



# PROMISING LEADERSHIP PRACTICES FOR RAPID SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT THAT LASTS

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Prepared for the Center on School Turnaround at WestEd



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This work was supported by the Center on School Turnaround through funding from the U.S. Department of Education, PR/Award Number S283B120015. It does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education, and no endorsement by the federal government should be assumed.

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Suggested citation: Hitt, D. H., & Meyers, C. V. (2017). *Promising leadership practices for rapid school improvement that lasts*. San Francisco, CA: WestEd.

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# Introduction

Achieving rapid school improvement — most commonly referred to as “school turnaround” — is a complex undertaking. Equally challenging is the work of sustaining and even expanding on a school’s initial improvements so that the school can more fully become a vibrant learning organization.

There is much to learn from schools that demonstrate sustained improvement and those who lead them. But because there has not been a broad effort to identify and highlight such schools, their successes have heretofore yielded little practice-based guidance for other leaders who aspire to the same outcomes for the schools they lead. There is also much to learn from other fields, such as business, where research has focused on organizational turnaround. This report, conceived to help fill a knowledge gap, presents promising practices for how to sustain the advances made in schools that have demonstrated rapid improvement.

The promising practices presented here are derived from a comprehensive review of relevant literature, both within and beyond the field of education, and from the experience of five school principals who not only facilitated school turnaround but also catalyzed considerable ongoing growth in student achievement for at least four years following their school’s initial turnaround. The continued growth at these schools contrasts with the achievement plateaus or regressions that more commonly follow a school’s turnaround.

The five principals are often referred to herein as “leaders of sustained improvement” because, as that designation implies, they did not undertake this essential work alone. Their most important contribution may have been that they clearly ascertained the realms needing attention and then prompted and supported positive contributions from others in order to collectively pursue improved outcomes for students.

At the school level, principals and leadership teams can use these promising practices to guide their teacher- and community-directed efforts and also to guide reflection on their own practices and their specific actions related to the practices. At the district level, principal supervisors can use them to design their support and coaching efforts. Superintendents or other district leaders can consider how to build the structures and interactions that are needed in order to enact these practices and related actions in district schools. For their part, state education agency (SEA) staff can consider these practices in thinking about how to encourage local education agencies to better support principals and schools.

## Overview of This Project

Examining exemplars of schools that have sustained the improvements made during their successful turnaround, along with relevant research, can suggest guidance to those who are embarking on or in the midst of a rapid-improvement endeavor for their school. This project specifically sought to better understand how the principals of five exemplar schools facilitated the transformation of their organizations into continuously improving, authentic learning environments for adults and students alike.<sup>1</sup>

To learn more about these transformative efforts:

1. **The authors first examined and synthesized research from the last decade on topics related to school turnaround, organizational turnaround and sustainability, and effective leadership.** For this project, the authors drew on these sources of prior knowledge to synthesize practices across all three areas in order to identify possible practices for leadership for sustained improvement. The authors initially focused on commonalities within language across the literature. To do this, they identified the key leadership areas called out within comprehensive reviews of similar content and aggregated those findings into “practice areas.” While the language in the reviews sometimes differed, elaborations within the reviews indicated similar intent. After establishing the “practice areas,” the authors again reviewed the language and content, but this time at a finer level so as to further delineate the practices that best fit together in terms of distinct supports in their respective areas.
2. **The authors interviewed five principals whose schools continuously improved after their initial turnaround gains.** The five schools in this project had demonstrated at least four years of continuous improvement following initial turnaround. Specifically, they demonstrated rapid growth — at least 10 percent per year — in mathematics and English language arts during the two years leading to turnaround, followed by at least four years of continued gains, regardless of the size of those gains. To enhance the validity of the principals’ reports about what occurred in their school, all project participants had to have continued as principal at the school for the entire six years; this tenure allowed them to describe the full scope of the change they led. These principals participated in in-depth interviews about the general practices they used while at the school and their specific actions within those practices.

(For more information on the methods underlying this report, see the appendix.)

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<sup>1</sup> Findings from research reviewed and synthesized for this project suggest that the key differences between high-functioning and low-performing schools are the qualities of a school’s organizational structures and of the interactions between and among its principal and the school’s stakeholders, including teachers, district staff, and the community. The authors conceptualize the purpose of principal practices and related actions to be facilitation of positive and productive structures and interactions within and among organizational members. There has been little consideration about what such practices — ones that facilitate establishment of structures and interactions — look like in schools that defy the odds by sustaining the improvements achieved in the turnaround effort.

