/279>
- Massachusetts Department of Education, Office of School Turnaround—State System of Supports: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/sss/dsac/>
- Transforming Schools Through Expanded Learning, National Center on Time and Learning—Orchard Gardens Report: <http://www.timeandlearning.org/?q=orchardgardens>
- Strategic Education Research Project (SERP)—Building Coherence Within Schools—Orchard Gardens: <http://ic.serpmedia.org/index.html>

Horace Mann Elementary School—St. Louis, Missouri

This case study describes how Horace Mann Elementary School, with supports from St. Louis Public Schools (SLPS) and the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, made significant changes in the learning experiences of their students. As a result, Horace Mann has improved academic achievement, increased the use of assessment data to individualize instruction, and increased enrollment. Over the past four years (three with the SIG grant and one without the funds), Horace Mann’s principal and staff have implemented a number of strategies to improve instruction for all children, grades pre-kindergarten (PK)–6. This case study highlights selected promising practices and lessons learned by state, district, and school leaders in the integration of early childhood within its school turnaround strategy.

Enrollment: 263 (PK–6)
 African American/Black: 63%
 Hispanic: 10%
 White: 10%
 Asian: 17%
 English Language Learner: 14%
 Low Income: 95%

Source: 2013–14 Horace Mann Elementary School data (rounded to the nearest percentage)

Background

Horace Mann celebrated its 110th anniversary in 2010 and is one of the oldest schools in the SLPS district. It is located in a racially and ethnically diverse neighborhood in St. Louis and has weathered the challenges of desegregation and declining enrollment. It currently serves more than 300 children in grades PK–6. Horace Mann was one of 15 schools in the district to receive SIG funding in school years (SY) 2010–13.

As part of its turnaround plan, Horace Mann used SIG funding to hire specialists in reading, math, and social-emotional support, including the improvement of family and community engagement. Since SIG funding has ended, Horace Mann has continued to receive some additional funding from the district to sustain its efforts.

Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MDESE)

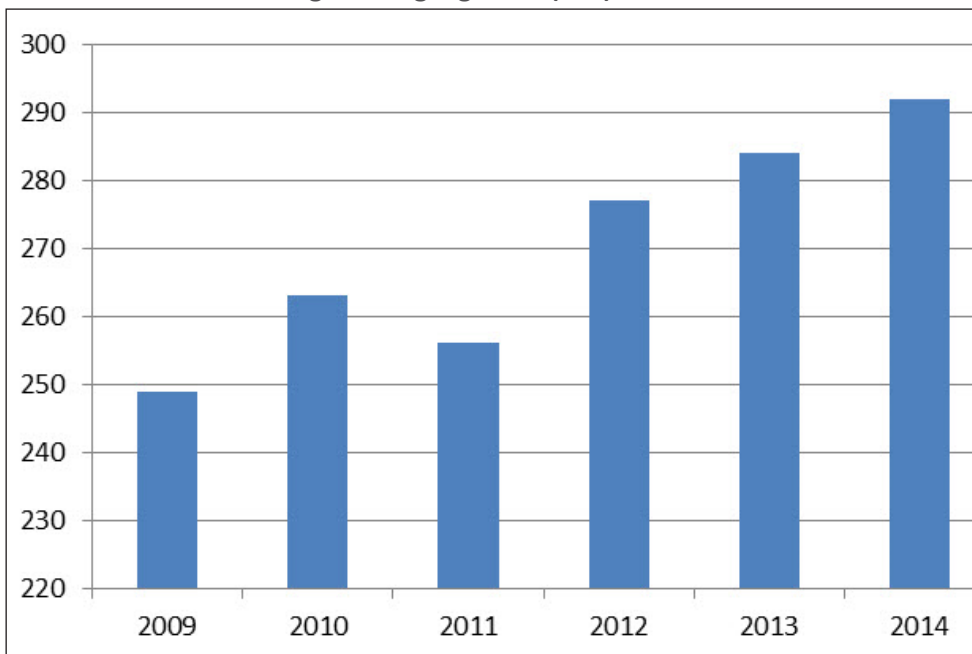
Within the MDESE, Division of Learning Services, the Office of Quality Schools oversees the Missouri School Improvement Grants. The Missouri Professional Learning Communities Project, a state-sponsored initiative for school improvement, provides extensive training and professional development to district and school leaders on building the capacity of school personnel to use data to customize learning for all students and implement job-embedded professional development. The MDESE also contracted with local vendors to provide direct technical assistance to districts receiving SIG grants. According to **Dennis Cooper**, assistant commissioner, Missouri Department of Education, *“Having the boots on the ground has been incredibly beneficial because relationships take time to build in the beginning, and someone that is working directly with district and school staff can identify who the leaders are, what the problems are, and what needs*

to be done.” The statewide initiative, Now for Later, promotes the importance of high-quality early learning, and one of the department’s Top 10 by 20 goals is to ensure all children enter kindergarten ready for success. Within the Division of Learning Services, the Office of Early and Extended Learning is responsible for overseeing the department’s efforts to expand and improve early learning opportunities for children. Staff administers the Missouri Preschool Program, which has long been a national leader in implementing Parents as Teachers (PAT), a home-based parent education program. The state has a curriculum approval process for preschool programs, recently adopted a school-readiness assessment for preschool children, and is providing training to district and state leaders. The office also addresses alignment with K–3 instruction, including afterschool programs.

