



**PARTNERSHIP** *for*  
**LEADERS** *in* **EDUCATION**

Darden School of Business  
Curry School of Education

**Part I: Cover Page – Organization Information**

Organization Information		
<b>Organization Name:</b>	University of Virginia Darden School Foundation on behalf of the Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education	<input type="checkbox"/> New or <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Continuation Submission
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Organization Category (select all that apply)		
<input type="checkbox"/> Charter Network, Charter Management Organization or Charter School <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Turnaround Leader Development Provider <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Management Partner <input type="checkbox"/> Stakeholder Engagement Specialist		
Preferred Geographical Region(s) in Colorado to Work In (select all that apply)		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Metro Denver <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Front Range (Colorado Springs, Ft. Collins) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Rural / Mountain / Western Slope		

Indicate the school district(s) or BOCES your organization is willing and able to engage with:

District name	City	County name
X ANY SCHOOL DISTRICT or BOCES	ALL	ALL

## Part II. Narrative Responses

### *Update on Work & Progress Since 2018*

The University of Virginia Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education (PLE) would like to thank Colorado Department of Education for the opportunity to continue our work in the state's efforts to transform low-performing schools and partner with local education agencies to ensure all students, regardless of where they live, have access to quality education. The PLE functions under the umbrella of the Darden School Foundation, a 501(c)(3) corporation that operates Darden's world-renowned Executive Education program and draws its strength from the unique collaboration between the Darden School of Business and the Curry School of Education.

The PLE Core Partnership is the only research-proven effort in the country focused on establishing system conditions ripe for change and building transformative leadership capacity to achieve that change. Through three years of integrated work customized to each partner, we empower system and school leaders to ignite needed change and engage a broad set of stakeholders in redesigning their organizations for lasting success. The PLE is the leading provider in the nation in the areas of leadership for school improvement, developing teachers and staff, transforming instructional infrastructure and creating positive school cultures to accelerate student engagement and learning. With the partnership now in its 17th year, most of our partner schools outgain state averages, almost 50% of our partner schools have experienced double-digit proficiency gains within two years and 20% of those schools achieve over 25-point gains within three years, providing the bright spots we use to inform learning for all participants. We were recognized recently by RAND and Wallace Foundation as one of only two leadership development efforts in the country that qualify as 'evidence-based' under ESSA. The PLE has accomplished these gains based on the belief that system- and school-level leaders succeed together when they identify key issues, develop bold strategies and empower leaders at all levels to execute the change.

Through the Core Partnership, the PLE functions as Turnaround Leader Development providers. PLE is also a proven successful management partner, both as district-level and school-level management partners. PLE works as a partner to build collective capacity at the district- and school-level to advance organizational coherence, strategy and execution to achieve lasting outcomes for students. PLE can also tailor support to management supports in turnaround leadership, talent development, instructional transformation, and culture shifts. Our key support actions focus on:

- Upfront district focus to enable school-level success: Help district leadership re-examine school system practices to establish successful conditions to support identified schools.
- Leadership Development: Provide world-class leadership development and consultation to enhance change leadership of district and school leadership teams
- Intensive work with cohort of schools: Deliver differentiated, embedded thought partnership regularly; our work together serves as a "learning lab" for re-examining practices, producing lessons that inform broader change efforts, spread impact to other campuses and establish a culture of continuous improvement at these "learning lab" schools.

Through three years of partnership, we collaborate with district and school leadership to build collective leadership capacity and shift the paradigm in under-performing schools, generating lasting gains in achievement and learning to spread success and improve conditions across the district. The core components of our program (see attachment *UVA-PLE Core Partnership Infographic* in Appendix A) include planning support to help district leaders establish conditions for transformation, world-class executive education for district and school leaders and embedded consultation to help district and school leaders execute their action plans ignited at executive education sessions. Both as a Turnaround Leader Development provider and as a Management Partner, PLE will work with the district from the outset of the partnership to understand their

greatest needs of its schools with historically underserved students. PLE and the district will co-create a vision to differentiate PLE support to meet their unique, system-level and school-level needs. The PLE integrates leading thinking on turnaround and instructional leadership, though ultimately is focused on capacity-building for leaders to solve their own challenges.

Any partnership with PLE would enroll the districts and schools in the Core Partnership; however, PLE would further supplement support to schools as a Management Partner. As helpful to a district, we can increase the frequency of district and school visits and if needed, PLE is willing and able to provide oversight and accountability (milestones and monitoring academic data) to all key aspects of the initiative. Supplementing participation in our core program with differentiated district- and school-level consultations to overcome their unique hurdles will ensure their system change efforts are informed by how schools experience and collaborate with the district. As a Management Partner, PLE will differentiate services during a launch year and two implementation years that follow to provide more intensive support to help system leaders align on how to confront and overcome their most pressing challenges than we would during a turnaround leadership partnership. During the Design Year, PLE will begin collaboration with schools to assist in the development of their Management Plan for presentation to the State Board of Education. This will help to ensure that the plan and future supports are fully aligned to the needs of students in the individual schools and provide support to school leaders earlier when compared to our Core Partnership.

PLE has seen success in this management partnership model of customized facilitation for cabinet-level collective capacity and vision alignment in Denver, Charlotte, Montezuma-Cortez, and Caddo Parish. As management partners, we bring experience designing custom sessions and more intensive support for district leaders at executive education sessions and in-district tailored consultation that move the needle toward creating sustainable, whole system changes in leadership development and cultural shifts, empowering leaders at all levels to move this change forward. A management partnership provides even more flexibility to design custom services to meet a district and schools needs and complement our core executive education and embedded consultation services.