While the inquiry into the principals' practices and actions was guided by knowledge from previous research, the authors also allowed for emergent themes, and the findings include several new practices revealed in the interview data.

The leaders interviewed for this project focused on ensuring that their teachers could achieve goals, feel a sense of accomplishment, and continue to grow professionally. To that end, these leaders designed, monitored, and, as needed, adjusted systems, structures, and interactions to support long-term learning and productivity among their teaching staff. For example, these leaders sought to intentionally interact with teachers in ways that elicited positive responses aligned with the school's vision. The promising practices presented in this report identify specific areas of focus for these leaders of sustained improvement, the types of practice they carried out in each area, and the specific actions related to each type of practice. The practices and their related actions address both the structural components of change (i.e., structures) and the human side of change (i.e., interactions).

# Details of the Project's Promising Practices

The promising practices in this section are organized into five areas of focus. Presented within each area are the promising practices, related actions for each practice, and the implications of those actions. Most of the actions and implications are school-level, with exceptions being those in a practice that pertains to a school and its district working together.

- *Areas of focus* are those aspects of the sustainability effort for which, research suggests, focused leadership is most important.
- *Promising practices* provide mid-level specificity about the important work of leaders of sustained improvement in each focus area.
- At the most granular level are the *actions* within each promising practice. These actions provide the most concrete information about what it is that a principal of a sustained turnaround school actually does, with the *implications* of each action offering more insight about the action.

The document concludes with a set of additional implications, these being for local education agencies and other entities, based on what the project sets forth as school-level promising practices.

As presented here, promising practices work in tandem across domains; however, future work may yield insight into how principals and their leadership teams might prioritize their efforts, based on contextual needs.

Figure 1 on the following page introduces the key areas of focus for leaders of sustained improvement and the promising practices for each area, as identified in this project. Specific actions for each practice and the implications of those actions are presented in subsequent tables.

## Figure 1. Key Areas of Focus with Promising Practices for Leading Sustained Continuous Improvement

### **Focus Area I. Continually Conveying an Invigorating Vision**

Promising Practice 1. Monitoring Short- and Long-Term Goals and Aligning Resources to Support Their Achievement

Promising Practice 2. Building Acceptance of the Vision

### **Focus Area II. Motivating Teachers to Maintain Commitment to Transforming the School**

Promising Practice 1. Matching Teachers' Strengths with Organizational Needs

Promising Practice 2. Shaping Staff Perceptions of the Principal

Promising Practice 3. Proactively Managing and Retaining Talent

### **Focus Area III. Leading Instruction for Ongoing Teacher Growth**

Promising Practice 1. Setting Teacher Performance Expectations and Anticipating Needs

Promising Practice 2. Ascertaining, Implementing, and Praising

### **Focus Area IV. Insisting on a High-Quality Learning Experience for All Students, Regardless of Their Background**

Promising Practice 1. Expecting Academic Excellence for Students

Promising Practice 2. Constantly Supporting Students in Pursuit of Academic Excellence

### **Focus Area V. Garnering and Maintaining Support from Partners**

Promising Practice 1. Co-Creating Success with the District

Promising Practice 2. Connecting with Families and the Community

Project findings suggest that leaders of sustained improvement invest in both the present and the future. Some actions, such as going after quick wins and building data structures, more often take place in the initial turnaround effort than in the sustaining-improvement phase. Other actions, such as setting in motion connections with the community at the beginning of the turnaround endeavor, may not lead to immediate gains but are likely to contribute to the school's growth for the long term.

A prudent starting point for district-level personnel seeking to support sustained improvement is helping principals to think deeply and critically about *when* and/or *how* they should work on a particular promising practice and undertake related actions, either themselves or through distributed leadership at the school. Then, to assess the principals' efforts, a next step would be to consider *if* the principal is, in fact, influencing teachers and other stakeholders. The final section of this report describes opportunities in each focus area for leaders in state and local education agencies to support efforts to achieve and sustain dramatic school improvement. The authors encourage these leaders to adapt the opportunities for their own context and to be on the lookout for additional ways to support rapid school improvement at every turn.