Evidence of Success

In 2009, Horace Mann was designated as one of the lowest performing schools in Missouri and was not accredited by the state. The Missouri School Improvement Program (MSIP)⁵ determines each school’s accreditation status based on academic achievement measured by growth over time on scores on the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP), subgroup achievement and attendance data. In the past four years, the school has seen increases in rates of attendance and achievement both with and without SIG funds. Chart 2 illustrates Horace Mann’s steady growth in English language arts scores on the MAP from 2009 to 2014. In 2013, Horace Mann achieved provisional accreditation status from the state. They missed full accreditation status by less than 1 point, meaning that the school has moved from one of the lowest performing schools in the district to within the top quarter of schools in the district.

Chart 2: Horace Mann English Language Arts (ELA) MAP Index Scores from 2009–2014



Source: Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Comprehensive Data System

In the district’s June 2014 *Report to the Community*, the district noted impressive gains in graduation rates, preschool enrollment, and daily attendance. State, district, and school administrators attribute these positive indicators of school improvement to a strong focus on the importance of high-quality PK, professional development on using data to drive instructional practices, and strong leadership at the district and school levels, including the role of teacher leaders and mentors.

How Horace Mann Succeeded

A combination of factors has led to the improvement of the school culture and student achievement at Horace Mann. A strong focus on the early grades has helped to ensure that children experience high-quality early learning, and parents are welcome in the school. An increased focus in every grade on the use of data to

⁵ The MSIP was approved as the state’s accountability system in their ESEA flexibility waiver by the U.S. Department of Education in July 2012. See the *Comprehensive Guide to the Missouri School Improvement Program* at http://dese.mo.gov/sites/default/files/MSIP-5-comprehensive-guide-3-13_1.pdf

differentiate instruction and creating a professional learning environment with shared responsibility for student learning among teachers/school staff, family, and students contribute to a culture of success at the school.

Dr. Kelvin Adams, superintendent of SLPS since 2008, has a strong focus on ensuring children are successful in preschool and the early grades of elementary school. Adams noted, “It doesn’t matter what we do in the tested grades. If we have not built a solid foundation between PK and second grade, then school improvement means nothing in terms of how well children will do on standardized tests.” **Dr. Paula Knight**, assistant superintendent of early childhood/early childhood special education, provides oversight to all the elementary schools, including the 137 PK programs serving 2,166 children (SY2013–14) in SLPS. She also oversees curriculum and instruction and the implementation of effective instructional practices in preschool through grade 2. Recently, Knight developed a five-year professional development plan for PK–3 teachers aligned to the district’s educator evaluation system and a number of other efforts to support teacher and principal effectiveness.

Horace Mann was identified as a school in the “Superintendent Zone” because of low student achievement and, in turn, was required to meet higher expectations for accountability to improve student achievement. However, SLPS Assistant Superintendent **Michael Haggen** provided significant support to the principal and played a critical role in the early years of Horace Mann’s SIG funding to address changes in school leadership, climate, and instruction. He was a strong advocate for Mann’s school principal, **Dr. Nicole Conaway**, who was recruited in 2010 to assume leadership of the school. According to Conaway, Mr. Haggen supported her as a leader and gave her the autonomy to institute changes she felt were needed.

Investing in Staff

Conaway replaced 50% of the school staff as a requirement of the SIG grant. She believes this was a critical step in turning around the school climate and culture, ensuring that the school staff had the skills and dispositions to embrace the changes she planned to implement. Conaway used SIG funding to hire two instructional specialists in reading and math as well as positive behavioral intervention and support coordinators that she felt were critical to instructional interventions. Conaway noted that having highly qualified teachers in the early (untested) grades and integrating PK teachers with grade K–6 staff have been factors in the school’s ability to support effective teaching and provide differentiated instruction tailored to students’ specific learning needs.

The school’s staff includes 12 K–6 classroom teachers, four ancillary staff, two ELL teachers, a reading specialist, a positive behavioral specialist, three PK teachers, and three special education teachers. The Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) coordinator, reading specialist, and math specialist were hired with SIG funds; and since SIG funding ended, the school has maintained the PBIS and reading specialists’ positions. Each of the specialists works as part of the instructional teams and also may provide specialized support to children and families. The PBIS coordinator is proactive in addressing behavioral issues that are impacting individual student’s learning, and provides teaching staff and parents with additional support to engage students. The ELL teachers and reading specialists also work individually with children or co-teach in the classroom in small groups.

Recognizing that successful teachers are the key to successful students, Conaway provided strong leadership and support to teachers as professionals. **Craig Rector**, federal program director, MDESE, offered this reflection, “It is important to have someone that holds the building staff accountable. We have found that you have to have strong leadership at the building level and they have to be invested in the change.” Conaway evaluates

all teachers, including PK teachers, through informal and formal evaluations, under the requirements of the Missouri Educator Evaluation System. She develops an individual improvement plan for each staff member and employs a job-embedded approach to professional development. Grade-level teachers have a common planning time. Conaway meets with each teacher to set goals, and assigns mentors to each teacher based on the individual styles of the teachers and what they teach.