### *New Work in Colorado Schools and Districts*

In the last seven years, PLE partnerships in Colorado have had positive results in urban, suburban and rural districts at the elementary, middle, and high school level. PLE has helped system leaders in Montezuma-Cortez, Denver, Weld, and Aurora Public Schools all establish systems to lift schools off the accountability clock, providing us base of understanding of Colorado context. PLE's recent partnership with Montezuma-Cortez as a management partner demonstrates our ability to tailor our typical partnership delivery model to the unique needs of a Colorado school district.

PLE has recently partnered with new districts and schools in Englewood Schools (Cohort 15) and Boulder Valley School District (Cohort 16) in Colorado. To expand learning across the district and deepen engagement with additional schools, Aurora Public Schools has added six schools to Cohort 16 through our core partnership. Denver Public Schools has added five secondary schools to Cohort 16. An example of a Core Partnership district aligning focus and support for the learning lab schools see supplemental document *Denver Cohort 16 Big Rocks and Common Commitments* in Appendix A. PLE is currently working with Denver to launch new management support for three secondary schools. We are actively supporting each school this fall, alongside DPS leadership, to develop a management support plan that meets the schools needs and prepares them to fulfill state board requirements. This fall, PLE will begin to launch systems level planning with Adams 14 as management partners in PLE Core Program Cohort 17. As management, partners in Adams 14, PLE will differentiate and scale support for schools above and beyond the Core Partnership. PLE is also preparing to work with Pueblo City Schools for a partial management partnership on a smaller scale with intensive support to two or three schools.

### **Part III. Capacity**

The PLE has capacity to support any districts that is ready and willing to think differently and achieve results for all student. The PLE seeks to partner with school districts that are ready to achieve measurable results and make bold changes for future achievement. PLE believes school system ownership is key to any major school transformation effort. Partner districts must create enabling conditions that provide the support, flexibility, accountability and resources needed for urgent and sustainable change. In addition to school system ownership, the PLE partnership sees selection and development of strong leadership as a primary lever to drive student outcomes and a necessary component of any school transformation. Effective leadership is necessary for teachers to grow professionally and maximize their impact on student learning.

Prior to a district officially launching a partnership with PLE, we complete a readiness assessment with each district and co-create an implementation plan with the district that outlines both what the district leaders are committed to doing ensure success and how PLE will deliver and adapt our services to meet the identified needs. We will adapt this process to meet the timeline of the management plan, focusing on what it will take to strengthen and achieve the plan. If the district is already an active partner, the PLE does not conduct a new readiness assessment, but goes through a similar process to determine commitments for a path forward. A context-based implementation plan builds off the learning from the readiness assessment about what most needs to improve across leadership, instructional infrastructure, talent management, support/accountability and is grounded in our leading research on strongest practices for lasting school improvement. This provides a clear road map for implementation of the district's change initiative, ensures clarity regarding critical steps, defines the measures of success that PLE will support along the way. Within the framework of the focus areas we know districts need to have in place to succeed, we customize our commitments to provide flexibility based on context and unique needs and build off the work already happening.

To ensure the conditions are highly likely to enable sustainable success, we ensure all partners commit to a readiness process, clear action plans each semester with three-to-five high leverage priorities building on collaborate efforts to understand school needs, and a designated district change team and school leadership teams to attend core programs and advance the work. We figure out how to customize the language for these commitments alongside district leadership while also paying attention to whether conditions should improve in leadership (school board alignment/support, central office resource commitment to high-needs schools and communication) and instructional infrastructure area (clear standards-based assessment strategy, user-friendly curriculum resources for teachers and allocation of time for collaboration and resources for teacher coaching). For talent management, we seek to understand whether any high-leverage commitments are needed to advance an intentional, rigorous development (and where there is need for a new leader hiring) of school leaders that takes into account competencies and results while also advancing quality and design of instructional leadership teams, attraction of schools to potential staff and a process to identify and address teacher under-performance that includes additional support. In the support and accountability area, we ask districts to ensure district champion has time to advance change initiative and coach leaders with a frequent schedule of meaningful visits to each school at least multiple times a month and with direct access to system leaders who can remove barriers for schools. For any commitment made, the PLE helps craft a support plan with our partners to achieve success and regularly revisits progress and next steps with the district leaders via our interactions and executive education programs.

For districts and schools entering Cohort 17, the DRA and design year would begin in 2019-2020 with districts with schools starting summer 2020. If districts and schools need more time they could start with Cohort 18. To ensure a systemic focus in all our services striving ultimately to improve district wide conditions for all schools, we encourage partners to include a critical mass of schools and ensure our partnership supports the district's larger strategic vision. PLE recommends at least three schools involved in the work (and at least five schools in a mid-to-large district). This is important to ensure a critical mass to

promote strategic prioritization, cohort learning and maximum lasting and systemic impact. The intensity of district support or participation for each service increases based on the number of schools participating. All of the supports in our delivery model are designed to adapt to each district's specific context and drive towards transformational change.