The following sections unpack each focus area for school leaders, the promising practices in each focus area, and the actions and implications related to each practice.

### Focus Area I. Continually Conveying an Invigorating Vision

Leaders of sustained improvement recognize the importance not just of developing a compelling vision at the outset of a change effort, but of maintaining the vision's captivating nature and adjusting it, if needed, to reflect new growth opportunities. These leaders build on the energy and excitement generated during the turnaround as participants demonstrate or observe heightened performance, accomplishments, and movement toward a better future for students and teachers. The leaders then extend the vision to include the prospect of the school's ongoing growth and accomplishment after the initial turnaround. These are the practices that leaders of sustained improvement use to foster iterative refinement and acceptance of a truly compelling vision for the school – one that generates continual and collective enthusiasm and eagerness to engage in elevated teaching and learning.

#### Promising Practice 1. Monitoring Short- and Long-Term Goals and Aligning Resources to Support Their Achievement

These leaders continue to develop goals for the organization that are informed by data and based on both progress and challenges. The leaders determine how to strategically attain goals, by breaking down the process into discrete tasks that scaffold the way to greater accomplishments. Timelines and tasks are continually updated, and resources are aligned, to support the effort.

#### Actions for Promising Practice 1

Descriptors	School-level Implications
Facilitating vision development and ongoing refinement of the vision within a capable and representative leadership team.	Regularly reviewing and refining the vision so that it reflects what the school, the teachers, and the students can each become.
Setting and monitoring rapid timelines to create a continual sense of urgency among stakeholders.	Updating specific targets for completion; supporting and holding accountable those who have roles in meeting the timelines.
Iteratively referencing data to refine and assess the vision.	Keeping data as the centerpiece in the process for defining improvement efforts.
Carefully aligning resources to prioritize extra time for teachers to teach and students to learn.	Clearly linking rationales for staffing and expenditure decisions to the vision as it evolves.

**Focus Area I. Continually Conveying an Invigorating Vision**

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**Promising Practice 2. Building Acceptance of the Vision**

As is applicable and prudent, these leaders continually encourage and cultivate collaborative decision-making and a collective sense of responsibility among staff and stakeholders. They are aware of their own practices and model what they want to see woven into the fabric of their school, so that teachers see effort exerted by fellow teachers and the principal alike. Leaders of sustained improvement consider how communication can contribute to transparency and to stakeholders’ belief in and commitment to the rationale for the school’s vision.

**Actions for Promising Practice 2**

Descriptors	School-level Implications
Communicating regularly and openly, using multiple methods to encourage transparency.	Exercising care to preserve productive two-way communication with stakeholders.
Modeling behavior that aligns with the intended changes and with the practices needed to attain the vision.	Considering how the leaders’ actions convey what is valued and important for organizational growth.
To the extent possible, using progressively more inclusive processes to foster and maintain whole-group acceptance of the vision developed by the leadership team.	Growing involvement of stakeholders as capacity is built.

## Focus Area II. Motivating Teachers to Maintain Commitment to Transforming the School

Leaders of sustained improvement focus on results for students *and* adults. Their practices encourage ongoing teacher engagement in pursuit of the challenging but rewarding work of creating a high-quality school for students. Leaders make an effort to transform teachers’ notions of what they — teachers — can accomplish, both as individuals and collectively as an organization, on behalf of students. Leaders deliberately create sustainable systems that bring out the best in teachers for the sake of their students, but the systems they create are also intended to benefit teachers themselves, because leaders recognize that teachers have a professional and sometimes personal desire to both achieve *and* grow, no matter how latent that need to grow may sometimes seem.

### Promising Practice 1. Matching Teachers’ Strengths with Organizational Needs

These leaders continue to monitor and assess teachers’ existing strengths and potential, and then align individual strengths with organizational needs. Doing so is mutually beneficial for the school organization and for the individual teacher, as it helps teachers to maintain a sense of efficacy and allows them to be open to and embrace growth while also improving overall instructional quality.