One of Conaway's greatest challenges in the first years of the SIG grant was convincing teachers that the decisions she made to improve instruction would result in real changes in student success. Conaway noted, "Some teachers took a 'wait and see' approach, but once the data on student achievement began to improve, they became committed to new instructional practices." Many have since taken on additional leadership; for example, Conaway initially led and oversaw the response to intervention (RTI) team, but it is now led by a teacher. In 2013, **Kimberly Davis**, kindergarten teacher at Horace Mann, was named the SLPS Kindergarten Teacher of the Year, and now serves as the mentor coordinator at Horace Mann.

Using Data to Improve Instruction

Conaway described her approach to student success as "We have a motto: 'Make it happen. No exceptions, no excuses.' And all the children know that. And we set the climate so that children feel safe in order to learn." The foundation of the instructional program at Horace Mann is built on an RTI model and on PBIS. Horace Mann teachers use a cloud-based assessment and instructional program focused on literacy. The program includes an online measure of children's reading levels. Using SIG funds, the school also purchased the AIMS-Web, a curriculum-based assessment for progress monitoring, aligned with the RTI differentiated instruction and assessment approach. All K–6 teachers received training in this instructional approach. (The PK teachers use a different curriculum and assessment aligned with the state's early learning guidelines; see below.) The use of these formative assessments—intended to inform instructional practices that are differentiated for each student's learning needs—is a new practice since receipt of the SIG dollars, as the district previously didn't use a common assessment.

Conaway believes that one of the most successful strategies to improve student performance was to increase teachers' use of data to drive instructional practices for each student. She redesigned instructional time and reassigned some staff so that grade-level teams meet in a "Power Hour" Monday through Thursday. Though not truly a full hour, this time allows teachers and support specialists to work for 30 minutes in small groups with specific children to provide tailored interventions as determined by the analysis of student data. Conaway said, "We're really, really good about gathering data, but that transition of actually using the data in a meaningful way that drives instruction is where we have that disconnect. ... It still is a process in which you have to really nurture people and train them and set an example for them."

Teachers conduct ongoing formative assessments as part of the RTI approach. Children with individual education plans (IEPs) receiving special education services are integrated within most classrooms, and all children have a portfolio that documents their assessment results and work samples. Specialists, such as ELL teachers or the reading specialist, are sometimes in the classroom teaching small groups or taking children out of class for specialized instruction. On Fridays, during a common planning time, PK–6 teachers and other support staff meet in data teams or professional learning communities to review individual student data and design differentiated instructional practices to address children's strengths and needs. Conaway described the process in this way:

“We meet every Friday and we ask, *Is this child really making any progress and what intervention are we using? ... and then we say, what does this child need and what do we want to change?*”

High-Quality Early Childhood Programs

Conaway’s goals for the school are to ensure that children are successful from their point of entry to their graduation at the end of grade 6. Horace Mann has a growing PK program, funded by the district with desegregation dollars. (The district doesn’t currently receive any monies from the Missouri Preschool Program, which is a competitive bid and grant program.) Both Conaway and Knight noted that the PK program utilizes promising practice in early childhood, including early learning standards, research-based curricula, and formative and summative assessments. PK teachers work closely with kindergarten teachers to implement a data-driven instructional program targeted to meeting individual children’s needs and preparing them for kindergarten success. This creates a seamless educational experience for PK children entering the full-day kindergarten program at Horace Mann.

Pre-kindergarten. Horace Mann had one PK classroom in SY2010, which expanded to three in SY2014, with plans to add a fourth classroom in SY2015. Each class has 15 children, staffed with a teacher and an aide. PK teachers have degrees in early childhood education or early childhood special education. Conaway considers each teacher’s individual teaching style and each student’s needs when making classroom assignments, as she believes the fit between teachers and students is an important factor in children’s learning success. PK teachers plan their instruction based on the state’s early learning standards, and utilize Project Construct,⁶ one of the state’s approved PK curricula, in curriculum planning. Throughout the day, children are grouped in homogeneous or heterogeneous groups to work on specific academic skills based on formative assessment data. Conaway described her philosophy about curriculum: *“One of the things that I tell the teachers is that the curriculum is just a tool. You as a teacher have to look at the data and decide where your children are, and use the best tool to move them from where they are to where they need to be. So they have that flexibility.”*

Kindergarten. Horace Mann currently has three full-day kindergarten classes in SY2014, and the school day is highly focused on instruction. Conaway says, *“Along with preschool, kindergarten provides the foundation for all learning, and children are learning all day long.”* Most children come into kindergarten with letter and number recognition skills and some are beginning to read. According to first-grade teacher, **Carla Ament**, this is a significant change from previous years when at least half the class did not know their letters. She attributes this change to the focus in SLPS on early childhood and the increased access to high-quality preschool programs.

All kindergarten teachers work collaboratively to plan instruction so they are teaching the same skills at the appropriate level for each child. Each child has a portfolio that documents their progress on key goals. Based on assessment data, children in each class are grouped by ability in order for teachers to provide targeted intervention to children who need extra time with specific skills and to provide support to those who are ready to take on additional challenges. These groups change frequently based on the data analysis examined each Friday, in data meetings or professional learning communities, to closely monitor student achievement and to plan interventions that will support each student’s success.