#### **Part IV. Evidence of Track Record of Improved Student and School Outcomes**

##### *Evidence of Recent Engagements*

Our work and experience in Colorado over the last eight years has shown positive impacts in urban, suburban and rural districts at the across all school levels. Since 2011-12 school year, UVA has worked with 58 schools across eight school districts in Colorado including a mix of elementary, middle, and high schools (See Appendix A for *PLE Colorado Partner Schools Impact*). The engagement typically lasts two school years. Out of the 58 schools, 30 schools are currently in either year one or year two of the partnership. Of the 28 schools with results past the second year of the partnership with PLE:

- 16 moved up at least one plan type during the two year engagement (for 12 of those schools that meant being off the accountability clock at the end of the partnership).
- 4 schools entered the engagement with a Performance plan type and maintained that status during the partnership.
- 6 schools entered with a Priority Improvement or Improvement plan type and maintained that status during the partnership.
- 2 schools dropped a rating from the beginning to the end of the partnership.

Our partnerships in Cortez, Denver, Weld, and Aurora Public Schools all established systems to lift schools off the accountability clock, including all five of our initial partner schools in Aurora (with multiple schools reaching "performance" level). In a recent partnership in Aurora, CO, (4 schools in Cohort 13 and 5 schools in Cohort 14) 9 out of 9 partner schools increased scaled scores, the majority with double-digit gains, and three schools were recognized for the first time as Centers of Excellence in the state of Colorado. Because of our early successful work in Aurora, our partnership with the district and schools now includes 17 schools (11 schools in Cohort 15 and 6 schools in Cohort 16). The PLE helped Aurora as part of this partnership enhance overall systems for instructional and leadership support across the district. In 2018-19, the district closed the proficiency gap with the state by 1.8% overall. Growth scores in most partner schools are promising, with the divisions we have worked with (all but autonomous division) having only one school remaining on the Colorado clock.

Our work in Denver began with 5 schools in Cohort 13. One school entered at the Performance Plan level and stayed there and the remaining four all moved up at least 1 level on the state accountability clock. We are actively supporting 5 elementary schools in Cohort 15 and are awaiting 2019 results.

In a recent partnership with Montezuma-Cortez, two schools in Cohort 13 (Mesa and Manaugh) received intensive support from the PLE and went up more than one performance level in performance after being rated "Turnaround". In 2018-19, Manaugh Elementary partnered with PLE via custom work and received at the end of the year the highest accreditation plan rating (Performance). We also completed a Cohort 14 Management Partnership that included system-wide work and work at the secondary level, helping contributed to both secondary schools receiving "Improvement Plan" accreditation and the district's overall proficiency and growth data increasing. See Appendix A for *PLE Colorado Partner Schools Impact*.

Partnerships in other states have shown significant results in both urban and rural settings. One rural example, Gallup, NM, achieved gains 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 in all 13 schools in our program, 9 out of 13 rising at least one letter grade and 4 out of 13 rising at least two letter grades in only two years. In a mid-size

district, Lawton, Oklahoma, our first year's results in 2015-16 demonstrate strong possibilities. The average mathematics gains across five participating schools was ten-points and four out of five partner schools experienced gains in both language arts and mathematics. In a recent urban district, Caddo Parish, Louisiana, 8 out of 10 partner schools were removed from the state's improvement required list in only two years, with a few schools as top-gains schools.

Another large, urban district, Fulton County, GA began work with PLE in 2015, forming an Achievement Zone of 10 low performing high poverty schools, anchored around Banneker High School. PLE helped the district prioritize supports, provided leadership development, instructional infrastructure training and prioritized talent management to staff and retain best teachers and leaders. Through the partnership, Banneker High School was removed from the State Priority Schools List and named Georgia "Beating the Odds School", the graduation rate rose from 41% to 75% (largest graduating class in history), State Accountability Score from 56.3 in 2015 (for 2014 school year) to 62.4 in 2017 and 66.1 in 2018 (for 2017 school year), as well as dramatic increases in the percent of students taking Honors and AP courses. In 2017, almost all Achievement Zone schools showed gains in the third, fourth, and sixth grades in all tested subjects, with several schools posting double-digit gains. Due to the systemic approach of PLE intervention model, strategies learned in the partnership have transformed the entire district and the learning has spread across the broader Fulton County School District, taking what leadership learned through PLE and developing a strategic support model to meet the needs of students at each school. The district-wide results are impressive, in 2017 Fulton had its highest score ever, 78.0, on Georgia's College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI), besting the state average. The district also reduced the number of state-identified, "chronically failing schools" from 14 to eight, while it reduced the overall number of F schools on the state's school grading system from 28 to 18. In 2017, 26 of 28 F schools achieved gains on the CCRPI, while 38 schools improved by at least a letter grade. In 2016, Fulton added 9 more schools to the partnership for leadership development and prioritized support, and in 2017, added five more schools, for a total of 24 schools working with the PLE partnership.

### *Evidence-Based Intervention Tiers*

The PLE is a tier two-evidence based intervention model. Based on the notable growth in PLE partner schools, our approach was recognized in a 2016 RAND/Wallace Foundation publication as one of only two comprehensive approaches to leadership development in K12 schools that is 'evidenced-based' per guidelines of the Every Student Succeeds Act. The rating is based on a rigorous quasi-experimental research design that included urban, rural, and mid-size districts, focused on 35 elementary and secondary schools in Ohio and Missouri that participated in the PLE Core Program in 2009- 2011 and demonstrates PLE's significant impact on student achievement and the potential value of school improvement efforts. The evaluation examined school-level student achievement data from at least three years before beginning the PLE Program and the two years in which they participated in the program. Overall, the evaluation found that participating schools reduced the gap with their districts by more than two thirds. (Player & Katz, 2013). Please see the published study here: <http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/686467>

Over the course of over a decade of supporting turnaround, PLE recognized alignment across the following four critical levers is an indicator of a district's success: Leadership, Differentiated Support and Accountability, Instructional Infrastructure, and Talent Management for a systemic approach to turnaround. These four levers are tightly aligned with the cutting-edge, research-based framework on rapid improvement that includes the four domains of turnaround leadership, talent development, instructional transformation, and culture shifts (Center on School Turnaround, 2017; see Appendix A for publication). Three of our organization's leaders (Coby Meyers, Dallas Hitt, William Robinson) were three of the six primary contributors to the creation of the four domains framework for rapid school improvement, which led to CDE's focus on building systems for instructional transformation, talent development, culture shift and turnaround

leadership. The PLE is the only program in the country that focuses on establishing systems conditions for transformation under these domains, which align directly with our core levers.