### Actions for Promising Practice 1

Descriptors	School-level Implications
Generating ongoing mastery experiences for teachers.	Providing ways for teachers to continually experience success during the growth and improvement process, so that morale remains healthy.
Considering how each individual teacher’s current strengths can contribute to school improvement and how to address each teacher’s current limitations.	Giving teachers work that is based on their strengths, to the degree possible, but that also challenges them to grow in the ways needed to help achieve the broader school organization’s vision.
Working to create a professional culture that establishes, distributes, and advances the school’s leadership capacity by fostering ways to broaden the impact of teachers who demonstrate high-quality teaching.	Allowing teachers opportunities to grow, both in and outside the classroom, and then to share leadership (for example, through peer coaching or mentoring in an area of expertise) in the realms in which they excel.
Broadening the leadership team by encouraging teachers’ participation in decision-making to the extent that individual teachers have proven capable of contributing to identifying problems, setting goals, and developing action plans.	Considering how some teachers may thrive when performing out-of-classroom responsibilities, while others may not.

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### Promising Practice 2. Shaping Staff Perceptions of the Principal

These leaders are aware of the power of their teachers' positive perceptions of them as leaders, and they work to maximize that influence.

#### Actions for Promising Practice 2

Descriptors	School-level Implications
Integrating themselves into daily routines of teachers.	Making themselves available as leaders, staying in the mix of daily school and classroom life.
Acting with transparency and being reliable, so as to deliberately create a trusting and transparent professional relationship with their teachers.	Establishing and protecting teachers' confidence in leaders' intentions to prioritize teaching, learning, and growth for all as fundamental for productive work.

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### Promising Practice 3. Proactively Managing and Retaining Talent

These leaders understand that managing human capital is a critical lever for many improvements, and they approach talent management with forethought and care.

#### Actions for Promising Practice 3

Descriptors	School-level Implications
Strategically positioning the school for advantageous and preferential hiring of the best teachers through aggressive recruitment and use of insightful selection practices.	Working with the district to develop thoughtful selection processes that allow the turnaround school early access to teachers who fit the school's distinct needs.
Intentionally planning to retain the best teachers by creating a high-quality, stimulating, and meaningful work environment.	Strategizing how to retain talent, recognizing that the school's success depends on it; anticipating the conditions that high-quality teachers would be attracted to, both initially and for the long term.
Addressing problems and resolving conflict, including, if appropriate, removing personnel who do not respond to professional learning opportunities or intervention.	If all else fails, being willing to help low-performing teachers move out and on to something for which they might be better suited.

**Focus Area III. Leading Instruction for Ongoing Teacher Growth**

Leaders of sustained improvement expand teachers’ instructional repertoire and capacity beyond what is needed to raise the quality of instruction to the level required for initial school turnaround. Leaders’ practices influence the faculty’s growth, helping teachers to fully become what their students need them to be. Recognizing the link between instructional quality and student achievement, these leaders design high-quality, stimulating, and “rapid-response” professional learning opportunities for teachers. They derive as much professional satisfaction from their own efforts to advance adult performance as they do when students demonstrate increased performance.

**Promising Practice 1. Setting Teacher Performance Expectations and Anticipating Needs**

These leaders anticipate that different teachers will have different reactions to professional growth and to changes at the school. Therefore, the leaders provide individualized support to teachers while, at the same time, holding individual teachers accountable for continuing to reach for and achieve ambitious standards for student learning.

**Actions for Promising Practice 1**

Descriptors	School-level Implications
Establishing ambitious expectations for the quality of classroom instruction and the overall student experience.	Telling teachers that excellence is expected in the classroom, and facilitating professional learning opportunities so that they have the skills to meet that expectation.
Buffering teachers from unnecessary burdens that distract from teaching, learning, and other organizational goals.	Asking teachers to direct their energies only toward what really matters.
Structuring the organization to allow for adjustments in instruction based on student needs identified in the data, as well as for schoolwide collaboration to support teaching and learning.	Setting up the schedule or other structures so that teachers can help one another determine how to continually monitor and adjust instruction, based on student data.
Anticipating the need for, and providing, personal support for teachers during the change and growth process, while holding true to ambitious expectations.	Expecting some teachers to have emotional responses to expectations for their growth and for change; anticipating how to handle different responses, using positive redirection as needed.

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**Promising Practice 2. Ascertaining, Implementing, and Praising**

These leaders closely monitor teachers’ growth and development, adjust teachers’ professional learning opportunities and supports on the basis of formative and summative assessments of the teachers and their students, and call attention to instances of high performance and excellence.