⁶ Project Construct is one of the approved curricula by the state of MO. See <http://dese.mo.gov/early-extended-learning/early-learning/curriculum>

Engaging Families and the Community in the School

Conaway believes relationships are critical to creating a loving atmosphere where parents feel their children are safe and all staff have high expectations for children’s learning. School staff actively engages with parents about their children’s learning through parent conferences at which students’ portfolios are reviewed and quarterly progress reports that include children’s goals for learning and summaries of relevant assessment data are shared. One parent noted, “Mann is a school with great diversity and high standards for student success. Mann staff creates a safe and optimistic environment for students to learn and encourages parents to be involved in activities, as well as many programs.”

Looking Forward: Sustaining Success at Horace Mann

Conaway believes the school is now on a path toward ensuring that all children are successful. She attributes her ability to be a great leader to the support of the district and to the teachers in the school. She has led by example with a strong foundation in effective teaching practices. She believes that, with a relentless focus on using individual student’s data to drive instruction, Horace Mann staff will sustain the progress it has made with SIG funding and continue to improve the performance of the school. **Dennis Cooper**, assistant commissioner, Office of Quality Schools, attributed Horace Mann’s success to the leadership at the school, and said, “School reform and school improvement begin with a school leader with clear expectations but also one who is not trying to do too many things. The leader has to have a strong but narrow focus.”

Student enrollment is increasing and mobility rates are decreasing at Horace Mann. Adams noted that before the SIG funds and Conaway’s arrival, the district considered closing the school. Now the school is sought out by neighborhood families. As the oldest school in the district, the district recently allocated \$1.1 million for renovations.

In reflecting on their turnaround experience at Horace Mann, Conaway and Adams offered the following advice to other leaders:

Make sure that you have the highest quality of teachers available to the students. Put people in the right places and make your vision very clear. Use data to make every decision!

—Nicole Conaway to Other Principals

Make early childhood a priority. As a superintendent, we have a million different priorities, but it is about the early years. Get young children in the classroom and ensure they have great teachers. By the time they get in 2nd grade they are on grade level and we can track for college and career readiness.

—Kelvin Adams to Other Superintendents

Conclusion

While the story of Horace Mann’s turnaround is not complete, the school has a strong and stable leader, with dedicated and knowledgeable school staff, all focused on the same goal—to ensure that each and every child is successful. The teachers are respected as professionals. They are given the tools and support to be in charge of their own learning and to improve their practice to meet the needs of all children. The school community sees the school as a welcome partner and a safe place for children to learn.

Key Takeaways

- **Horace Mann’s leadership benefitted from the strong support for early childhood education and resources to improve instruction from the district.**
- **In turn, the district and school utilized the policy, guidance, and resources from the MDESE Offices of Quality Schools and Early and Extended Learning.**
- **With these quality infrastructure supports from the state, the district and the school could focus on deep and sustained implementation of effective practice.**
- **This work takes time and persistence, and a relentless focus on core beliefs and goals for children’s learning.**
- **It is not the “school” that is turning around, but the people that touch and influence student learning, including district staff and the school principal and staff.**

Additional Resources

- MDESE, Office of Quality Schools: <http://dese.mo.gov/quality-schools>
- MDESE, Office of Early and Extended Learning: <http://dese.mo.gov/early-extended-learning>
- Missouri Professional Learning Communities Project: <http://dese.mo.gov/quality-schools/school-improvement-initiatives/professional-learning-communities>
- MDESE “Now for Later” Early Learning Public Awareness Campaign: <http://nowforlater.org/>
- Missouri Teacher Evaluation: <http://dese.mo.gov/educator-quality/educator-effectiveness/educator-evaluation-system/teacher-evaluation>
- Missouri Preschool Program: <http://dese.mo.gov/early-extended-learning/early-learning/missouri-preschool-program>
- St. Louis Public Schools: <http://www.slps.org/site/default.aspx?PageID=1>
- SLPS Report to the Community: <http://www.slps.org/cms/lib03/MO01001157/Centricity/Domain/6854/SLPSAnnualReport.pdf>
- Horace Mann Elementary School: <http://www.slps.org/Page/4263>
- Response to Intervention for Horace Mann: <http://www.slps.org/cms/lib03/MO01001157/Centricity/Domain/5411/RTI%20for%20Mann.ppt>
- Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports at Horace Mann: <http://www.slps.org/domain/477>
- Missouri Educator Evaluation System: <http://dese.mo.gov/educator-quality/educator-effectiveness/educator-evaluation-system/teacher-evaluation>
- School Readiness Tool: <http://dese.mo.gov/early-extended-learning/early-learning/school-readiness-tool>

Elliott Elementary School—Lincoln, Nebraska

Elliott Elementary School in Lincoln, Nebraska, built its turnaround approach around intentionality, focus, and persistence, which led to impressive results. Through a coordinated effort of state, district, and school staff, Elliott used SIG funds as an opportunity to reset its course, use data to improve student performance, and launch a pre-kindergarten (PK) program to better meet students' needs. This case study highlights selected strategies and lessons learned by state, district, and school leaders in aligning early childhood and school improvement policy priorities.

Background

Elliott Elementary School is a Title I elementary school serving students in the heart of Lincoln, Nebraska, since 1922. Elliott serves approximately 400 PK–5 students from diverse linguistic and ethnic backgrounds in one of Lincoln's oldest neighborhoods. The neighborhood and surrounding community face common urban challenges including poverty and a high mobility rate. Just over 90% of Elliott students participate in the free or reduced price lunch program, a proxy for poverty.

