



DISTRICT READINESS TO SUPPORT SCHOOL TURNAROUND

A Guide for State Education
Agencies and Districts, 2nd Edition

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Introduction

This document provides state education agencies (SEAs) and districts with guidance about how to assess a district's readiness to support school turnaround initiatives. First published in 2013, the guide has been updated in this edition to highlight how its approach to assessing district readiness embeds and reflects key components of *Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement*, a framework developed by the Center on School Turnaround (CST, 2017).

Using this framework, the guide aims to help policymakers or practitioners consider school turnaround as a *system-level* issue — fundamental district-level practices must be in place to establish the conditions for school turnaround to succeed. This perspective counters the tendency for school turnaround efforts to focus on only the *school's* structure and leadership. By contrast, this guide provides an introduction to district-level turnaround readiness and the conditions that will help districts best position resources to enable turnaround schools to succeed and to sustain that success.

SEA leaders can also use the guide to reflect on where and how to support districts in ways that have been shown to matter by the experience of practitioners entrenched in supporting turnaround as well as by research in the field of rapid improvement. An SEA that implements its own readiness-assessment process (directly or indirectly) might build mutual understanding with districts as they launch turnaround endeavors. Such understanding can help direct SEA resources toward improving practices and providing interventions targeted in ways that are most likely to lead to lasting gains in student achievement. The Every Student Succeeds Act gives SEAs more discretion in where to invest precious resources, and a readiness-assessment process aligned with what matters can help SEAs determine what commitments may be needed from a district if that district is to receive a major investment of resources from the SEA.

A typical view of the district's role in turnaround is that the district is responsible for selecting who will lead schools that need to make big improvements. Although leadership selection is certainly a critical, symbolic, and time-intensive step, it is actually just the beginning. A fuller turnaround initiative consists of a larger set of changes that the district should facilitate, changes that are detailed in the Four Domains framework.

To illustrate how such district-led turnaround might unfold in practice, and to show some of what the district and SEA can do to create the conditions for school leaders' efforts to have the greatest chance for success, the following vignette describes a fictional school and the commitment of its district to support the school's turnaround.

Turnaround Vignette

Sanders County Public Schools (SCPS)* underwent a shift in terms of the students it served. Most of the SCPS students had positive outcomes in the existing system, but a growing number clearly needed a different set of supports than the system was providing. Specifically, the Grant High School (GHS) feeder system — including two middle schools and eight elementary schools — began to enroll more and more students who needed additional support to learn at high levels. As the county's economic base shifted and more affluent families moved to the northern portion of SCPS, the mobility rates, demographics, and socioeconomic status of students in GHS and its feeder schools gradually changed. Test scores also declined, which signaled that the district needed to adapt in order to better meet the needs of all of its students.

Last year, the accountability ratings of GHS and all 10 of its feeder schools reached a new low. The district's superintendent, John, hoped the schools would improve if they had the right leaders in place. Several years back, he had replaced the principals in most of the schools with very promising candidates. But after those principals' first two years, little improvement had been made. John blamed his choice of principals and removed and replaced leadership — again with new principals who also showed great promise. A year later, again, there had been little improvement and, spurred by burnout, several of the principals left to take positions at suburban schools. It became clear to John that he could not rely on the replacement of school leadership as the only catalyst for positive change. This reality led him to ask a critical question: What can the district do to create conditions for turnaround efforts to have the greatest chance for success?

John's district had the benefit of a state turnaround office focused on supporting districts' school improvement efforts, so he initiated contact with the office. Not long after, turnaround office representatives visited to gauge the conditions in the district that would support turnaround. They spoke with John and his leadership team to better understand 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, talent management process, instructional infrastructure, 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 focusing on some of the areas in which the district was doing well, they highlighted areas they saw as needing improvement. For example, the representatives noted that there was no cycle of regular accountability and support for principals and no agreement about what was most critical for the school, a situation that slowed change and created general confusion about goals and objectives.

The representatives also explained that the district could take other proactive steps to improve how GHS and feeder schools recruited, developed, and retained talent. They recommended that the district find ways to give GHS and its feeder schools early access to principal, assistant principal, and teacher applicants and perhaps implement an incentive structure to attract the most promising candidates. They also recommended improving the relevancy of professional development based on data and enhancing resources for coaching to create the conditions for attracting and retaining a first-rate faculty and staff who truly want to serve GHS feeder system students.

Additionally, the state suggested bolstering the role of the principal supervisor. Principal supervisors, through their presence on campuses daily, could play a high-leverage role by providing real-time coaching and perspective to turnaround principals hungry for feedback and support during the transformation process. Currently, SCPS had only two principal supervisors for the entire district. The state suggested that this number was too small and without enough impact, and that SCPS should dedicate at least one principal supervisor position, as well as an assistant director focused on instructional system development, for just GHS and its feeder schools.

Another area identified for improvement was to provide an ongoing way for GHS to understand how well the school's efforts were reflected in student achievement. The state representatives recommended regularly implementing common, interim assessments, and provided resources to ensure that those assessments would be aligned to the state's standards. Through collaborating with district instructional personnel, schools would no longer have to wait for the end-of-year state tests to assess progress, a situation that had made it almost impossible to responsively adapt to address data-based student needs. Checking the pulse of student achievement on a regular basis would allow principals to help teachers more rapidly respond to problems, adjust their approaches, and identify students in need of special attention.

As John met with the state representatives, he began to consider changes that the district could implement to help schools focus their efforts. These changes could create a cycle of positive outcomes that would energize GHS and its feeder schools. John knew that implementing these types of changes would call for a willingness to invest in equity and adjust the allotment of important district resources, including the current use of money, time, and people. He brainstormed with state representatives about how best to engage the school board on these issues.

John did not have all the answers, and there was not just one recipe for improvement. He realized that the work would likely encounter resistance. But he gleaned new insight and saw multiple possible ways to reframe how the district approached turnaround. The state turnaround agency pledged to support SCPS's efforts through scheduling follow-up site visits and meetings to monitor progress and provide resources. The state also began having its own conversations about how it could alter its processes by establishing turnaround zones to better align structures and supports for districts such as SCPS.

* This name is a pseudonym, as are the names of all other districts referenced in this guide.

This fictional story is in many ways representative of the challenges that 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, or can play, in providing schools with the support structures necessary to bring about the type of change that turnaround requires. Instead, many districts continue to provide turnaround schools with a carousel of promising leaders who lack the resources and support needed to sustain turnaround efforts.

This guide is intended to help shift the focus of districts and guide the support of states by clarifying ways that districts can and do play critical roles in turnaround. The recommendations in this guide are based on the research literature (CST, 2017), as well as the experience of the University of Virginia's Partnership for Leaders in Education (UVA-PLE), which has

supported over 60 school districts that have focused on their systemic roles in launching and sustaining successful school turnaround. This guide is specifically tailored to help states and districts carry out a turnaround-readiness assessment of districts or of broader turnaround zone initiatives in which a lead partner (often the district) is directing efforts across multiple schools.