**Actions for Promising Practice 2**

Descriptors	School-level Implications
Individualizing teacher learning opportunities and supports so that they are responsive to student needs, are professionally transformative, are rooted in adult learning theory, and lead teachers to create high-quality classroom experiences.	Providing teachers with engaging and individualized professional learning.
Displaying an understanding of how to promote and support positive change for teachers through job-embedded and rapid-response use of coaching and of two-way peer observation with feedback.	Intervening with support early and quickly when teachers’ data indicate instructional challenges.
Engendering collective responsibility through ongoing individual performance feedback and formative assessment (e.g., observation, midpoint evaluations).	Providing regular and ongoing feedback for teachers that tracks their performance so as to support their professional growth.
Publicly celebrating wins and highlighting accomplishments that support attainment of the school’s vision and of teachers’ goals.	Celebrating and praising big and small victories when individuals or teams exhibit growth or contribute to realization of the school’s vision.
Deriving considerable professional meaning and fulfillment from facilitating adult learning and progress toward growth.	Fostering both student and teacher growth and deriving similar levels of professional satisfaction from improvement in each area.

**Focus Area IV. Insisting on a High-Quality Learning Experience for All Students, Regardless of Their Background**

Leaders of sustained improvement cultivate an environment that is both academically rigorous and supportive for students. Effective leaders understand that low academic performance is a function of multiple factors that, as leaders, they can influence. As a result, they resolutely strive to facilitate decision-making about how their organizations address school-based factors that affect student performance, as well as some factors that are traditionally non-school-based. Leaders are prepared to make dramatic adjustments to delivery of education services.

**Promising Practice 1. Expecting Academic Excellence for Students**

These leaders recognize that student growth results from a balance between high expectations and appropriate support. To operationalize high expectations for students, they facilitate teachers' use of first-rate curricula, instruction, and assessment.

**Actions for Promising Practice 1**

Descriptors	School-level Implications
<p>Developing and monitoring rigorous curricular programs aligned with state standards.</p>	<p>Supporting teachers in designing ways to maintain high expectations and deliver content in a rigorous manner, even if deficits in students' knowledge and skills are present. This process includes principals ensuring rapid-response reteaching, fluid teacher assignment, and grouping for students as needed.</p>
<p>Facilitating teacher development of research-based instructional strategies to meet students' collective needs as well as the needs of smaller groups of students.</p>	<p>Supporting teachers in the delivery of engaging instruction that builds on students' innate curiosity and joy of learning and that is reinforced by a variety of instructional representations for both whole-group instruction and instruction of smaller groups.</p>
<p>Leveraging assessments and analyzing data to monitor students' collective and individual progress.</p>	<p>Supporting teachers in pinpointing individual student needs, as well as larger trends, and in designing teaching or interventions to address those needs.</p>



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**Promising Practice 2. Constantly Supporting Students in Pursuit of Academic Excellence**

These leaders think outside the box and overcome obstacles, removing barriers to student learning. They ensure that students’ basic needs, such as safety, are addressed, and take steps to foster students’ sense of belonging. They ensure high-quality instruction and student support in all classrooms, having teachers use such strategies as personalized learning, extended learning time, and fluid, rapid assessment and adjustment of instructional grouping and delivery.

**Actions for Promising Practice 2**

Descriptors	School-level Implications
Tending to the physical environment as a means of showing students that they are valued and that learning is important.	Renovating and maintaining buildings and other infrastructure, because students and teachers sense their value from the state of their surroundings.
Fostering students’ overall positive association with, and perception of, their school, by establishing predictable routines, supportive adult/student relationships, and a fundamental sense of safety.	Designing schools to be harbors of safety and routine that foster a joyful approach to learning, recognizing that many students from underserved backgrounds face chaotic out-of-school experiences.
Working with teachers to ensure that students receive personalized instructional experiences.	Facilitating teachers’ abilities to discern the evolving needs of each student and to build instruction programs that address those needs.
Persistently believing in both teachers’ and students’ capability to learn and grow when presented with the right conditions.	Maintaining conviction that most people have the drive and capacity to achieve when the environment is optimized.
Lengthening the instructional day, week, and/or year and offering acceleration and scaffolding to get students up to speed during that extended time.	Making decisions about instructional time based on what students need, and ensuring that additional time is used effectively and does not simply perpetuate inefficient practices.
Taking a whole-child approach to students, by ensuring that they receive what they need in order to attend school regularly and focus on achieving.	Leveraging non-school-based variables to support student learning.