As a SIG-eligible school, in SY2009–10, Elliott was in the bottom 5% of schools in Nebraska. The school was, in fact, identified by the state as one of Nebraska's five lowest performing schools. After receiving SIG funding as a Cohort 1 grantee (one of seven schools across Nebraska and the only Lincoln Public Schools (LPS) site in Cohort 1), the long-time principal was replaced. This principal replacement was an unpopular move at both the district and school levels, but it was a requirement of the SIG transformation model. The new principal, **Dr. Jadi Miller**, came from another school in the district and began a focused effort to drastically improve Elliott's performance. Despite turnover in both leadership and teaching staff during the course of SIG, Elliott built a culture of achievement through systemic, intentional, and focused strategies that spanned the PK–5 student population and were sustained after the conclusion of the grant.

Nebraska Department of Education (NDE)

Within NDE, the Federal Programs Office oversees SIG, with **Randy McIntyre**, Nebraska SIG director, being the only state-level staff devoted to school turnaround. As part of his role, McIntyre visits SIG schools to provide monitoring and compliance assistance. These visits have given McIntyre insight into what is happening in school turnaround across the state. In the three Nebraska SIG schools that are including a focus on early learning, McIntyre sees a holistic approach to learning. He explains, *"Sometimes [PK] is looked on as a separate program, but it really shouldn't be. It really should be from the time that the child becomes a student in your facility until the time they leave, everybody should be working together to develop that child."*

McIntyre and his colleagues in the Office of Early Childhood (OEC) try to mirror this holistic approach in their support. OEC has three early childhood specialists who provide monitoring and technical assistance to districts and early learning providers to ensure high-quality learning environments for children birth to age eight. Most of the Federal Programs Office and OEC collaborative efforts are informal by design. (McIntyre's desk is next to the desk of an early childhood specialist.) For example, if an issue arises with a particular site, staff from both offices can immediately talk to each other to discuss the issue and possible solutions. In the recent past, these NDE offices collaborated in more formal ways. Last year the Federal Programs Office and OEC provided joint professional development to early childhood educators to

Enrollment: 425 (PK–5)
 African American/Black: 18%
 Hispanic: 32%
 White: 22%
 Asian: 12%
 Amer. Indian/Alaskan Native: 3%
 Two or More Races: 14%
 English Language Learner: 32%
 Low Income: 92%

Source: 2012-13 Elliott Elementary School Data (rounded to the nearest percentage)

ensure consistent messaging on regulations across programs and how funds can be leveraged to support early childhood.

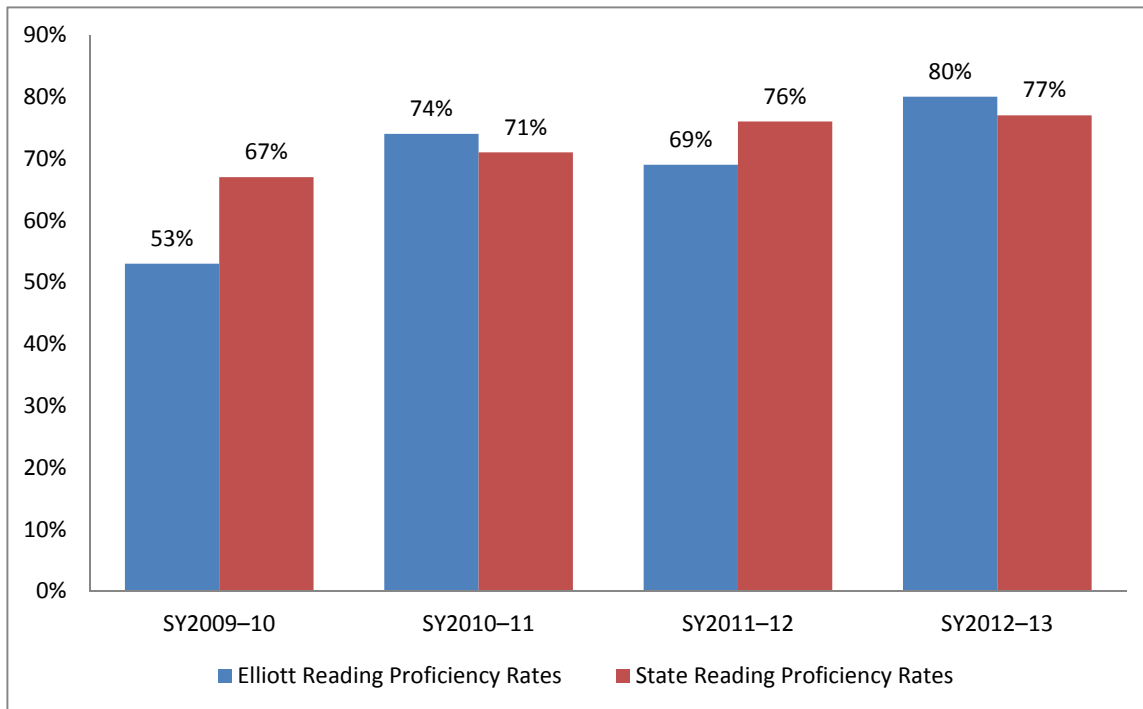
In 2013, Nebraska passed the Step Up to Quality Child Care Act, which provides guidelines and standards for improving the quality of early childhood programs through professional development, parent outreach, application of standards and assessments, use of data for improvement, and a quality rating and improvement system. OEC provides focused professional development and training to support the implementation of this legislation. NDE has an approval process for early childhood programs administered at the local education agency (LEA) level. OEC also oversees the