School Turnaround Is a *District* Issue

It is intuitively logical for school turnaround efforts to 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. However, schools and districts should partner to co-create success. As the literature on effective leadership (Hitt & Tucker, 2016) and on effective turnaround practices (Hitt & Meyers, 2017) suggests, successful school turnaround calls for the district and the schools to use collaborative tools, routines, and strategies.

Despite the relatively light focus of policymakers and others on the *district's* role in school turnaround, it is easy to see the critical gatekeeper role that 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, assessment, and curriculum. A school turnaround initiative will face an uphill battle if a district is not ready to provide support in these areas and remove barriers that may be caused by the district's ineffective practices or requirements. Some researchers have made this point 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).

Given the importance of a district establishing conditions for turnaround to be successful, this guide is organized around the four focus areas, or levers, that are most critical for a district to understand and advance in order for its support to schools to be successful. These levers should be assessed before a district begins a turnaround initiative not only to help determine the district's readiness but also to illuminate areas of strength and challenge, providing information that can help shape the turnaround approach. The guide also suggests how these focus areas are aligned to the four domains of the Center on School Turnaround's framework. Each section focused on a domain includes examples based on UVA-PLÉ's visits with districts before they embarked on significant turnaround efforts. The guide concludes with practical advice on how to conduct a readiness assessment for a district turnaround initiative.

Indicators of Readiness: A Summary

Over the course of more than a decade, UVA-PLE's efforts to support turnaround have coalesced around ascertaining a district's strength in the following four focus areas, each of which can be a lever for change, indicating a district's proclivity for turnaround: leadership, talent development and management, instructional infrastructure, and support and accountability. These four levers are tightly aligned with the Center on School Turnaround's cutting-edge, research-based framework on rapid improvement that features four domains: turnaround leadership, talent development, instructional transformation, and culture shift (CST, 2017; see Appendix A). The following sections of this guide describe how the four domains relate to assessing district readiness for turnaround.

Domain 1: *Turnaround Leadership* and Assessing District Readiness

Table 1. Indicators of Readiness for Turnaround Leadership

| Turnaround Leadership Practice | Indicators of Readiness for the Practice |
|---|--|
| <p>Practice 1A: Prioritize improvement and communicate its urgency</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commit to turnaround. District demonstrates a will to do what is necessary. • Commit to positive change. District leadership promotes bold changes to prioritize turnaround work. • Install capable leaders. District provides turnaround principals with defined autonomy in key areas to drive change in their schools. |
| <p>Practice 1B: Monitor short- and long-term goals</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate accountability. District executive leadership holds principals, school leadership teams, and itself accountable for high, specific expectations and aligned goals throughout the improvement process. |
| <p>Practice 1C: Customize and target support to meet needs</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build capacity. The district builds capacity through identifying, creating, and providing appropriate development and support. • Demonstrate capacity to provide support. The district has the bandwidth for multiple members of its leadership team to orchestrate significant change for immediate school turnaround. • Allocate resources to turnaround. District leadership supports schools by providing strategic and tailored resource utilization, rapid response to key needs, and a regular and purposeful presence in schools. |

One of the clear keys to successful turnaround is strong leadership at all levels (Herman et al., 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 (Meyers & Hitt, 2017) and who demonstrates an intense focus 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, 2008, 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 — with the school — co-developing further interventions, as needed, based upon the school’s progress (Leithwood, 2012). These types of leadership focuses can contribute to a productive, supportive, and energizing school culture that enables adults in schools and district offices to collaboratively work toward improved outcomes for students (Kruse & Louis, 2009).

The UVA-PLE team 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 the number of schools each supervisor oversees, also known as “span of control” (Gill, 2013). A reduction in span of control means that principal supervisors should be able to deliver more meaningful one-on-one coaching and accountability to principals. One report recommends that districts reduce the span of control of each principal supervisor (Gill, 2013), meaning each would manage a smaller portfolio of principals and schools in order to have more time to deliver meaningful one-on-one coaching, responsiveness, and accountability to schools.

Schools should clearly know when and how to seek district support. Also, the district should have an executive-level person who provides regular support to the turnaround principals (Honig et al., 2010). This approach requires rethinking the district’s resource allocation to prioritize the coordination of implementation support among 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 role as an instructional leader (Petersen, 1999).

One way to implement accountability that supports turnaround is to formalize the district’s internal reporting structure and intensify its support to schools with a person or team. This district-based entity should be able to provide both support and accountability (Leithwood, 2012) 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 district-level individual or team 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. Identifying or creating a district office specifically 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).

While schools need to know what is expected of them, they also need autonomy for certain matters. For making staffing choices and assignments, constructing the school schedule, and carrying out other processes that are context-driven, the district should empower principals

to take the lead. Principal supervisors can serve as sounding boards and establish clear parameters for what is tight and what is loose, but should ultimately recognize that school leadership has the best perspective on these matters. The district should be transparent with newly selected principals about what processes will allow for “defined authority” and autonomy and, conversely, what will largely be district-driven. Removal of barriers for principals so that they can enact needed changes and make bold decisions is a key task of principal supervisors (Hitt & Meyers, 2017).

Domain 2: *Talent Development* and Assessing District Readiness

Table 2. Indicators of Readiness for Talent Development

| Talent Development Practice | Indicators of Readiness for the Practice |
|---|---|
| <p>Practice 2A: Recruit, develop, retain, and sustain talent</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select school leaders strategically. District leadership implements intentional, rigorous, and prioritized hiring of school leaders for high-priority schools. • Manage teacher talent through recruitment, placement, and retention. District leadership establishes conditions to increase the number of highly effective teachers in high-priority schools through recruitment, placement, and retention. • Strategically provide school supervision and coaching. District leaders provide well-coordinated, strategic coaching, development, and accountability for leaders of high-needs schools in order to reliably advance school leadership capacity and empower school leaders to solve problems.^a |
| <p>Practice 2B: Target professional learning opportunities</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide effective professional growth. District leadership displays commitment to development at all levels: for teachers and leaders in high-priority schools as well as district personnel associated with support for turnaround schools. • Coach principals. The district provides individualized coaching for principals that helps them improve their instructional and organizational leadership within their unique school contexts. • Balance support and accountability. The district maintains high expectations for principals and teachers; those expectations are coupled with customized supports for reaching them. |

| Talent Development Practice | Indicators of Readiness for the Practice |
|---|---|
| <p>Practice 2C: Set clear performance expectations</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend to goals and expectations. The district takes a developmentally appropriate approach to increasing performance expectations for teachers, leaders, and the district itself. • Address underperformance. The district develops and implements strategies to identify, understand, and address teacher underperformance, initially with enhanced coaching and support and ultimately with accountability when expectations are not met. |

a. When considering the domains most critical for a *district's role* in establishing conditions for sustainable, scalable school turnaround, the UVA-PLE team believes effective school support and accountability are critical enough to warrant being their own domain (a fifth domain of CST's domains for rapid improvement, or a fourth domain if leadership and culture shift are combined). See Appendix A for more information on alignment between UVA-PLE's areas of district readiness and the CST's four domains. School supervision and coaching are the most important aspects of support and accountability, though aspects of the four domains' practices 2C (accountability), 3C (flexibility and defined authority), and 4A (school leadership development) are also critical. See Appendix B for more information about support and accountability in practice.