**Focus Area V. Garnering and Maintaining Support from Partners**

Leaders of sustained improvement understand the discretion and influence the district has in relation to school-level factors, including leaders’ own development, and they find ways to develop constructive relationships with district leaders. Effective school leaders expect their school to be a positive contributor to the community, and they work toward realizing the community’s desire for the school to be a source of optimism and success.

**Promising Practice 1. Co-Creating Success with the District**

These leaders view redesigning their own relationship, and the school’s relationship, with the district as a high priority, understanding that a positive partnership is important for rapid and continued improvement.

**Actions for Promising Practice 1**

Descriptors	District-level Implications
<p>Advocating for embedded and regular interaction and coaching from the principal supervisor.</p>	<p>Expecting the principal supervisor(s) to spend time each week shadowing, coaching, meeting, and debriefing with each principal, recognizing the principal’s crucial role in the daily work of transformational change.</p>
<p>Championing district prioritization of support to develop high-quality data structures, curricula, and assessment tools.</p>	<p>Embedding collection and analysis of student achievement data in the district infrastructure and providing time for principals to understand how to lead the process of interpreting data at their schools.</p>
<p>Promoting rationales for preferential and discretionary support for recruitment, retention, and hiring of teachers and assistant principals in turnaround schools.</p>	<p>Articulating rationales for removing barriers within district structures so that principals may attract and maintain — and replace low performers with — personnel who have demonstrated, or who show potential to do, high-quality work.</p>

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**Promising Practice 2. Connecting with Families and the Community**

These leaders find common ground with their school’s families and broader communities. Developing positive relationships with students’ families and the community takes time and effort, but these leaders understand that such relationships are mutually beneficial, supporting the school’s efforts and playing a role in long-term improvement.

**Actions for Promising Practice 2**

Descriptors	School-level Implications
Thinking critically to determine how parent and community involvement can be focused on benefiting student achievement.	Partnering with students’ homes and with the community in ways that can maximize and bolster a school’s efforts to improve student achievement.
Conceiving of the school as the “hub” of the community.	Envisioning the school as the heart of the community and developing strategies to bring the school and the community together to benefit students by meeting the needs of the whole child – that is, meeting both the academic and non-academic needs of the child.

# Implications for Districts and Other Entities Supporting Schools That Seek to Sustain Rapid Improvement

This report synthesizes in one cohesive set of promising practices what is known so far about sustaining and even building on school-level transformation in a school's post-turnaround years. It offers the first set of promising practices to draw both from a comprehensive review of relevant research and from interviews with principals who have led successful efforts to sustain and build on the outcomes of school turnaround. These promising practices can be applied in any effort to sustain or extend turnaround success, regardless of where a school is in that process or of the student population served by the school.

By making clear which practices matter, this report can help principals and their leadership teams to devise their own context-specific versions of an improvement plan that incorporates these promising practices. The promising practices can also inform local districts and SEAs in how they support their schools' rapid improvement efforts, prompting reflection on and consideration of how principals are expected to go about their work and how districts and SEAs can support them in pursuit of the practices that matter. For example, when principals are engaged in activities outside the realm of these domains and practices, it would be wise to question and carefully consider the rationales for such engagement.

Following are descriptions of opportunities, in each key focus area, for school systems to support efforts to achieve school turnaround and to sustain and build on the resulting improvements.

## **Focus Area I. Continually Conveying an Invigorating Vision**

- Encourage and help principals to develop a vision that is a compelling expression of what the school wishes to become; employ collaboration when prudent and possible; provide feedback to principals as they practice developing vision statements; and encourage principals to avoid overused, stale, or generic vision statements.
- Consider committing resources to support thoughtful development of the vision, through a retreat or other activity. Doing so helps the principal and the leadership team to create the vision; to construct how they will engage the broader organization in accepting it; and to conduct backward planning and development of aligned goals and timelines.
- Encourage principals to strike a balance between collaboration and, especially at the outset, leading with their own sense of where the school needs to go. As capacity is built, movement toward broader participation makes sense.