Early Childhood Training Center, which offers early childhood resources and training for early childhood personnel and families, and facilitates the state’s integrated early childhood professional development system. Nebraska has long worked to provide integrated services related to early learning. The state operates a Nebraska Early Childhood Interagency Coordinating Council (ECICC) to coordinate services across agencies related to early learning, including early intervention, Head Start, and First Five Nebraska. This integrated approach to early learning helps NDE offer more cohesive services to families through intentional coordination of services across state agencies through joint projects, shared priorities, and coordinated federal grant applications.

Evidence of Success

Over the course of its SIG, Elliott moved from being one of the bottom five schools in the state to performing near the state average—no small feat for a school named “persistently low-achieving.” Elliott increased reading proficiency rates by 27% and exceeded the state average in reading in its final year of SIG (see Chart 3). Though math proficiency rates were not available for SY2009–10, during the three years of SIG (SY2010–11 to SY2012–13), Elliott increased the percent of proficient students by 23%—from 52% to 75%—meeting the state average for math proficiency.

Chart 3. Comparison of Elliott and Nebraska Reading Proficiency Rates SY2009–13



Source: Nebraska Department of Education 2013-2014 State of the Schools Report

In addition to notable achievement gains, the school culture changed for the better over the SIG period. “It is a different school than it was [before SIG]. The ownership and pride is very positive from parents and all,” explained **Delia Steiner**, the recently retired director of Federal Programs for Lincoln Public Schools (LPS). The current principal, **Kathleen Dering**, reinforced this ownership: “Systems, procedures, and expectations....they all have to be solidly in place and completely bought in by everyone on staff. Then, we as a staff are executing all of those facets.”

How Elliott Succeeded

Identifying the focus of improvement efforts was an early step in the improvement process. As Miller, Elliott principal during the first two years of the SIG period, described, “When I got to Elliott...[it] had a lot of needs, a lot of students with a lot of needs. And the approach had been to try a lot of different things to meet those needs.” Some of those strategies were successful, but some were not. SIG funds offered an opportunity to hone in on the strategies that would help Elliott students achieve. For Miller, a key lever was to offer high-quality core instruction coupled with high-quality interventions. To achieve this, Elliott focused on data teams, integrating early learning into a cohesive elementary curriculum, and investing in staff through targeted professional development.

Data Teams

Elliott staff recognized that in order to offer high-quality interventions to meet student needs, they had to have a clear idea of what those needs were. As part of their SIG efforts, all teachers, including PK teachers, held weekly grade-level professional learning community (PLC) meetings, referred to as “data teams.” During data team meetings (a district-wide strategy), teachers and support staff review formative assessment data, student work, and behavioral data. Formative assessments include teacher-developed common assessments and curriculum assessments for early learning. Data are used to tailor instruction at the individual student level. “They were very much focused on what the data were telling them,” McIntyre noted, “and that drove their instruction....across all grade levels.”

Not only do the data teams provide opportunities for teachers to share with others in their grade level, but they also help teachers coordinate across grade levels. “When you’ve got those preschool teachers that are working very closely with kindergarten, first grade, second grade PLC teams....that is always a big benefit rather than being disconnected....I think all of those pieces play a role in the consistency factor [at Elliott],” explained **Dr. Jane Stavem**, associate superintendent for instruction in LPS. Through these meetings, PK teachers have the chance to understand the standards and curricula in subsequent grades so they know what skills they are building toward.

District and school leaders recognize that regular use of assessment data allows teachers to better understand the individual needs of their students and to customize instruction based on those needs. The current Elliott principal, Dering, explained, “The data—student work samples—that were commonly decided on by the teams ahead of time—are looked at every week. So every week individual kids and their needs, instructionally and emotionally, are looked at.” For some students at Elliott, those needs include basic food, clothing, or health care. Teachers work with the nurse, after-school supervisor, social worker, and site administrators to identify and address these needs. This intentionality has assisted Elliott in its improvement.

Early Learning Strategies

Early learning, and PK specifically, was an explicit focus of Elliott’s turnaround strategy. Though PK had been offered by LPS for many years, Elliott was not a site for the district-managed program. “It was one of the few Title I schools [in Lincoln] that did not have a preschool program,” explained Miller, “and that was something teachers felt was....significant and missing and needed to enhance the effectiveness of their school.”

Elliott was ripe for an opportunity to start a PK program. Teachers wanted the program, the principal who came to Elliott as part of SIG wanted the program, and the district had the infrastructure to support it. In addition, the school had an existing family literacy program, funded by a National Center for Family Literacy grant, focused on K–3 early learning. This program, Miller noted, was a great advertisement for the PK program and helped bring families into the school from the area. “We were looking for every way we could to make parents feel comfortable and connected with the school. Family literacy and early childhood [programs] were two great ways for us to do that,” she remarked. Since Lincoln PK programs were district-administered, students could come to Elliott for PK from across the city. Miller, however, wanted to bring in families from the area that would stay at Elliott for the remainder of their children’s elementary education. Doing so would help build continuity from PK to kindergarten and beyond—a key strategy in Elliott’s improvement efforts.