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 place; it is also about creating conditions whereby 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.

Domain 3: *Instructional Transformation and Assessing District Readiness*

Table 3. Indicators of Readiness for Instructional Transformation

| Instructional Transformation Practice | Indicators of Readiness for the Practice |
|---|---|
| <p>Practice 3A: Diagnose and respond to student learning needs</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure valid, useful assessments. District leadership ensures a rigorous assessment strategy, with interim assessments clearly aligned to standards. • Support school action-planning. District leaders provide school leaders with sufficient, ongoing support to ensure completion and focused execution of high-quality school action plans that leverage data to identify significant challenges, detail a thoughtful, organized, and responsive way forward, and articulate how progress will be defined and sufficiently monitored for continuous learning and adjustment. |
| <p>Practice 3B: Provide rigorous, evidence-based instruction</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategically provide curriculum. District leadership provides a clear, coherent, quality curriculum that guides teachers during weekly collaborative meetings, supports alignment of lesson plans to standards, and helps build teacher understanding of each standard. • Establish data culture and systems. District leadership establishes a data-driven culture and student management data system that prioritize responsiveness, urgency, and individual student needs. • Monitor and support instruction. District leadership establishes practices and systems to ensure that instruction (core and intervention) aligns to the expectations of the curriculum and assessments and is high-quality in all classrooms to ensure student success. |
| <p>Practice 3C: Remove barriers and provide opportunities</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide flexibility and buffering that promote focus and ownership. The district provides flexibility, within reason, in key areas of hiring, scheduling, programming, and resource utilization and ensures that priority principals are not distracted by burdensome requirements or tangential meetings. • Provide defined authority for school leaders to achieve a unique school vision and results. The district ensures that turnaround schools have sufficient authority over staffing, scheduling, and resources and have flexibility to achieve clear expectations, so that school leadership has agency in achieving each school's unique vision. |

High-quality teaching is essential to school turnaround, and analysis of student data plays a big role in 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 clarifies and illuminates instructional expectations (Rorrer et al., 2008). The data should provide schools and the district with regular, ongoing insight into student progress.

Utilizing well-designed, rigorous interim assessments that are aligned to a clear, rigorous curriculum is one way to accomplish this continual monitoring. Adjustments can be made throughout the year based upon these assessments and short-cycle assessments to help schools meet their year-end goals. This strategy provides multiple opportunities to diagnose areas that need attention prior to state testing. In working with partner districts, the UVA-PLE team has found 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 and to ensure that teachers see the tools available to them as useful. The critical aspects of the system could include the responsiveness of the data system, the rigor and alignment of the assessments, teachers' understanding of how to leverage data on student learning or how to unpack standards, or a district calendar that prioritizes time to conduct deep data analysis and plot adjustments in instructional strategies when the new data are relevant.

The curriculum should be aligned with state standards such that it provides students with the knowledge and skills needed for the 21st century and is on par with that of high-performing schools (Drake, 2007). Districts should provide training that (a) ensures teachers understand the full scope of the curricular content and (b) is focused on mechanisms for school leaders to be able to monitor the implementation of rigorous standards, including student mastery of knowledge and skills (Lachat & Smith, 2005; Orr, Berg, Shore, & Meier, 2008; Tomlinson et al., 2003).

Domain 4: *Culture Shift* and Assessing District Readiness

Table 4. Indicators of Readiness for Culture Shift

| Culture Shift Practice | Indicators of Readiness for the Practice |
|---|--|
| <p>Practice 4A: Build a strong community intensely focused on student learning</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategically support school collaboration. District leaders ensure high-quality, evidence-based collaboration among teachers, including establishing structures, expectations, and supports for school leadership teams to help them maximize the value of time set aside for improving teacher practice and student outcomes. • Ensure differentiated, cross-school leadership development. The district facilitates well-designed gatherings for school leaders to promote peer-to-peer learning, strengthen leaders' capacity, and ensure that principals only leave the campus for highly relevant development that meets key school needs. • Provide role clarity. The district establishes explicit expectations and support for each person's role (expected behaviors) both in the turnaround and in supporting student progress. • Unify stakeholders. The district creates opportunities for members of the school community to come together to discuss, explore, and reflect on student learning. • State and reiterate high expectations. The district champions high expectations (of self and others), embeds them in everyday practice and language, and reinforces them through shared accountability and follow-through on strategies for dramatically improving student outcomes. |
| <p>Practice 4B: Solicit and act upon stakeholder input</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapidly and continuously respond to needs. The district has a strategy for rapid response to effectively identify and address emergent needs critical to creating a dynamic culture of support and excellence for teaching and learning. • Gather and use stakeholder perspectives. The district asks for perspectives from school personnel, students, families, and the broader community about the degree to which the school climate is or is not positive, and uses these perspectives to gauge the climate-related work to be done by a school striving for turnaround; the district acknowledges and responds to constructive feedback, suggestions, and criticism; stakeholder perceptions are considered when identifying priorities and improving the underlying conditions that contribute to school climate issues. |

| Culture Shift Practice | Indicators of Readiness for the Practice |
|---|---|
| <p>Practice 4C: Engage students and families in pursuing education goals</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and address critical barriers, particularly for enhancing school culture. District and school leaders examine critical barriers and consider at least budget-neutral ideas and policy changes to overcome these barriers; in particular, leadership uncovers major barriers to ensure that the school has at least baseline resources and strategies to create a climate and culture conducive to student learning and to meeting students’ emotional needs. • Engage external community. District and school leadership provides school board and community members with intermittent updates and opportunities to engage in supporting substantive needs. • Empower school leadership teams to pursue bold ideas. The district empowers school leadership teams to garner district and community support to articulate and pursue an ambitious school vision or branding, adapt scheduling and resource distribution to meet unique needs, add extended learning, and/or further enhance strategies to provide wraparound and enrichment support. • Meaningfully engage parents in their children’s learning. The district invites parents to materially participate in their children’s learning, progress, and interests, and in setting long-term goals. |

School and district culture can support turnaround. Often, cultures of schools and districts in need of turnaround are not maximized or tapped to support transformation. UVA-PLÉ’s experience partnering with districts and schools suggests that districts must be interested in establishing cultures that are at once supportive and results-oriented, and that a culture shift begins with believing in the capacity of students, and with establishing high expectations for them and for all of the adults who serve and support the students. Achievement-oriented cultures are collaborative, distribute leadership, provide role clarity and high expectations, and engage and involve multiple stakeholders from both within and outside the school district.