- Help principals prioritize people, not products. The effects of extra time for teaching and learning and extra personnel to provide services for students outlast the impact of supplies, high-priced curriculum packages, and unnecessary technology for students.
- Consider how to highlight and communicate successes to the broader community and the public, including, for example, the use of news media and social media that help the school and district to establish a recognizable “brand” associated with success and positive results for students.

## **Focus Area II. Motivating Teachers to Maintain Commitment to Transforming the School**

- Encourage heavy doses of principal reflection and strategizing, particularly about how to motivate faculty members, both on the individual and collective levels. Principal supervisors should engage with principals in ongoing conversations about how to best make the determinations called for in these practices and actions. Another option would be to pair principals with peers, or with a “critical friend,” to support each other and to generate new thinking about how to maximize these actions.
- Districts should remember that they have the discretion to help principals with ongoing preferential hiring and development of incentives (including monetary incentives as well as working conditions) for teaching in schools that have achieved rapid improvement and are now focused on sustaining or extending that improvement.
- Be ready to discuss the removal of poorly performing teachers and, if appropriate, to support principals in removing them. Often, the best actions that system leaders can take are to eliminate barriers to efficient human resources operation, creation of teacher leadership roles, and honest performance management.
- Help principals select and engage members for their leadership team who complement their competencies and instructional strengths. Districts should consider how to surround principals with teacher leaders who are committed to transformation.
- Proactively lead efforts to build a district talent pipeline of educators who are ready to succeed existing principals and/or spread practices to other schools.

## **Focus Area III. Leading Instruction for Ongoing Teacher Growth**

- Work with principals to monitor and adjust what is asked of teachers, in part to ensure that it is targeted to the improvement effort. When the district and principals carefully prioritize what teachers are asked to do, teacher energy and time are reserved for what matters most: teaching and developing their craft.
- Ensure that school schedules include significant time for teacher collaboration and for building the capacity of administrators and teacher leaders to conduct strong, evidence-based, and engaging facilitation to help teachers learn from one another and meet student needs.
- Provide rigorous student assessments aligned to the state curriculum, training for principals and teachers on how to conduct data analysis, and structures to help teachers plan instructional adjustments based on data.

- Provide direct, targeted professional learning and curriculum resources for teachers to build their capacity to design rigorous units and lessons.
- Model high-quality professional learning opportunities that are responsive to principals' needs as leaders of organizations engaged in high-level change and/or in sustaining dramatic improvement. Seeing these kinds of learning opportunities modeled reminds principals of the value of thoughtfully implemented professional learning and will spark ideas for how they can best engage teachers in professional learning.
- Devise responsive data structures that allow principals to help teachers “break down” their students' performance.
- Coach school leadership teams on how to conduct effective one-on-one conversations with teachers to drive evidence-based instruction.
- Remember the power of celebration and acknowledgment for all, including for principals.

#### **Focus Area IV. Insisting on a High-Quality Learning Experience for All Students, Regardless of Their Background**

- Mobilize instructional support and expertise to ensure high-quality, rigorous curricula.
- Support principals' efforts to maintain high standards for student behavior and school safety and to establish systems and routines that reinforce these standards.
- Encourage principals to consider how they can construct learning environments that truly foster students' and teachers' love of learning.
- Mobilize district support to improve and maintain school facilities. Encourage relevant district-level departments to focus on updating school infrastructure and on preserving an appealing image and a tidy campus that contribute to a learning environment.
- Anticipate that, going forward, teachers and students will likely need extra time for the work entailed in continuously improving teaching and learning. Thoughtfully develop extended-year, -week, and -day programs for students and teachers, and discern ways to sustain funding for this additional time through budget restructuring.
- Provide school staff with professional learning on high-quality differentiation and intervention, and monitor school efforts to accelerate learning for all students, irrespective of students' starting points.

#### **Focus Area V. Garnering and Maintaining Support from Partners**

- Provide regular high-quality job-embedded coaching to assist principals in thinking through their problems of practice and the issues raised by these promising practices.
- Ensure that principals have access to any data they request; bring together and organize longitudinal student achievement, attendance, program, and other data into user-friendly, responsive systems.