PLE partnership is tailored to fit the district needs, working as a partner to support district leaders in solving their own challenges while leveraging our leading research-based frameworks. Embedded in our approach are systems to provide feedback with short-cycle commitments each semester aligned to the management plan and a high-level of touch points and support to monitor progress within the district. These commitments align to both our research-based rubric on district practices that matter for sustainable school turnaround as well as our research-based, school-level framework. PLE brings competency from working with almost 100 districts across the country, to apply best practices and pattern recognition and research to help leadership teams cut through complexity and identify context-specific priorities to advance the work that will matter most to lead to lasting school improvement and student achievement.

The PLE has a record of accomplishment for closing the achievement gap for high-needs students, ensuring all students, regardless of where they live, have access to quality education. Many of our partner schools have above state averages of English Language Learners, minority students and free and reduced price lunch eligible student populations. Embedded in our approach is support to address opportunity and achievement gaps felt by specific subgroups of students as well as strengthening efforts towards a positive school culture of achievement and success for every student.

Our work across the country in the last seventeen years has shown positive impacts in urban, suburban and rural districts across the nation, as well as pronounced improvement in student achievement across primary and secondary schools in various grades and subjects. All of our work is interwoven, advancing evidence-based practices to build internal leadership capacity and helping leaders figure out how to create the content, delivery systems and mechanisms proven to result in dramatic sustained improvement linked to strong leadership. The PLE is ready and willing to partner with any under-performing school in the state of Colorado that is committed to make bold changes and achieve measurable results for all students, regardless of location.

The PLE is in an exceptional position to meet the unique needs of schools and districts in Colorado. Our competency in providing districts with consultation on issues associated with the four domains, experience helping partners deliver results in Colorado, unique context based knowledge of systems in Colorado, and our capability to support districts through differentiated services from our typical support approach positions us to partner with any school district in Colorado committed to achieving greater results on behalf of their historically underserved students.

## **APPENDIX A: Additional Supporting Documents**

- Denver Cohort 16 Big Rocks & Common Commitments
- PLE Colorado Partner Schools Impact
- UVA-PLE Core Partnership Infographic
- *District Readiness to Support School Turnaround: A Users' Guide to Inform the Work of State Education Agencies and Districts*, University of Virginia Partnership for Leaders in Education, Center for School Turnaround

## UVA Cohort 16

### Big Rock and Common Commitments

**Purpose:** With urgency, joy, and a collective commitment, we will create, support, and sustain the district and school conditions for students to engage in rigorous and relevant learning, grounded in our graduation requirements, so that every student - especially those drastically underserved and historically underrepresented - graduates college and career ready.

#### Big Rock: High Quality Tier 1 Instruction

High Yield Instructional Strategies (HYIS) in Math and Literacy, 9th - 11th grade:

*Teachers plan and deliver lessons that align to sheltering best practices, specifically:*

1. Opportunities for academic discourse
2. Independent practice at grade-level of a rigorous, standards-aligned task
3. Timely, instructive and corrective feedback with exemplar in hand

*As a result, students:*

1. Engage in academic discourse
2. Practice grade-level rigorous task
3. Students receive timely, instructive and corrective feedback that is actionable

#### District Commitments

##### Support Cadence:

##### Weekly

- Weekly check in to monitor and support HYIS implementation with RIS or I&L specialist
  - \*frequency could vary depending on need

##### Bi-Weekly

- RIS or I&L ILT participated in ILT meetings
- RIS or I&L co-observe classrooms with principals and APS focused on HYIS implementation using a look for rubric

##### Monthly

- Provide monthly Principal and STL (Math and Literacy) UVA cohort trainings focused on HYISs
- Develop bi-monthly PD schools can turnkey to teachers on HYIS, including a 1-pager for coaching and feedback
- RIS provides feedback to principal and AP on their videos coaching STLS

##### Semester

- Provide PD to STLs on facilitating

#### School Commitments

##### Weekly

- Communicate lesson plan expectations that include minimally:
  - **Lesson Vision:** Standard, Objective, Aligned assessment item from unit test or interim assessment
  - **Agenda:** Learning activities that align to objective, includes exit ticket or other daily assessment
  - **Independent Practice:** Aligned to objective, includes exemplar and criteria for success
  - **Student Discourse:** Planned opportunities for multiple types of student discourse

##### Add in here: Student Feedback

- 

*Schools have flexibility on if they will require a common template to be used. They can also add expectations in addition to the minimum.*

- Monitor and follow through on the lesson plan expectations
- Provide weekly collaborative lesson planning time for teachers; set clear expectations for process and outcomes of this time