Believing in students’ capacity to learn and in the possibility of exciting improvements for schools, seeking stakeholder input on how to improve student outcomes, and then creating ways for families and the community to participate are the steps to launching a culture shift. This shift leads to energizing and satisfying work to build powerful learning, and it builds momentum for district leaders to chip away at less-effective norms as the culture shifts.

Indicators of Readiness: An In-Depth Look at the Four Domains and Assessing District Readiness

The following sections, organized by the four domains and their practice areas, further elaborate on the conditions that can indicate a district's readiness for turnaround. Examples of what the conditions look like in practice are based on actual districts that UVA-PLE has partnered with.

Domain 1: *Turnaround Leadership and Assessing District Readiness*

Leadership drives improvement through creation of a vision for change, strategic planning to bring the change to life, and adept and balanced use of support and accountability in interactions with those who enact the change.

Practice 1A: Prioritize improvement and communicate its urgency

Commit to turnaround. 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 schools to address.

Commit to positive change. Districts not only ask schools to change but also rethink and adjust their own policies and practices to co-create school-level success. 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 doing so means altering entrenched district structures and norms.

Install capable leaders. To undergird the commitment to turnaround and positive change, districts approach the principalship with utmost care and consideration and install high-quality principals that can be empowered to effectively utilize autonomy. Districts dedicate attention and resources to attracting and selecting the highest-quality principal with the best fit for the turnaround school. Through utilizing a competency-based approach, districts can make well-informed decisions about who they want to lead the school-level turnaround endeavor.

Practice 1B: Monitor short- and long-term goals

Demonstrate accountability. The district administration must be structured to monitor and 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 should also have a dedicated turnaround team that includes a highly competent point person to whom principals in turnaround schools report. This principal supervisor, or “district shepherd,” must have sufficient time, expertise, and organizational capacity to focus on turnaround efforts. Further, the district shepherd must be an adept coach who can provide support, accountability, and perspective for the turnaround principals. Through this structure, the district leadership holds principals, school leadership teams, and itself accountable for high, specific expectations and aligned goals throughout the improvement process. Such a role for district leadership includes supporting school leadership teams as well as holding them accountable for creating and monitoring action plans that articulate stretch goals and clear priorities for reaching those goals. The action plans should also articulate highest-leverage actions to improve school practice, based on priorities and school needs.

Practice 1C: Customize and target support to meet needs

Build capacity. The district can build capacity for turnaround through a district turnaround team that identifies needs and provides appropriate support for the turnaround process. The demanding nature of turnaround requires that each school leadership team’s attention 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.

Demonstrate capacity to provide support. 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.

Allocate resources to turnaround. The district must have evidence of readiness to prioritize giving turnaround schools additional resources for a period of time and then disseminating information to the broader system about the successful innovation and what is being learned from the work in turnaround schools.

Turnaround Leadership in Practice

One district that exemplifies strength in leadership is Acorn Public Schools (APS), an urban district that serves a diverse student population. APS 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. One such initiative was to form a zone where the lowest-performing schools or the schools in a geographic feeder pattern are concentrated to prioritize these schools and better enable differentiation of services and innovation by empowering zone and departmental leaders to treat this set of schools differently. 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 when the current one was misaligned with state standards, a willingness to reconfigure schools' schedules to expand learning time, and partnerships with the business and philanthropic communities. Each of these examples demonstrated the district's forward-thinking mindset.

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.

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 and defining the roles they would play in turnaround success 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, including a district shepherd, for support and capacity-building of the school-based teams. Without a strong team with the competencies needed to drive the change, stakeholders at the school would not see the vision as authentic and would not have the resources they needed to navigate change and improve identified areas of instructional need. The UVA-PLE team thus focused on helping the district make a case for investments in systems of support and helping the district create a district team to execute that support, which included intentional efforts to engage the community in tangible ways that would make a difference for students.

Potential SEA role. The turnaround process is filled with hard work and unknowns. The SEA could address some of these pressures through structuring collaborative meetings among districts and schools across the state or regions so they have time to learn from each other along the way. Also, for districts that are struggling with alignment of leadership, the SEA could provide development opportunities to help district teams craft a coherent path forward.

Domain 2: Talent Development and Assessing District Readiness

Creating conditions for effective talent management is vital to growing and sustaining effective school leadership. Successful turnaround districts and 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.

Practice 2A: Recruit, develop, retain, and sustain talent

Select school leaders strategically. The district must be intentional in choosing leaders who will meet the school’s needs. Rigorous, competency-based principal selection 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. Competencies for turnaround leaders include focusing on sustainable results, engaging the team, having impact and influence, holding people accountable for school performance, commitment to student learning, conceptual thinking, and analytical thinking (Table 5).

Table 5. Model for Principal Competencies Shown to Link to Student Achievement

| Competency | Level 1 | Level 2 | Level 3 | Level 4 |
|--|---|--|--|--|
| Focuses on Sustainable Results | Identifies problems | Addresses problems | Takes initiative to create change and to deliver results in relation to problems | Sustains pursuit of measurable progress toward addressing problems and achieving results |
| Engages the Team | Communicates with the team | Works with the team | Aligns team efforts toward clear goals | Empowers the team |
| Has Impact and Influence | Communicates own position | Acts to influence thinking and mindsets of others | Adapts approach to affect actions of others | Leverages multiple stakeholders to change ingrained behaviors |
| Holds People Accountable for School Performance | Demonstrates school performance mindset | Aligns individual expectations to school performance standards | Monitors performance and helps people to improve | Strengthens organizational capability for performance |

| Competency | Level 1 | Level 2 | Level 3 | Level 4 |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|--|---|
| Commits to Student Learning | Sees self as the champion | Takes ownership for students' learning | Stands behind potentially transformative decisions and/or policies benefiting students | Stands up for students in the face of powerful opposition |
| Thinks Conceptually | Compares situations or ideas | Utilizes insight to help prioritize | Reframes situations for clarity | Generates new ideas and approaches |
| Thinks Analytically | Sees the facets of a situation | Understands basic cause and effect | Identifies cause and effect among several items | Articulates complexity among multiple variables |

Note. This model is empirically derived through a mixed methods analysis of principal interview data. Shaded cells indicate the levels that distinguish outstanding principals from typical principals, based on student achievement scores; however, levels are additive and therefore outstanding principals encompass criteria described in lower levels as well. Analytical thinking does not distinguish outstanding principals from typical principals. See Hitt, Woodruff, Meyers, and Zhu (2018) for additional information.

Source: Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education, University of Virginia

As indicated by this model, each competency has levels. Candidates for principalships can be interviewed and then scored on these competencies (Hitt, 2015; Hitt et al., 2018).

