



Guiding Principles for Improving the Lowest-Performing Schools in Tennessee

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A Policy Brief on Driving Improvement in Low-Performing Schools

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Introduction

Despite significant financial support from federal initiatives such as School Improvement Grants and Race to the Top, few state-led efforts to turn around low-performing schools have proven successful. In contrast, the effectiveness of Tennessee's Innovation Zones (iZones) has been widely recognized and well documented. In this policy brief, we distill research on school reform from the past several years, including research conducted through the Tennessee Education Research Alliance, into a set of guiding principles for state efforts to improve low-performing schools.

These guiding principles constitute a coherent and interconnected approach to reform, all of which are necessary to improve low-performing schools. The five principles are not specific practices, nor is this a how-to guide for districts. Rather, the principles are mutually supportive components of a comprehensive strategy for effective school reform.

The guiding principles are:

- 1 *Establish a dedicated organizational infrastructure*
- 2 *Identify and address barriers to improvement*
- 3 *Increase instructional capacity*
- 4 *Increase leadership capacity*
- 5 *Implement processes and practices to maintain stability*

These guiding principles have been developed in response to federal requirements to support the lowest-performing schools. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires states to designate the lowest-performing five percent of Title 1 schools as Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) schools. We now provide a description of each of these guiding principles as well as some examples of interventions supported by prior research.

The district organizational infrastructure should clarify roles and coordinate responsibilities for districts and schools including planning, implementing, resourcing, monitoring, and evaluating the reform efforts for the lowest-performing Title 1 schools.

All too often, turning around the poor performance of a school is left to the principal and other school staff. Effective reforms require the state, district, and schools to take on complementary responsibilities. At the district level, this requires dedicated turnaround leadership not only because turnaround work requires too much effort, coordination, and focus to be merely one part of an administrator's portfolio, but also because improving the lowest-performing schools requires implementing a cohesive set of policies and practices that differ from those in other schools within the district. In fact, in another state, districts impeded turnaround reforms by undermining the implementation of interventions specific to their lowest-performing schools.

One of the defining characteristics of the effective Tennessee iZones in Memphis, Nashville, and Chattanooga was the district-within-district organization, each with autonomy and each supported by additional resources from the district and state. At the district level, a dedicated organizational infrastructure should be established to help develop turnaround plans, oversee the implementation of these plans, and authorize the lowest-performing schools to operate differently from other schools in the district, because individual schools need additional resources, support, and advice in maintaining their planned approach to reform.

Another important but less well-known role was the state's guidance for districts' iZone plans. For instance,

the Tennessee Department of Education required that performance-based financial incentives be provided to teachers and leaders in the iZones. Because of this requirement, teachers transferring into iZone schools in Memphis earned 18 percent more than they would have in their previous schools, and effective teachers who stayed in those schools earned 12 percent more than those who transferred out. The differential pay for educators in the iZone schools has been shown by rigorous research to be effective.

The evidence also suggests that the state has a role in setting the parameters for reform, such as stipulating which strategies are included in each district or school improvement plan, monitoring implementation, and ensuring that the resources from the federal, state, and local levels are sufficient to implement the reform plan.

Together the state and districts should consider the scale of the reform efforts that are possible, given available resources. It appears that in another state, the available resources were not sufficient for effective intervention in the lowest-performing five percent of Title 1 schools and may have contributed to negative effects on student achievement and increasing teacher turnover. The resources offered to support Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) activities should account for the scale of efforts required to implement all five guiding principles across all of the CSI schools. In some states that have been effective in prior rounds of turnaround, far fewer than five percent of their Title 1 schools were included in the reforms. Also, the largest positive effects of one state turnaround effort were in the lowest 2.5 percent of the lowest-performing schools, which suggests it is better to serve fewer schools well than to spread resources too thinly across all CSI schools.

KEY INGREDIENTS FOR ESTABLISHING A DEDICATED ORGANIZATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE:

- *Dedicate full-time district positions to supporting CSI schools.*
- *Guide development of the school improvement plan, monitor implementation, and continue support during implementation.*
- *Establish policies and processes specific to improving the lowest-performing schools and provide enhanced resources for CSI schools.*
- *Define and solicit necessary support from the state.*
- *Determine scale and scope of turnaround efforts, given available federal, state, and local resources.*

The inherent instabilities in low-performing schools constitute barriers to improved performance. In most low-performing schools, comparatively high rates of teacher, principal, and student churn create an unstable foundation upon which to build meaningful improvement efforts. Teacher turnover begets inexperienced and lower-performing teachers, which begets ineffective teaching and undermines reform. High rates of principal turnover are also associated with both low student performance as well as lower teacher retention rates. Some malleable characteristics of students, such as chronic absenteeism and high rates of between-school mobility, lead to lost instructional time, and are ultimately reflected in poor achievement scores.