##### Bi-Weekly

## UVA Cohort 16

### Big Rock and Common Commitments

- effective collaborative lesson planning meetings (August & January)
- Provide common math and literacy assessments to progress monitor HYIS' impact on student learning
- Lead assessment scoring calibration with teachers
- Fund sub coverage for math and literacy teachers who participate in the assessment scoring calibration
- Facilitate cohort assessment data analysis and action planning PD

#### Other Supports

- Hire a full-time instructional leadership specialist to support the schools.
- Provide lesson plan criteria and exemplars
- C&I will support in math and literacy to unpack interim and unit assessments including, exemplars, grading protocols, and rubrics
- Work with the C&I team to develop new English unit(s) of study of Mexican Literature with aligned ELD curriculum resources

#### Teachers (STLs?)

- Provide lesson planning and observation feedback to teachers on HYIS

#### ILT

- Conduct ILT walk throughs to progress monitor school wide implementation of HYIS using provided rubric and determine next steps
- Principal/APs provide feedback to each STL on their coaching/feedback to a teacher on the HYIS
- Principal/APs participate in teacher team's collaborative lesson planning time
- Principal/AP film a coaching session with an STL and submit the video to RIS for feedback leader of leaders development

#### Monthly

- Participate in Principal and STL cohort trainings on HYISs (will include instructional rounds)
- Deliver turnkey PD to teachers on HYISs after cohort training (recommended: 2x a month)
- Implement Math and Literacy assessments in agreed upon windows (more information coming)
- Provide content teams time and space to grade assessments

#### Annually

- Each school hosts a learning lab for the cohort once a year
- Participate in all UVA sessions
  - Summer Session in Charlottesville - **June 9-15, 2019**
  - Fall Site Visits in Denver - **Sept. 18-20, 2019**
  - Midyear Session in Albuquerque - **Jan 9-12, 2020**
  - Fall Site Visits in Denver - **Feb. 20-21, 2020**
  - Summer session and school year session in 20-21, **dates TBD**

NOTE: The first state rating for each school represents the rating of the school upon the start of their partnership with UVA-PLE (the rating the entered the partnership with)

Years in PLE

Sheidan School District, CO	2011-2013	2011 State Rate	2012 State Rate	2013 State Rate	2014 State Rate	2015 State Rate
Alice Terry Elementary						
Sheridan High School		Improvement Plan	Priority Improvement Plan	Priority Improvement Plan	Improvement Plan	
Fort Logan Elementary		Priority Improvement Plan	Improvement Plan	Improvement Plan	Performance Plan	

Years in PLE

Adams 14 School District, CO	2012-2014	2012 State Rate	2013 State Rate	2014 State Rate	2015 State Rate	2016 State Rate
Kearney Middle School		Performance Plan	Performance Plan	Performance Plan		Improvement Plan
Adams City Middle School		Priority Improvement Plan	Performance Plan	Improvement Plan		Priority Improvement Plan

Years in PLE

Weld County School District, CO	2013-2015	2013 State Rate	2014 State Rate	2015 State Rate	2016 State Rate	2017 State Rate
Butler Elementary School		Improvement Plan	Improvement Plan		Performance Plan	Performance Plan
Fort Lupton Middle School		Performance Plan	Improvement Plan		Performance Plan	Priority Improvement Plan
Twombly Elementary School		Improvement Plan	Performance Plan		Performance Plan	Performance Plan
Fort Lupton High School		Improvement Plan	Improvement Plan		Improvement Plan	Improvement Plan

Years in PLE

Montezuma-Cortez School District, CO	2014-2016	2014 State Rate	2015 State Rate	2016 State Rate	2017 State Rate	2018 State Rate
Kemper Elementary School		Turnaround Plan		Performance Plan	Improvement Plan	Improvement Plan
Manaugh Elementary School		Turnaround Plan		Priority Improvement Plan	Turnaround Plan	Improvement Plan
Mesa Elementary School		Priority Improvement Plan		Turnaround Plan	Priority Improvement Plan	Priority Improvement Plan

Years in PLE

Rocky Ford School District, CO	2014-2016	2014 State Rate	2015 State Rate	2016 State Rate	2017 State Rate	2018 State Rate
Rocky Ford Junior Senior High School		Improvement Plan		Improvement Plan	Performance Plan	Performance Plan
Washington Primary School		Improvement Plan		Improvement Plan	Performance Plan	Performance Plan
Jefferson Intermediate School		Priority Improvement Plan		Performance Plan	Improvement Plan	Improvement Plan

Years in PLE

Aurora Public Schools, CO	2015-2017	2015 State Rate	2016 State Rate	2017 State Rate	2018 State Rate
Sixth Avenue Elementary School			Priority Improvement Plan	Performance Plan	Improvement Plan
Sable Elementary School			Priority Improvement Plan	Performance Plan	Priority Improvement Plan
East Middle School			Priority Improvement Plan	Performance Plan	Performance Plan
Vaughn Elementary School			Priority Improvement Plan	Improvement Plan	Priority Improvement Plan
Hinkley High School			Improvement Plan	Improvement Plan	Priority Improvement Plan

Years in PLE

Aurora Public Schools, CO	2016-2018	2016 State Rate	2017 State Rate	2018 State Rate
Altura Elementary School		Improvement Plan	Improvement Plan	Improvement Plan
Laredo Elementary		Priority Improvement Plan	Performance Plan	Priority Improvement Plan
Clyde Miller P-8		Improvement Plan	Performance Plan	Performance Plan
Elkhart Elementary School		Performance Plan	Performance Plan	Performance Plan