With these competency levels in mind and with principals' strengths identified through the interview process, district leaders should hire and then make placement decisions that match the needs of the schools and community. For decisions and actions regarding development and performance management in turnaround schools, districts should also be guided by clear accountability criteria aimed at improving those schools. This process often requires overhauling the recruitment and incentive system to find leaders who are attracted to turnaround situations and to make these critical positions the most attractive in the district. The districts that are most prepared for turnaround initiatives extend this intentional recruitment and placement approach to hiring for the entire school leadership team.

Manage teacher talent through recruitment, placement, and retention. 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 so that those schools receive staffing advantages that other schools may not receive.

Strategically provide school supervision and coaching. District leaders should continually consider how to customize and individualize support, follow-up, and accountability. Districts understand that a thoughtful approach to support and accountability that is responsive to the unique context of the school and principal is ultimately what builds capacity.

In districts that the guide's authors have worked with, this practice of strategically providing school supervision and coaching is important enough, alongside a few other practices related to providing support for school leadership teams, to potentially warrant its own domain as "differentiated support and accountability."

Practice 2B: Target professional learning opportunities

The district leadership displays commitment to development at all levels: for teachers and leaders in high-priority schools as well as for district personnel associated with supporting turnaround schools.

Provide effective professional growth. Effective districts monitor teacher performance so that appropriate action can be taken, including adjusting levels of support and accountability (in alignment with the principal) for each teacher based on the teacher's individual growth needs. School leaders are afforded opportunities to grow through reflecting on problems of practice, and districts continually sense needs in order to provide just-in-time growth for principals.

Coach principals. Districts should provide principals with opportunities to develop their leadership. Coaching provides the customized, individualized development that turnaround principals need to be able to tackle the challenges of rapid and dramatic change. The district must be willing to monitor performance and hold principals and teachers accountable for progress throughout the year, including progress on defined expectations for what principal excellence looks like and what types of systems need to be in place in successful schools, recognizing the need for flexibility in designing context-based strategies to achieve these expectations and incorporating a strong principal voice in determining what is prioritized each semester. Through gauging principal performance, the coaching structure allows the district to provide ongoing, customized support to meet expectations.

Balance support and accountability. 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, redesigning deployment of support to align with each school's stated priorities. Providing this support often requires district leaders to regularly embed themselves in the turnaround work and help school leaders to solve their most pressing challenges in ways that are welcomed by the school leaders. This support is also often at its best when complemented by the type of high-quality coaching described in the "Coach principals" paragraph. 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.

Practice 2C: Set clear performance expectations

Attend to goals and expectations. Most underperforming schools have significant room to grow in terms of creating an environment where teachers receive the individualized support and accountability they need to attain goals and reach expectations for their professional practice. Thus, it is critical for the district to identify common, high-leverage areas to improve teacher talent management and make those areas a focus of the turnaround

initiative. District human resources staff ideally function as strategic partners who work to improve hiring, development, and accountability.

Address underperformance. Low-quality teaching often pervades turnaround schools. In cases where teacher practice does not respond to development and support, principals and district leaders must continue to hold high expectations and insist upon high-quality teaching practice. Districts must support principals in taking the necessary steps to ensure that each member of the turnaround school's faculty is dedicated to and capable of facilitating student learning.

Talent Development in Practice

Clay Public Schools (CPS), a midsize suburban district with more than 7,000 students in 14 schools, exemplifies relative strength in talent development.

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 new chief developed screening procedures to illuminate the most qualified talent pool. These screening procedures were specifically developed to focus on the competencies and predispositions of teachers who were likely to be successful serving at-risk students in challenging educational environments. Additionally, the district introduced a highly rigorous and in-depth selection interview for finalists. This interview included not only a site-based committee interview and other interactions but also a demonstration of teaching. CPS reported that in several instances, hiring committees went into the teaching demonstration with a top choice but, after the demonstration, had much different insight into candidates, resulting in the emergence of a more fitting front-runner.

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. The district 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 teachers who intended to depart their positions to declare their intentions earlier in the year so that upcoming 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 that CPS took to staff its schools with high-quality teachers represented a strong start and also indicated the district's 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 to 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.

To prioritize principal selection, CPS could explore developing incentive structures (working conditions or pay) to increase their principal applicant pools, enticing high-quality applicants to apply. Further, CPS could explore using the competency model (see Table 5) to better understand what their candidates' talents for turnaround seem to be so that hiring decisions are more informed by the criteria that matter for turnaround. Finally, just as CPS utilized a behavior-based component in the teacher selection process, creating a similar opportunity to see principal candidates in action could provide valuable insight. Once CPS arrives at a list of finalists, each candidate could spend the day at the campus. These visits could include meetings with student, teacher, and parent/community stakeholder groups and a classroom visit to observe instruction, followed by a debrief with the principal supervisor and other district leaders to discuss what the candidate's feedback to the teacher would be.

Potential SEA role. To facilitate district growth in talent management, the SEA could offer support on how to create a robust interview process. The SEA could also participate in the interview process and provide perspective on finalists. Further, the SEA could focus efforts on developing relationships with both principal and teacher preparation programs to develop a continual stream of applicants for the schools most in need. Finally, the SEA could target its collective efforts to districts like CPS to support talent management needs, reducing potential distractions from less critical areas.

Domain 3: Instructional Transformation and Assessing District Readiness

Through facilitating improvement of the instructional program, districts are poised to enact positive change in schools.

Practice 3A: Diagnose and respond to student learning needs

A school can successfully turn around only if its students are receiving high-quality instruction every day. Often, students in turnaround settings have individualized needs that should be identified through careful diagnostic assessments and/or deep, item-by-item analysis of student responses on 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, there is unlikely to be the kind of dramatic improvement in learning that is the hallmark of a true turnaround.

Ensure valid, useful assessments. 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 standards reflected in and aligned to the curriculum. Interim assessments should be common across turnaround schools to promote rigor, cross-curricular learning, progress monitoring, and instructional adaptation. 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 should adjust instruction to better meet student needs. To complement interim assessments, formative

assessment practices — organized, ongoing check-ins for understanding and responsive adjustments to teaching — should be woven into classroom interactions, and the district should provide schools with tools and capacity-building to help determine their formative assessment process and strategy. Student progress and success depend greatly upon a teacher’s ability to engage in a cycle of individualizing, monitoring, and adjusting.

Support school action-planning. The results of assessments, along with other data points, should inform the school-level action plan that is iteratively adjusted to reflect progress and remaining challenges and goals. Districts can use their perspective and strengths to support school leadership in the creation of high-quality planning for a clear path forward.

Practice 3B: Provide rigorous, evidence-based instruction

Strategically provide curriculum. District leadership should have a clear, coherent, high-quality K-12 curriculum with mapping, pacing guides, and vertical alignment documents that are comprehensive and accessible. The curriculum ideally should include advanced components, such as technology integration lessons and activities, enrichment and re-teaching resources, suggested instructional strategies for differentiation, opportunities for cross-curricular connections, and suggested topics for subject-based and cross-curricular collaborative meetings. Optimally, time is set aside for regular, collaborative meetings that include teachers from across different subject matters.