Evidence from Tennessee indicates that high levels of teacher turnover and, in turn, high rates of novice teachers in the Achievement School District suppressed achievement score gains. Conversely, iZone schools were able to recruit and retain more effective teachers, likely through retention bonuses. Moreover, principals in iZone schools also earned higher salaries than in comparison schools, which appear to have reduced principal turnover and allowed these schools to be staffed with more effective principals. Research finds that hiring highly effective teachers in the first year and staffing these schools with highly effective principals in the second and third years explain a substantial amount of their positive effects on student achievement.

If the instability of a school's leadership, teacher workforce, and student body are not directly addressed through school reform efforts, capacity building efforts will be for naught when teachers and leaders move to other schools, taking that increased capacity with them, or if students are not in class to learn the content being taught. Research demonstrates that in years two and three of the ASD, teacher turnover was 30 percentage points higher than in other low-performing schools, which increased the number of new teachers and undermined potentially positive effects.

Improving performance in CSI schools will require recruiting, hiring, and retaining effective teachers and leaders as well as devising interventions to reduce student transfers to other schools during the school year. Financial incentives for principals, assistant principals, and teachers with demonstrated records of effectiveness to transfer into CSI schools and stay in these schools have been found to be effective. Also, survey research in Tennessee's priority schools has found that teachers prefer schools with steady administrator support and a consistent approach to discipline. In many CSI schools, interventions will be needed to increase students' attendance by getting them to school, getting them there on time, and keeping them in class during the day. In other CSI schools, interventions will be needed to reduce voluntary student transfers during the school year, which often occur when families relocate or after students have violated school rules.

KEY INGREDIENTS TO IDENTIFYING AND ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO IMPROVEMENT:

- *Conduct comprehensive needs assessments in CSI schools, including examining teacher and leadership experience, effectiveness and turnover rates and student in-migration, chronic absenteeism, and loss of instructional time from tardiness and being pulled out of class.*
- *Use these analyses to complement the analysis of test performance, value-added scores, graduation rates, and dropout rates.*
- *Implement and monitor interventions tailored to address the most pressing sources of the instability in each school.*

The essence of improving academic achievement is the interaction between teachers and students, thus low-performing schools must substantially improve classroom instruction. The ability to develop instructional capacity is contingent on hiring and retaining teachers who are, or can become, effective classroom instructors. This can require a within-district competitive advantage for CSI schools, which the dedicated leadership infrastructure should help foster and protect to allow the most talented and promising teachers to work in CSI schools. Hiring effective teachers in the initial year that schools were added to the iZones explained about 40 percent of the positive effects of iZones in year one.

Once schools are staffed with capable teachers, improving instruction begins with a curriculum aligned with state standards and then adds assessments and resources for teachers to provide effective instruction based on the chosen curriculum. Survey results from Tennessee indicate that teachers who teach in low-performing schools prefer to work in schools that provide a “middle-level” of autonomy in the classroom. That is, they prefer a space between complete autonomy, in which they must each individually “reinvent the wheel” when it comes to all curricular materials, and, at the other extreme, scripted daily lesson plans. The need to develop assignments and assessments independently can be especially onerous and demanding for the novice teachers who comprise a disproportionately large number of newly hired faculty in low-performing schools.

The overreliance on novice and alternative entry teachers in CSI schools suggests that induction, mentoring, and collaboration opportunities for these teachers will be needed to quickly develop their instructional practice, content knowledge, and classroom management.

Induction, mentoring, and collaboration can also help ameliorate the negative effects of teacher turnover on school reform efforts, because these strategies help schools to orient new staff toward the school’s reform priorities. In addition, successful school turnaround efforts have provided teachers with external resources, provided by partner organizations, districts, or the state.

Often the external resources come in the form of coaching. However, evidence from other states has shown that simply providing coaching does not lead to improved performance. If provided, the coaching should employ evidence-based coaching strategies, some of which include modeling, co-teaching, and direct observations followed by actionable feedback. Coaches’ expertise should also align with the grade level and/or subject area content being taught by the teachers they coach and areas of practice in which teachers most need support. Finally, coaching should include a plan to increase each teacher’s capacity to address school-wide barriers to improvement identified through the comprehensive needs assessment process described above (e.g., how to effectively integrate newly arrived students or address chronic absenteeism).

In addition, mechanisms for collaboration about instruction, including professional learning communities that focus on the largest gaps in students’ performance on achievement tests and individual students who are struggling, can enhance individual instructional capacity. Also, engaging teachers to quickly assess and integrate incoming students into meaningful instruction and working with parents to reduce absenteeism is key to overcoming unstable student participation.

KEY INGREDIENTS FOR IMPROVING CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION

- *Hire and retain teachers who are, or can quickly become, effective classroom instructors.*
- *Implement a curriculum aligned with state standards.*
- *Develop teachers’ capacity for effective instruction aligned with the chosen curriculum.*
- *Address content and grade-level performance gaps as identified by assessment data.*
- *Define roles for teachers in plans to address each school’s barriers to improvement.*

Effective school leadership is required to establish conditions within the school that allow for effective instruction and positive working relationships among school staff. Leaders affect teacher retention; evidence shows that when a principal exits, teachers tend to also leave the school. Survey results from Tennessee show that teachers prefer schools that have supportive administrators, enforce discipline consistently, and are safe. These highly desired school characteristics are all areas that can be impacted by the school leadership.