- Help principals delineate and anticipate their budget needs. Work collaboratively with principals to prioritize principal requests that strengthen teaching and learning and teacher commitment to the school.
- Facilitate creative thinking on how to address student needs, whether inside or outside the classroom. For example, one of the five schools studied for this report partnered with the local health agency to establish, in the school building, a clinic staffed with a doctor, a nurse, and a dentist, so as to decrease student absenteeism and increase student readiness to learn. Such an endeavor is time- and effort-intensive, but if the district can identify high-impact solutions such as this for meeting students' needs and set them in motion early on in the turnaround process, such efforts will come to fruition in time to support sustainability.

## Appendix: Project Methods

Prior to the start of this project, no research had been conducted on sustaining school turnaround. Thus, for this project, the authors reviewed and drew from empirical research in related fields to hypothesize promising practices for principal facilitation of lasting change in formerly low-performing schools after turnaround has been achieved. The research areas reviewed include effective school leadership, turnaround leadership in education, and sustained turnaround leadership in non-education sectors (e.g., the business sector).

In each of these areas, researchers have conducted comprehensive literature reviews that set forth aggregate findings (Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010; Murphy & Meyers, 2008; Rhim, 2016). For this project, the authors drew on these sources of prior knowledge to synthesize practices across all three areas, in order to identify possible practices for leadership of sustained improvement. To do this, they first identified the key leadership areas called out within the comprehensive reviews of similar content, and then aggregated those findings into five “focus areas.” The authors initially focused on commonalities within language across the bodies of literature. While the language sometimes differed across reviews, elaborations within the reviews indicated similar intent.

After establishing five focus areas for leadership, the authors again reviewed the language and content of the literature, but this time at a finer level, so as to further delineate the practices that best fit together in terms of distinct supports in their respective area. The authors included all practices clearly identified in any body of literature, even if they appear only in one body of literature, because the next phase of the project was established to refine the practices. Through this initial research review, 33 leadership practices, in five focus areas, were identified.

To test this hypothesized set of research-based practices in the five focus areas, the authors developed rigorous selection criteria for a sample of principals whose schools appeared to be sustaining turnaround. For this project, “sustained turnaround” is defined as a school having demonstrated substantial initial gains in student achievement during the first two years of its turnaround effort, as well as at least four more consecutive years of achievement gains. To be included in the sample, principals had to have led their school during its entire transformation over the six years, a criterion that eliminated the need to report on the work of a former principal. The authors anticipated that these criteria would yield an extremely limited sample, but decided to collect data only from principals who could tell their stories of sustained improvement from start to finish and whose leadership of sustained improvement was evident in their schools’ outcomes.

After combing through data on nearly 200 schools, the authors identified five schools that (1) had received School Improvement Grant funds or were otherwise designated as having been engaged in turnaround; (2) had demonstrated, on average, 10 percent gains in percent-proficiency scores in both English language arts and mathematics during the first and second years of the turnaround effort; and (3) had demonstrated continued positive trajectories for four more years. These five schools became the sample for this project. Although the sample is small, the authors elected to prioritize school principals who appeared to have sustained improvement after leading rapid improvement in low-performing schools.



The principals from the five schools were interviewed using a detailed protocol derived from the authors' hypothesized practices for leadership for sustained improvement. In the first part of the interview, principals were asked to tell the story of their school's turnaround and its sustained improvements. In the second part of the interview, they were asked to provide specific action-based stories of how they used each of the hypothesized practices. Each interview, including both parts, lasted for two to three hours.

Interview data were transcribed and then coded for areas of alignment and lack of alignment with the hypothesized practices derived from the literature. Emergent, or new, practices — that is, those identified in the interviews but not identified from the literature review — were also coded. The authors then adjusted the hypothesized literature-based practices to reflect the experiences of the principals, based on areas of alignment and non-alignment and on practices identified as new. In this way, the literature served as the analytic premise for the interviews, but the practices reflect the experiences of these principals who have sustained change — that is, the research team aligned interview questions with the practices identified in the literature review and synthesis, while allowing for new knowledge about sustained turnaround to emerge.

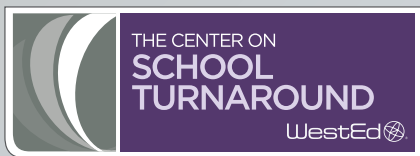
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