Establish data culture and systems. Teachers and leaders must be able to quickly access student data, including data on current and historical achievement, attendance, and discipline. Interim and diagnostic assessment results should be generated with very short turn-around times (under 48 hours). The data systems should be relatively easy to access and understand. 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.

Monitor and support instruction. To monitor the progress of instructional program improvement, the district team ensures that everyone at the district level who influences the instructional leadership of schools’ leadership teams receives professional development (internal and external) on high-quality instruction and principles of effective observation and feedback. The professional development should include defined “look fors” that serve as indicators of the quality of instruction in the classrooms of the schools that the district leaders supervise or influence.

Districts can effectively support data use when a sound instructional infrastructure is in place. Hallmarks of effective instructional infrastructure include provision of resources for administration of relevant, rigorous, short-cycle assessments; professional development aligned to data-based needs; promoting regular use of teacher collaboration time to explore how to monitor and continually adjust instruction based on assessment and student work data; deep item analysis following interim assessments; and the subsequent creation of data-aligned instructional action plans.

Practice 3C: Remove barriers and provide opportunities

Provide flexibility and buffering that promote focus and ownership. Districts can reconsider expectations of principals and teachers in turnaround schools. Through thoughtfully analyzing all of the responsibilities and expectations, districts can identify the ones that are most important and connected to improving instruction and overall turnaround. Buffering

provides focus for teachers and principals ensconced in turnaround and protects their time and energies for what matters most.

Provide defined authority for school leaders to achieve a unique school vision and results.

Districts should also explore giving school leaders sufficient authority in staffing, scheduling, and resource utilization to be able to act on what the school needs. 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 (Marzano & Waters, 2009). 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 — those 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 district may also renegotiate contracts with teachers for underserved schools to find opportunities to increase collaboration, professional development, or intervention time, or to remove a staffing constraint that inhibits the school vision. 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.

Instructional Transformation in Practice

Davis Public Schools (DPS), a midsize district serving 12,000 students in 16 schools, demonstrates some strength in instructional transformation.

Strengths. DPS effectively created the foundations of instructional infrastructure by establishing a coherent curriculum system and an assessment system that includes interim and formative assessments. For curriculum, teachers were involved in developing collective standards and curriculum pacing guides for all elementary schools, including leveraging rigorous resources tied to state standards. The district's assessments in elementary grades were aligned to the pacing guides, and leaders used the results of these assessments to influence broader programmatic decisions and help build school capacity to inform instructional practices. DPS noticed that many students in the district regularly changed schools, which necessitated the implementation of more consistent instruction throughout the district so that these mobile students would not experience piecemeal instructional sequences. Collecting interim assessment data across schools enabled consistent tracking of student progress, even for students who changed schools midyear. 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 had 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 receive feedback following interim assessments so that the teachers could subsequently adapt instructional plans based on the data. Finally, even when teachers knew what to improve, some teachers struggled too much with determining how to improve because of poor processes for instructional planning. The district needed intentional efforts to develop model practices at the beginning of the year and periodically help teachers unpack standards and apply insights on student learning for future instruction. Thus, the district needed to identify promising practices and identify and create models of excellence in the district to aid in

building all teachers' capacity to be data-based problem solvers, and to develop training for all administrators. Furthermore, the middle and high schools were not moving as quickly as the elementary schools to align instruction across different schools. The district still needed to strengthen the rigor of assessments and the culture of data use among teachers and leaders at the secondary level.

Potential SEA role. The SEA could facilitate district and school use of aligned and rigorous formative and interim assessment by shining a light on districts and schools that effectively use assessment in this way and by providing access to assessments or assessment banks that align to state standards. The SEA could also compile effective tools for helping teachers unpack standards and plan instruction and could provide resource banks for rural districts.

Domain 4: *Culture Shift* and Assessing District Readiness

Shifting culture denotes reconsidering “how things are done around here,” and placing energizing, productive, and collaborative initiatives at the center of turnaround work. Districts that are ready to embark on turnaround express interest in bringing internal and external stakeholders together, empowering them to tackle the work of creating and enacting visions of excellence, thereby transforming the organizational culture into one that is positive and sustains student and adult performance.

Practice 4A: Build a strong community intensely focused on student learning

When a school district embraces a focus on students and their learning, the joint work needed to support students' needs becomes clear. Opportunities for creating powerful coalitions to support students exist at the school level and across the district. Clarity about roles and expectations can also support this practice.

Strategically support school collaboration. District leaders set expectations for and facilitate school-level collaboration. The district provides resources, such as time and staffing, to support teacher collaboration. The district also helps principals consider how to lead collaboration in their schools with their leadership team as well as across the faculty in grade-level or subject-level teams.

Ensure differentiated, cross-school leadership development. Principal professional development features peer-to-peer learning during district-facilitated sessions. Districts determine ways to group principals who face similar challenges so that these principals can continually share ideas, discuss practice, and solve professional dilemmas during regular, structured professional development. Because turnaround schools should be prioritized, the process of bringing principals together to practice the work of data-driven and transformational leadership and to share their innovations can help create learning for an entire district. Further, all development opportunities should be highly relevant, and turnaround principals should be allowed to miss districtwide professional development that does not meet their immediate needs because such allowance acknowledges that a school leader's time is precious.

Provide role clarity. Districts provide concrete expectations for roles and pay special attention to those involved in a school's turnaround. Role definition is important not just for school-level personnel but also for district support and leadership positions. Districts continually revisit the level of clarity provided for expectations and roles.

Unify stakeholders. District leaders create opportunities for members of both the internal and external school community to discuss, explore, and reflect on student learning. District leaders organize regular meetings and extend invitations to families and community stakeholders to maintain open lines of communication and reciprocal relationships.

State and reiterate high expectations. District leaders identify and share high expectations for themselves and those they lead. Everyday behavior and actions reflect these expectations.

Practice 4B: Solicit and act upon stakeholder input

Rapidly and continuously respond to needs. District leaders advance a strategy for rapid response that is effective at identifying and addressing emergent needs related to advancing teaching, learning, and the overall creation of a dynamic culture of support and excellence.

Gather and use stakeholder perspectives. Collective perceptions about school climate — held by school personnel, students, families, and the broader community — are gathered and used to gauge the climate-related work to be done by a school that is striving for turnaround. Stakeholder perceptions are considered when identifying priorities and improving the underlying conditions that contribute to school climate issues. The district helps principals acknowledge and respond to constructive feedback, suggestions, and criticism.

Practice 4C: Engage students and families in pursuing education goals

Identify and address critical barriers, particularly for enhancing school culture. District and school leaders examine critical barriers and consider at least budget-neutral ideas and policy changes to overcome those barriers. In particular, leaders uncover major barriers to ensure that school leadership has at least baseline resources and strategies to create a climate and culture conducive to student learning and to meeting students' emotional needs.