Years in PLE

Denver Public Schools, CO	2016-2018	2016 State Rate	2017 State Rate	2018 State Rate
International Academy of Denver		Turnaround Plan	Performance Plan	Improvement Plan
Center for Talent Development at Greenlee		Priority Improvement Plan	Improvement Plan	Improvement Plan
Goldrick Elementary School		Performance Plan	Performance Plan	Performance Plan
Valverde Elementary School		Turnaround Plan	Priority Improvement Plan	Improvement Plan
Schmitt Elementary School		Priority Improvement Plan	Performance Plan	Improvement Plan

Years in PLE

<b>Aurora Public Schools, CO</b>	2017-2019	<b>2017 State Rate</b>	<b>2018 State Rate</b>
Wheeling Elementary		Performance Plan	Performance Plan
Jewell Elementary		Priority Improvement Plan	Performance Plan
Virginia Court Elementary		Priority Improvement Plan	Turnaround Plan
Gateway High		Priority Improvement Plan	Priority Improvement Plan
Aurora Hills Middle School		Priority Improvement Plan	Priority Improvement Plan

**Years in PLE**

<b>Montezuma-Cortez School District, CO</b>	2017-2019	<b>2017 State Rate</b>	<b>2018 State Rate</b>
Montezuma-Cortez High		Improvement Plan	Performance Plan
Montezuma-Cortez Middle		Priority Improvement Plan	Priority Improvement Plan

**Years in PLE**

<b>Englewood Public Schools, CO</b>	2018-2020	<b>2018 State Rate</b>
Charles Hay World School		Performance Plan
Englewood Leadership Academy		Performance Plan
Englewood Middle School		Improvement Plan
Bishop Elementary		Priority Improvement Plan
Englewood High School		Improvement Plan
Clayton Elementary School		Performance Plan
Cherrelyn Elementary		Improvement Plan

**Years in PLE**

<b>Aurora Public Schools, CO</b>	2018-2020	<b>2018 State Rate</b>
South Middle School		Improvement Plan
Lyn Knoll Elementary		Improvement Plan
Side Creek Elementary		Performance Plan
Mrachek Middle School		Improvement Plan
Lansing Elementary		Improvement Plan
Iowa Elementary		Improvement Plan
Century Elementary		Performance Plan
Arkansas Elementary		Performance Plan
Montview Math & Health Sciences Elem		Performance Plan
North Middle School		Turnaround Plan
Kenton Elementary		Improvement Plan

<b>Denver Public Schools, CO</b>	2018-2020	<b>2018 State Rate</b>
Cheltenham Elementary		Improvement Plan
Smith Elementary		Improvement Plan
Hallett Academy		Turnaround Plan
Beach Court Elementary		Improvement Plan
Stedman Elementary		Turnaround Plan

# CHANGE IS IN SESSION.



**PARTNERSHIP** *for*  
**LEADERS** *in* **EDUCATION**

Darden School of Business  
Curry School of Education

## ENGAGE | 2 MONTHS

*Together, we identify your district's strongest needs and highest-leverage opportunities.*

- **1 core assessment** to understand your system conditions
- **Multiple engagements** to craft the vision and scope of work

## DESIGN | 5-10 MONTHS

*We architect long- and short-term strategies to address district-specific challenges, outline sustainable change and prepare a learning lab of partner schools.*

- **4 days** of system design courses through Darden School of Business Executive Education
- **Multiple days** of embedded, research-based leadership interviews to identify change-ready principals, district leaders and additional personnel
- **At least 1** on-site support visit to help structure your strategy and optional custom support to schools to accelerate their leadership advancement
- **Continuous** on- and off-site collaboration to shape a strategy contextualized to your ambitions

## ACTIVATE | YEAR 1

*School and district leaders immerse in a rigorous campaign to ignite school performance, leadership commitments and collective purpose.*

- **1 week** of summer Executive Education for your selected leadership to advance their change leadership and address root issues
- **3 days** of winter Executive Education for leaders to iterate and adapt change efforts
- **At least 4** on-site support visits tailored to your focus areas and leaders' needs
- **Year-round** off-site support for strategic consultation and year 2 planning

## ADAPT | YEAR 2

*Leaders integrate the success of year 1 and adapt their approach toward new areas of sustainable improvement.*

- **3 days** of summer Executive Education to synthesize the prior year's outcomes
- **3 days** of winter Executive Education to innovate on district successes and spread organizational learning
- **At least 3** on-site support visits to drive continuous improvement
- **Year-round** off-site support to consolidate your learning and deepen program impact

## EXTEND | YEAR 3 (AND BEYOND)

Continuous improvement takes many shapes. **80% of our partners** choose to extend their PLE partnership with sustainability, cabinet and/or new cohort support.



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EMPOWER YOUR DISTRICT.**

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# DISTRICT READINESS TO SUPPORT SCHOOL TURNAROUND

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

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Darden School of Business & Curry School of Education



Partnership for  
Leaders in Education  
Darden School of Business  
Curry School of Education





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Janice Lowen Agee, Editor, WestEd

This guide, updated based on new experience and research since its original publication in 2013, provides state education agencies (SEAs) and districts (LEAs) with guidance about how to assess the district's readiness to support school turnaround initiatives. The guide is also updated to highlight how the readiness assessment embeds and reflects key components of the Four Domains for Rapid Improvement (Center on School Turnaround, 2017).

Often, school turnaround efforts focus only on the *school's* structure and leadership. Rarely do policymakers or practitioners think about school turnaround as a system-level issue requiring fundamental changes in district-level practice to establish the conditions for school turnaround to succeed. This guide will also provide an introduction to turnaround readiness conditions that will help districts to best position resources to enable turnaround schools to sustainably succeed.