SIG funds offered an opportunity to develop a PK program at Elliott that provided a consistent, high-quality education PK–5. Because of timing issues with receiving SIG funds in the first year of the grant, the PK program did not begin at the school until the second year of funding. Once it was in place, however, it made “a huge difference....the preparation for students when they were coming to kindergarten, it was exponential in terms of the positive impact it had,” noted Miller.

Elliott’s early learning efforts are situated within a supportive district and state context. Nebraska has several key policies in place that support early learning. Policies, statutes, and funding streams support integrated early childhood programs to ensure inclusion for students identified for special education. The state also requires that PK teachers are fully certified teachers with an early childhood endorsement. Certified teachers can teach provisionally as they earn that endorsement, but all PK teachers must be certified. Nebraska has experienced a growth in early childhood programs. That, coupled with the certification requirement, has created a teacher recruitment challenge. “People who have the [early childhood] endorsement can pretty much go where they want to go,” explained **Melody Hobson**, Nebraska Office of Early Childhood administrator. The state is hopeful that more colleges and universities will offer high-quality early childhood training programs to ease the shortage of qualified early learning teachers. As the need and support for early learning programs grow, so does the need for qualified and effective teachers. The need and interest in early learning appears to be growing in Lincoln. Since SY2008–09, LPS has implemented district-wide full-day kindergarten. Elliott offers four kindergarten classes with strategically lower class sizes than other grades. The state, district, and school seem to value the impact of early learning and are offering supports to ensure its viability and sustainability.

Investing in Staff

Offering teachers targeted professional development and hiring instructional coaches was a cornerstone of Elliott’s SIG plan. Teacher professional development focuses on PLCs and data use. Instructional coaches focus their time on providing teachers with individualized support. The goal of both efforts has been, according to Miller, to build a common language about instruction to improve collaboration within and between grade levels

PK–5. “Once we got that common language to talk about instruction in place, the effectiveness of [coaches] became much, much greater because when they were talking about instruction with teachers, the teachers were hearing it and understanding it exactly the same way,” Miller said. In addition to site-based professional development, LPS gathers early childhood teachers for staff development and training on a monthly basis. “[Supports] are vital to growing the expertise, keeping the expertise, and then allowing [change] to happen over time,” remarked Stavem.

A key factor in sustaining improvement is having committed, trained, and high-quality leaders and staff. There was a lot of turnover at Elliott both before SIG—an issue many high-poverty, low-achieving schools face—and during SIG. In fact, there were three principals at Elliott in three years. “As a district we know leadership really matters. We never would have wanted three principals in three years,” noted Steiner. Various factors contributed to this turnover, but it speaks to the resilience of the school and the district that Elliott has been able to continue its improvement despite these leadership changes.

There was instability at the teacher level, too. As part of its SIG strategy, Elliott invested in various forms of teacher professional development, including graduate-level courses. Despite these investments, Elliott experienced high rates of turnover during SIG. “That’s one of the problems that I think occurs when you infuse dollars in high-need schools,” noted Stavem. “You invest heavily in professional development, yet the turnover rate—you have that expertise walking out the door,” she concluded. This tension was noted by state, district, and school staff. As Nebraska SIG Director McIntyre pointed out, professional development made the existing staff better teachers, but it also made them attractive to other schools. So when Dering came in as principal after SIG, she focused on stabilizing the teaching force, and her efforts appear to be working. At the end of SY2013–14, explained Dering, “the school lost one teacher who wanted to go to another district compared to 11 or 12 the previous three years.” Her role, as she sees it, is to continue and sustain the improvements at Elliott. A high-quality, stable teaching force is key to continuous improvement.

Looking Forward: Sustaining Success at Elliott

Elliott is on an upward trajectory, and Principal Dering is determined to keep it moving in that direction. Her efforts to build and retain a high-quality, committed staff are a key piece of sustaining the improvements at Elliott. Dering remarked, “I think it’s very clear that we’re where we need to be, but we just need to keep going at an intense focus and pace because....we’re always going to be growing. We’re always going to have kids that aren’t proficient in an area, and so our work is never done.”

Turnaround can take longer than expected, explained Miller, “I sometimes think that that moniker of turnaround is very misleading and even sometimes detrimental because turnaround implies I can turn around and go the other way very, very quickly. It’s more of a speed boat mentality, but if you’re on the Queen Mary, it’s a lot slower and takes a lot more time to get things turned around. I think sometimes people feel a sense of failure when they’re not seeing those quick results, but I think it takes years of doing things well and adapting and still bolstering things up to really see a turnaround.”

While Elliott did experience notable growth during the SIG period, its improvement efforts continue. To maintain growth, the school and district are working to build systemic supports.

In reflecting on their experiences in turnaround at Elliott, Dering, Miller, and Stavem offered the following advice to other leaders:

You have got to know where you're going. It's got to be crystal clear... Developing the leadership density among your teachers, that is another huge piece. It's never one person. It's never really even two or three. It's that whole collective. It's teachers being leaders. We've got that here. I think that that has to be included as a reason for the turnaround and a reason for the growth.

—Kathleen Dering to Other Principals

If there are holes or if there are issues that you need to address in [grades] three to five, then do that, but don't discount the value of spending some time, energy, and money investing in quality programming for primary grade kids as well as early childhood. That's going to pay off long term.