Engage external community. District and school leaders look for ways to include families and the community in improvement processes. The district can partner with entities outside of the district by including the external community in co-creating visions for excellence, identifying areas of mutual interest, sharing resources, and providing updates on progress.

Empower school leadership teams to pursue bold ideas. The district empowers school leadership teams to garner district and community support to articulate and pursue an ambitious school vision or branding, adapt scheduling and resource distribution to meet unique needs, add extended learning, and/or further enhance strategies to provide wraparound and enrichment support.

Meaningfully engage parents in their children's learning. Through providing progress updates, determining children's interests, and establishing long-term goals and visions for the children whom families share with the school, districts can create energizing relationships with parents that ultimately strengthen student learning and achievement.

Culture Shift in Practice

Creighton Public Schools is a large urban district and serves over 180,000 students. Vaughn High School (VHS) enrolls just under 3,000 students. Both the school and the district worked hand in hand to improve culture.

Strengths. Teachers, parents, students, and the broader community thought turnaround was out of reach for VHS, which had only a 41-percent graduation rate. However, the district expressed its commitment to rethink all aspects of support for the school and hired a dynamic, new principal, Amy Samuels. Both Samuels and the district knew that high performance was possible for VHS, given their research on and exposure to other schools that became excellent schools despite perceived challenges. Their perspective was “If other schools could do it, so will we.” Samuels saw VHS not as what it was but as what it could be, and the district empowered her to pursue bold changes. First on the priority list was addressing the school’s culture of low expectations for students and addressing their low outcomes. More than half of the students and teachers were absent or late for all or part of every school day. Students did not want to go to class; teachers did not want to teach. Yet, there was no real option for teacher replacement because VHS began each school year with 20 percent of its faculty positions covered by long-term substitutes since too few applicants applied. A parallel situation held for students: Anyone who had the resources to transfer did so.

These rock-bottom realities did not stop Samuels from building a vision and aligned plan for transforming VHS’s culture from depressed to dynamic. First, Samuels publicly rebranded VHS and started a magnet program. The magnet program was open to all and had lenient acceptance criteria; however, Samuels did believe application was an important part of the process to signal to students and parents that effort needed to come from the family and student as well as the school. The district immediately identified ways to support the rebranding through funding reallocation. The district also connected with the school board to develop community support of the rebranding.

This first bold move of rebranding quickly enticed savvy students who had previously left VHS to then return to the school and give it another try. Perhaps as important, the rebranding attracted a much larger teacher applicant pool. Suddenly, VHS went from being a school no one wanted to be part of to one that contended with others in the district. Teachers were attracted because of the excitement associated with building a new program that also provided excellent professional learning and ongoing collaboration.

To allay the ongoing disciplinary challenges that VHS experienced, Samuels began working with teachers’ mindsets and paradigms about how to bring the best out of students and how to handle students when best efforts still were not enough. As the school implemented teacher development programs based in Carol Dweck’s “growth mindset” and restorative practices, student disciplinary rates began to dramatically decrease. The district understood the importance of adjusting mindsets and helped develop schedules and structures for ongoing, job-embedded professional development. The district also identified and secured resources to sustain teacher learning.

Areas for improvement. Academically, VHS still has progress to make. Samuels, with the support of the district, focused on creating a culture that attracted teachers and students and reversed the exodus. Increasing the focus on instructional supports and

instructional effectiveness remains a priority to pursue. However, Samuels's assessment was that she first needed to create a school that exuded a sense of promise and energy. Her initial bold changes of rebranding the school and addressing teachers' mindsets established a sense of optimism, and the district's willingness to provide ongoing support, political networking, and funding each contributed to the improved culture.

Potential SEA role. Often, schools and districts can become focused on structural and programmatic changes. In this example, mindsets of teachers and other stakeholders were addressed. The potential role of SEAs in supporting a culture shift can be as simple as reminding districts that change can include addressing the affective needs of stakeholders. Additionally, SEAs can consider how to help districts and schools rebrand or reinvent themselves to attract students and teachers.

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 domain, 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 making changes to system-level practice was essential to preparing for sustainable school improvement. This situation is typical for districts ready to embark on turnaround. If a district is truly exemplary in all four domains, it is unlikely that it will have schools in need of turnaround. Accordingly, a district-readiness assessment should be approached 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 practices to effectively prioritize and drive bold change in turnaround schools.

Typically, conducting a readiness assessment includes carrying out interviews and focus groups with educators and stakeholders, along with collecting other data, in order to learn about current conditions in the district. The process of assessing district readiness can have important implications for how useful the resulting data are. Based on UVA-PLÉ's experience working with districts and schools to support turnaround, the following are some key questions and guidance for conducting a district-readiness assessment.

Who Benefits from the Assessment?

The assessment process benefits districts and SEAs in several ways. First, it allows the SEA to have a baseline diagnostic that can guide its support and resources. The assessment process also helps districts recognize how their strengths can be leveraged, and it identifies issues that should be addressed and potentially identifies a shared understanding across district and SEA leadership regarding where the district should be heading. 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. The team should be relatively small: four or five members at most. Its members should conduct interviews 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. Ideally the interviewers should be individuals who will be working with the district throughout the turnaround process.

How Should the Assessment Be Conducted?

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

Interviews

Having a team conduct semi-structured interviews of individuals usually allows the interviewees plenty of time to express and expand upon answers. The interview format can provide confidentiality that encourages the interviewees to provide insightful responses and not be concerned with how their peers might perceive their answers, which can be a concern in a focus group. Interviewers should ask a mix of predetermined, scripted questions along with unscripted follow-up questions 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 that the interviewer uses open-ended (rather than leading) questions to maximize insight and ensure that the interviewees 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. Given the flexibility, responsiveness, and insightfulness afforded by semi-structured interviews, they are suitable for district-readiness assessment purposes.

Focus Groups

Although interviews are beneficial in terms of the depth of information provided, the interview format does not allow for the group dynamics that a focus group promotes. Often, participants' responses during a focus group trigger the thinking of other participants in ways that would not be triggered with a single interviewee. The focus group approach results in a broad spectrum of responses from multiple participants. The focus group's social setting can lead to more conversational interaction, with a 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, and these observations can provide more data for assessing district readiness.

Other Data Collection

In addition to conducting interviews, the SEA or others involved in conducting a district-readiness assessment should consider other data collection methods. For example, asking someone to *demonstrate* how teachers access student data in the district's data system might be more enlightening than just asking people in an interview context to *talk about* accessing student data. Likewise, strategic observations and document reviews might yield important insights. Public-facing documents like brochures, strategic planning documentation, and letters to the community can be useful, particularly in comparing the information in these documents against what is conveyed in the interviews and focus groups.

What Tools Should Be Used?