In addition, this guide could help SEAs reflect on their role in identifying where and how to support districts in reference to key components shown to matter by both experience of practitioners entrenched in supporting turnaround as well as research in the field of rapid improvement. Accordingly, SEAs that implement a readiness assessment process (directly or indirectly) can build mutual understanding with districts as they launch turnaround endeavors. Such understanding can help direct SEA resources towards improving practices and providing targeted interventions most likely to lead to lasting gains in student achievement. ESSA provides SEAs more discretion in where to invest its precious resources – and a readiness assessment process aligned with what matters can also help determine what commitments may be needed from a district to receive major investment of resources from the SEA.

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

*Sanders County Public Schools (SCPS) had undergone 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 that the system was not providing. Specifically, the Grant High School (GHS) feeder pattern- including not only GHS, but also 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 economic base shifted, and more affluent families moved to the northern portion of SCPS, the mobility rates, demographics, and socio-economic status of GHS feeder pattern students gradually changed. Test scores also declined, which served as a reminder that the district was not changing with the times and adapting to the needs of all its students.*

*Last year, all 11 GHS feeder pattern schools' accountability ratings reached a new low. The district's superintendent, John, hoped the feeder pattern would improve if the schools had the right leaders in place. Several years back, he replaced the principals in most of the schools with very promising candidates. But after two years, little improvement could be seen. 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 was little improvement and, spurred by burnout, several of the principals resigned to accept positions at suburban schools. It became clear to John that he could not rely on the replacement of school leadership alone as the catalyst for positive change. This reality led him to ask himself a critical question: **What can the district do to create conditions so that turnaround efforts have the greatest chance for success?***

*John's district had the benefit of a state turnaround office designed to support districts in school improvement. John initiated contact with his state's turnaround office. Not long after, turnaround office representatives visited the district to gauge the conditions in the district that would support turnaround. They spoke with John and his leadership team to understand better how the district operated. The state representatives met with principals 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 addressing some of the areas in which the district was doing well, they highlighted areas they saw for improvement. For example, the representatives noted that there was no cycle of regular accountability and support for principals grounded in agreement about what was most critical at the school, which slowed change and created general confusion about goals and objectives.*

*The representatives also recommended that the district could take proactive steps to improve how the GHS pattern recruited, developed, and retained its talent. They recommended the district find ways to give GHS feeder pattern schools early access to leadership and teacher applicants and implement some sort of incentive structure to attract the most promising candidates. They also recommended a focus on improving the relevancy of professional development based on data and enhancement in resources for coaching to create the working conditions to attract and retain a first-rate faculty and staff who truly wanted to engage in the work of serving GHS feeder pattern students.*

*Additionally, the state suggested bolstering the role of the principal supervisor as a high-leverage use of resources. Through their presence on campuses daily, they provide real-time coaching and perspective to turnaround principals hungry for feedback and support. Currently, SCPS had only two principal supervisors for the entire district. The state suggested that this span of influence was too great and without impact, and that SCPS dedicate at least one principal supervisor position and a director focused on instructional system development just for the GHS feeder pattern.*

*Another area for improvement was to rethink the assessment strategy approach of only providing beginning and end of year diagnostics. The representatives recommended implementing regular common, interim assessments and work with a reputable partner to ensure those assessments would be aligned to the state's standards and district's sequence while providing a bank of questions teachers could use for short-cycle assessments. Schools would no longer have to rely on the school-developed assessments that lacked rigor and created unnecessary work for teachers. Checking the pulse of student achievement on a regular basis would allow principals to identify high-leverage professional development while helping teachers more rapidly respond to problems, adjust their approaches, and identify students in need of special attention.*

*As John met with the representatives, he began to understand with greater clarity changes the district could implement to help schools and a path forward to successfully implement those changes. These changes could create a positive cycle that would energize GHS 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 the work would likely encounter resistance. But the new insight that he gleaned about changing the way the district approached the turnaround illuminated multiple ways to reframe the approach. The state turnaround agency pledged to support SCPS's efforts through scheduling follow up site visits and meetings to provide resources that met a defined need the district requested support with and to monitor progress. The state also began having its own conversations about how it could alter its processes to better align structures and supports for districts like SCPS with turnaround zones.*

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

### **School Turnaround Is a *District Issue***

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

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

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

### **Indicators of Readiness: A Summary and Alignment to Center on School Turnaround Framework**

If we know the critical nature of district participation in school turnaround, it makes sense to consider the ways the district might contribute. Over the course of over a decade of supporting turnaround, UVA/PLE's efforts have coalesced around ascertaining strength in the following four levers as an indicator of a district's proclivity for turnaround. These levers are leadership, talent development and management, instructional infrastructure, and support and accountability. These four levers are tightly

aligned with the cutting-edge, research-based framework on rapid improvement that includes the four domains of turnaround leadership, talent development, instructional transformation, and culture shifts (Center on School Turnaround, 2017).

The four levers represent the district system conditions needed to initiate and sustain change successfully, whereas the four domains address key drivers to successful implementation of turnaround at the state, district and school-level. Considering the strengths of the levers in the left column during a district readiness assessment provides a way for districts and state education agencies to understand how well positioned the district is to enact the domains in the right column. And, the table as a whole depicts the broad areas of alignment in terms of focus and intent between the levers and the domains to help a state or other entity construct their own version of a needs assessment. Below, we further define and discuss each of the four levers.