In addition, school leaders have significant influence over systems and structures within the school that facilitate effective instruction. For example, leaders are pivotal to establishing an environment in which teachers can collaborate and ensuring that the collaboration is focused on instruction and students. Several studies point to a strong association between teacher collaboration and teacher effectiveness. School leaders are also integral to engaging teachers in the school's approach to reform. Studies have shown that student performance improves when school leaders can motivate their staff to contribute to the school's academic priorities, instill their staff with a shared sense of responsibility for improvement, and create a culture focused on learning (an idea often referred to as academic press). Another example of effective leadership capacity supported by existing research is distributed leadership, a strategy where effective principals empower and support assistant principals, department heads, and teachers to lead different aspects of the school's reform efforts.

Interventions aimed at building leadership capacity have been a part of the successful iZone schools in Memphis. The Memphis Shelby County iZone partnered with two external partners, the University of Virginia School Turnaround Specialist Program and the Opportunity Culture initiative. Through summer training, mentorship, guided reflection, and targeted feedback, these external partners have helped train iZone leaders and have had positive effects elsewhere in supporting the development of school leaders. However, not all leadership coaching is effective. In another state, principals said coaching responsive to their day-to-day needs was less helpful than coaching on achieving specific objectives tied to their school improvement plans.

Developing the capacity for effective leadership is possible for low-performing schools but does not necessarily result from simply requiring that the current principal be dismissed. Leaders in schools that successfully turned around their performance were given support in developing and implementing effective, research-based leadership capacities, in some cases through external partners. In some schools, leaders have implemented promising practices such as reducing potential distractions during instructional time (e.g., announcements during homeroom only with no exceptions for summoning students to the office) and establishing a positive behavioral support approach to school discipline.

KEY INGREDIENTS FOR EFFECTIVE TURNAROUND LEADERSHIP:

- *Hire and retain effective principals, assistant principals, and teacher leaders in CSI schools.*
- *Support school leaders in creating and maintaining a school environment that is conducive to effective instruction and attractive to teachers.*
- *Develop administrators and lead teachers into effective instructional leaders using research-based leadership capacities.*

One of the important roles for CSI school leaders is to establish regular processes and routines that promote continuity and maintain stability. The amount of instability that characterizes many CSI schools can lead to an environment that is chaotic and dysfunctional. In another state, teacher turnover during the academic year, which occurs with surprising frequency in these schools, especially among both novice and out-of-state teachers, has been shown to have negative effects on the achievement gains of students taught by these teachers. One process that Tennessee's iZones used to provide routine access to additional instructional time was to make transportation available to accommodate an extended school day.

The CSI schools require stable and routine implementation of various processes ranging from moving students from class to cafeteria, to teacher collaboration opportunities, to consistent enforcement of school policies. For staff and students who remain in the school during changes in leadership, faculty, and students, consistent routines can help sustain focused

efforts toward teaching and learning, offering a respite from the chaos of a high-churn environment. And while new school staff and students will need to be oriented to these routines and school and district leaders should constantly monitor them and their effectiveness, having routines and processes in place can shorten the orientation and acclimation period for new teachers and new students alike and help both find success in their respective roles sooner.

District and school leadership are important inputs necessary to support continuity and maintain stability. As mentioned earlier, creating a district leadership and infrastructure allows for coordination of state, district, and school reform efforts, and helps provide low-performing schools with the resources necessary to carry out the reforms. A stable, dedicated structure at the district level also allows for a continued focus on creating, monitoring, and maintaining processes to enable stability within and across schools. Building leaders are important for creating a school culture focused on a consistent approach to reform and staff commitment to the reforms.

KEY INGREDIENTS FOR IMPLEMENTING SCHOOL PROCESSES AND PRACTICES TO SUPPORT CONTINUITY AND MAINTAIN STABILITY

- *Establish school-wide processes to help maintain a safe and caring environment, such as positive behavioral supports.*
- *Make time for teachers to collaborate on a regular schedule and focus their collaboration on teaching and learning.*
- *Schedule time during the school day for students who have fallen behind to catch up with their classmates.*
- *Identify and codify procedures for essential processes within the school, such as how and when lesson plans are submitted and how students go to and from the lunchroom.*
- *Train veteran teachers in school procedures and induct new teachers into school procedures immediately.*
- *Establish roles for leadership, teachers, and students to train and induct new students into the school's processes and procedures.*

These five principles can provide guidance for the painstaking process of improving Tennessee's lowest-performing schools. As the principles serve to make us aware, effective reform of these schools requires attention to external factors, including the educator labor market, and internal factors that require us to think and act differently than the past to bring about needed improvements within these schools.

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