Protocols for conducting interviews and focus groups provide a framework for interviewers to make sure they ask the essential questions. (See Appendix C for sample questions that can be used in designing a district-readiness assessment protocol.) Development of protocols also encourages the assessors to be clear about what they are listening for in each interview and focus group. As the interviewers conduct sessions, they can monitor whether

their questions are yielding the breadth and depth of information they are seeking. At times, rephrasing or adapting questions may be necessary. For this reason, a protocol 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 more specifically explain 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 a turnaround initiative. The focus group should also include some principals, other key leaders chosen by the superintendent, 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, allowing sufficient time for follow-up from the participants. The length of the interview might depend on the respondent. Scheduling at least an hour with most respondents and at least 90 minutes with the superintendent and for any focus group is usually advisable.

How Long Does the Whole Assessment Take?

The assessment's duration depends on the number of interviews and focus groups and on the staff available to conduct the assessment. Generally, visits to small and medium-sized districts take two days, and 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 data and for 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 that will be assisting the district with its turnaround effort. Over time, interviewers are seen less as outsiders and more as part of the district 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 that 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 Does the Readiness Assessment Team 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 consistency of answers

across respondents. At this point, the interviewers should also collectively assess the big-picture areas of strength and weakness in leadership, talent development and management, instructional infrastructure, and support and accountability, and should determine what commitments would likely be necessary to ensure the success of a turnaround initiative.

What Happens at the End of the Assessment?

Following a readiness assessment, the SEA's readiness-assessment team (or contracted organization working on behalf of the SEA) should schedule a meeting with the district leadership team to share its findings. The findings will help the district implement changes that will put it in a better position to support an effective turnaround effort. The assessment's results can contribute to a dialogue about what commitments from both the district and the SEA leaders would be necessary for embarking upon and realizing a successful turnaround. This dialogue can be useful to specifically identify contributions and commitments that will enhance alignment and partnership between the district and SEA. For the assessment to result in a greater level of collaboration between the district and SEA around defined areas of need, the readiness assessment team needs to be transparent about what information from the assessment, if any, will be presented publicly and to whom.

Implications for SEA and District Collaboration

School turnaround is a challenge not only for schools but also for 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 and to determine what adjustments may need to be made. Districts alone, without the SEA's guidance, may not be able to identify and develop the best solutions to their challenges.

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 district leaders who are more actively engaged and take the initiative to remove traditional bureaucratic barriers to improvement.

This guide discusses some of the ways that SEAs can help districts anticipate schools' needs related to undergoing a change process that involves 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 levers for change (UVA-PLÉ's four focus areas) and to understand the turnaround process through the four domains (CST's framework for rapid school improvement) during their discussions and planning for school improvement within their particular contexts.

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Appendix A. Alignment Between Levers for District Readiness and Domains for Rapid School Improvement

During a district-readiness assessment, districts and state education agencies can consider the strengths of the levers in the left column of the following table to understand how well-positioned the district is to enact the domains in the right column. The table as a whole depicts the broad areas of alignment between the levers and the domains in terms of their focus and intent.

Table A1. Alignment of UVA-PLE Levers and CST Domains

| Leadership and Culture: Support and Accountability* | |
|--|--|
| UVA-PLE Levers for District Readiness Assessment Leadership | Center on School Turnaround Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement Turnaround Leadership and Culture Shift |
| Will to do what is necessary | Prioritize improvement and communicate its urgency |
| School accountability | Monitor short- and long-term goals |
| School support | Customize and target support to meet needs |
| School support** | Build a strong community intensely focused on student learning |
| Will to do what is necessary** | Solicit and act upon stakeholder input |
| Capacity | Engage students and families in pursuing education goals |

| Talent | |
|--|---|
| UVA-PLE Levers for District Readiness Assessment Talent Management | Center on School Turnaround Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement Talent Development |
| School leadership selection | Recruit, develop, retain, and sustain talent |
| Teacher talent management: Development | Target professional learning opportunities |
| Teacher talent management: Recruitment and retention | Set clear performance expectations |
| Instruction | |
| UVA-PLE Levers for District Readiness Assessment Instructional Infrastructure | Center on School Turnaround Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement Instructional Transformation |
| Valid assessments | Diagnose and respond to student learning needs |
| Data culture and systems | |
| Curriculum strategy | Provide rigorous evidence-based instruction |
| Instructional monitoring and support | |
| Defined authority*** | Remove barriers and provide opportunities |

* domains combined to better demonstrate similar focus and intent across domains

** repeated

*** from a different domain

Appendix B. Support and Accountability in Practice

One district that exemplifies strength in its support and accountability systems is Brown Public Schools (BPS), a small rural district with a total enrollment of approximately 3,500 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 than were previously in place. 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 new superintendent's arrival commented that previously there had been a perception across the district that mediocre outcomes were acceptable.

In contrast, the new superintendent made it clear that his expectations were much higher than the status quo. Continuing with tradition for tradition's sake was no longer sufficient. The district reallocated resources at the district level to eliminate positions that did not strongly advance the work in schools and to create new positions that were filled by several strong leaders with knowledge relevant to building instructional systems such that the central office would be able to intensively help all schools. District staff became more visible in schools by regularly visiting sites and implementing professional development programs for teachers. The professional development was tied to achieving learning goals for students and to meeting formal evaluation objectives.

School staff in the district began to recognize that they were being held to increased standards, which they appreciated. Many 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.

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 or identify the particular needs of each turnaround school. Thus, support, though well-intentioned, was overly based on ingrained preferences rather than on data and a root-cause analysis of actual needs.

The district also had 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 lead to attracting top talent to fill teaching and school leadership positions. Finally, because the superintendent served as supervisor to every school in the district and was stretched in many directions, not enough had been done to ensure a regular presence in the particular schools where the district wanted to focus on building leadership capacity.

The district needed help to build its principal supervisor practice in a manner that truly cultivated leadership capacity and ensured that all district support to the schools was cohesive, urgently identified, and advanced the schools' most pressing goals. The district also needed help to identify how it could change policy or practice to remove barriers and allow leaders to focus on the turnaround work.

Potential SEA role. To help districts strengthen structures for support and accountability, the SEA could assist with analyzing school and district contexts to ascertain root causes of key challenges and could provide and model high-quality professional development for school and district leaders that addresses the challenges illuminated by such an analysis. Further, the SEA could connect districts with exemplar principal supervisors to observe in action (leading coaching sessions or principal meetings). The SEA could point out examples of districts that create “tight-loose” structures, which include both common expectations and areas of meaningful autonomy.

Appendix C.

Sample Interview Questions

The following list provides a few sample questions that can be used as a starting point for designing a district-readiness assessment protocol. In choosing an interview approach, please keep in mind that each interview should be contextualized — based on the interviewee's role and expertise — to go deeply into a few key practices that are most relevant for the particular interviewee.

1. Leadership

- Describe the district's role in improving schools.
- 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?
- 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?

2. 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?

3. 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? 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?

4. Culture Shift

- How would you describe the culture in the district?
- How would you describe the culture in the individual turnaround schools?
- How is the culture of the district and schools being used to support turnaround?
- How are stakeholders involved in the improvement process?
- How are stakeholders' perspectives reflected in the overall approach to improvement?



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