—Jadi Miller to Districts and Schools

Alignment with district initiatives and putting the systems in place that aren't just specific to the needs of that building, but support all buildings while also meeting the needs that come with some of the things like Elliott had encountered, but not leaving things to chance [is important advice to other districts]. Providing the supports that are needed, whether it's realigning how you have staff development positioned or how you allot time for those things [is key].

—Jane Stavem to Other Districts

Conclusion

Elliott Elementary School offers a compelling example of how to build a coherent improvement strategy based on a foundation of early learning. Through a coordinated effort, and with key supports from the district, Elliott rose out of persistent low achievement and is continuing its improvement trajectory. SIG offered LPS and Elliott an opportunity to deepen and expand their early learning efforts. As Miller noted, early learning is the foundation for future success: “That emphasis on high-quality instruction...certainly had an impact for us PK–5, but I think it had a profound impact in PK–3, because of the foundation and support that were provided to students well beyond those years.” Elliott is building a strong foundation that will continue to benefit students for years to come.

Key Takeaways

- State and district supports reinforced the concept that strong early learning programs can support student achievement in later grades.
- Though the district manages many aspects of PK, Elliott saw site-specific needs that helped them launch a PK program through SIG.
- The district and school leveraged SIG as an opportunity to focus on a few key strategies to support student achievement.
- High-quality instruction is grounded in the meaningful analysis and use of data. When teachers come together to examine student data, they can better tailor their instruction.
- Building and investing in staff are at the heart of creating a sustainable turnaround strategy.

Additional Resources

- Elliott Elementary School: <http://wp.lps.org/elliott/>
- NDE Federal Programs: <http://www.education.ne.gov/federalprograms/Index.html>
- NDE Office of Early Childhood: <http://www.education.ne.gov/OEC/index.html>
- Step Up to Quality Childcare Act: <http://nebraskalegislature.gov/laws/statutes.php?statute=71-1961>
- Nebraska Early Childhood Interagency Coordinating Council (ECICC): <http://www.education.ne.gov/ecicc/>
- First Five Nebraska: <http://www.firstfivenebraska.org/fullsite>
- Lincoln Public Schools Professional Learning Communities: <http://www.lps.org/post/detail.cfm?id=666>
- Lincoln Public Schools Early Childhood Preschool Program: <http://wp.lps.org/familylit/lincoln-public-schools-early-childhood-preschool-program/>
- Lincoln Public Schools Staff Development: <http://wp.lps.org/staffdev/>

Turnaround Considerations for States, Districts, and Schools

Leverage Opportunities Across States, Districts, and Schools

In an effort to break down silos, turnaround leads at each level should proactively seek opportunities to collaborate with those overseeing early learning efforts. The SEA leads may actively seek opportunities to develop resources that may highlight early learning strategies that can be shared with schools and districts developing turnaround plans. Additionally, collaborating with early learning leads at the state level may encourage cross collaboration at the local level and assist the SEA in its efforts to support a more comprehensive approach to improving schools.

Encourage Early Learning as a Key Component for Sustainable School Turnaround

As turnaround efforts continue, state education agencies are uniquely positioned to incentivize the use of promising practices, such as early learning guidelines, comprehensive assessments, and professional learning, through both policy and funding support to districts and schools. States may highlight examples of promising efforts underway to incorporate early learning strategies and school turnaround. They may also provide guidance to schools and districts taking on school turnaround, and they may consider providing guidance on the flexibility that exists as schools develop turnaround plans. Further, states may use that guidance to highlight early learning efforts as a way to sustain change as students continue to move through the educational system.

Develop School Turnaround Models That Incorporate Early Learning

As a part of their turnaround strategy, many states have incorporated additional elements for schools and districts to include in their turnaround work. States may consider making it mandatory for schools and districts to incorporate certain early learning strategies into their turnaround plans. These strategies may include transition programs or investing in professional development as a way to incorporate collaboration across grade levels. Other considerations for early learning strategies, noted in the proposed revisions to SIG regulations, include the following:

- Creating a full-day kindergarten
- Establishing or expanding a high-quality preschool program
- Providing educators, including preschool teachers, with time for joint planning across grades to facilitate effective teaching and learning and positive teacher-student interactions
- Using data to identify and implement an instructional program that is research-based, developmentally appropriate, and vertically aligned from one grade to the next as well as aligned with state early learning and development standards and state academic standards
- Providing staff with ongoing, high-quality, job-embedded professional development such as coaching and mentoring (e.g., regarding subject-specific pedagogy, instruction that reflects a deeper understanding of the community served by the school, or differentiated instruction) aligned with the school's comprehensive instructional program and designed with school staff to ensure they are equipped to facilitate effective teaching and learning and have the capacity to implement school reform strategies successfully

Across the nation, the education community continues to seek ways to improve our most challenged schools. To do this, real system change is needed. These case studies highlight several efforts underway that are designed to bring about systemic change (and are already showing signs of success, although they still face challenges).

Despite these examples of improvement at the school level, sustainable turnaround efforts in our nation's schools cannot be successful unless the systems in which chronically underperforming schools reside are also part of the change discussion. As seen through these case studies, the integration of early learning as a strategy to turn some of the lowest performing schools presents a unique opportunity to drive change across the system.



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