<b>UVA/PLE Four Levers for District Readiness</b>	<b>Center on School Turnaround Four Domains of Rapid Improvement</b>
<b><i>Leadership and Culture</i></b>	
<b>Leadership</b>	<b>Turnaround Leadership &amp; Culture Shifts</b>
Will to do what is necessary	Prioritize improvement and communicate its urgency
	Solicit and act upon stakeholder input
Leadership capacity	Build a strong community intensely focused on student learning
	Engage students and families in pursuing education goals
<b>Support and Accountability</b>	
School support	Customize and target support to meet needs
	Build a strong community intensely focused on student learning*
School accountability	Monitor short- and long-term goals
	Set clear performance expectations**
Defined authority	Remove barriers and provide opportunity**
<b><i>Talent</i></b>	
<b>Talent Management</b>	<b>Talent Development</b>
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*
<b><i>Instruction</i></b>	
<b>Instructional Infrastructure</b>	<b>Instructional Transformation</b>
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

*Note.* \* repeated; \*\* from different domain

## **Leadership**

One of the clear keys to successful turnaround is strong leadership at all levels (Herman, Dawson, Dee, Greene, Maynard, & Redding, 2008) likely because leadership establishes the structures and opportunities for stakeholders to collaborate as well as engenders a culture of shared responsibility focused on student learning (Center on School Turnaround, 2017). The objectives for both school and district leaders are to articulate a clear and compelling vision, create attainable short-term goals, define high performance expectations, hold faculty and staff accountable for those expectations, and continually celebrate wins (Leithwood, 2012). Research points to the importance of having a strong leader who can change culture and influence staff efficacy (Duke, 2008) and demonstrates an intense focus and direction on academic outcomes (Picucci, Brownson, Kahlert, & Sobel, 2002). Turnaround leaders provide a sense of both support and accountability (Hitt & Meyers, 2017) through creating a coherent and collaborative culture that includes academic press and high expectations (Center on School Turnaround, 2017). In addition, the district should embrace the turnaround effort as a district-led initiative, as it is district's provision of systems and structures to support focused collective efforts on student learning that serves as a catalyst for turnaround (Center on School Turnaround, 2017). One study finds that the "district instructional leadership builds capacity by coordinating and aligning work of others through communication, planning, and collaboration" (Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, p. 318). Throughout the turnaround process, the district must coordinate the work by setting high performance expectations, sharing those expectations in a transparent way, continually checking progress on those expectations, and co-developing with the school

further interventions as needed for the school based upon the school’s progress (Leithwood, 2012). These types of leadership focuses lead to enactment of 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).

### **An In Depth Look at Leadership**

<b>Leadership Dimensions</b>
<i>Will to do what is necessary.</i> District leadership promotes bold changes to prioritize turnaround work.
<i>Capacity.</i> The district has the bandwidth for multiple members of its leadership team to orchestrate significant change for school turnaround now.

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

District leadership must acknowledge an urgent need for change and the district’s critical role in initiating that change. “At all levels in the system, especially the district, leaders make it a priority to elevate the performance of low-achieving schools, and they communicate the urgent need for turnaround so that all students receive the high-quality education they deserve,” (Center on School Turnaround, 2017). A public and vocal commitment to success and change, accompanied by bold goals, is often necessary to empower others to overcome barriers. A well-prepared district will view low-performing schools as a *district* challenge, not just an issue for the ailing school to address. A district that places all the blame on schools (administrators, teachers, and/or students) or conditions presumably out of their control (policy, unions, and/or poverty) is typically not

prepared to make the necessary district-level investments that will yield sustainable turnaround. A well-prepared district is willing to prioritize the needs of turnaround schools and provide them with the resources they need, even if it means adjusting entrenched district structures and norms.

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

The district administration must be structured in a way to support turnaround efforts. The superintendent must be available for and willing to invest in turnaround work. The district must be stable enough to make the turnaround initiative one of its top priorities. The district must also have dedicated turnaround team members, including a highly competent point person to whom the principals report. This 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 both provide support, accountability, and perspective for the turnaround principals.

The demanding nature of turnaround requires that the team’s attention must be protected from other unrelated responsibilities. If the team is not buffered, its efforts will be less likely to bear fruit; it may view its role in the turnaround process as yet another responsibility that is being added to the already lengthy list of expectations. To pull off such challenging work, the district team must include credible, powerful, and organized leaders.

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

Before a district can help support turnaround efforts, it must define a workable strategy with a coherent direction, clear goals, and aligned supports. The district should also demonstrate that it has the support of key stakeholders, including the school board. It

must have evidence of readiness to prioritize giving turnaround schools additional resources for a period of time, and then disseminate information to the broader system about the successful innovation and learning piloted in turnaround schools.

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

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

*Strengths.* Prior to beginning its turnaround effort, APS demonstrated a commitment to bold change through the district leadership's actions and responses. The district had a well-developed turnaround plan and began launching several initiatives that prioritized the lowest performing schools, including the formation of a zone to promote the prioritization and space for innovation needed for success. Leadership at the board and executive level demonstrated a commitment to innovation and openness to taking risks associated with innovative reform. For example, the district adopted a strategic staffing initiative that prioritized the staffing needs of the lowest performing schools and worked to get some of the best teachers and leaders to move to the targeted schools. APS also had a proactive approach to adopting a new curriculum where 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 that exemplified its 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 role 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 PLE thus focused efforts on helping the district make a case for investments in systems of support and designing its team to execute that support, which included intentional efforts to engage the community in tangible methods that would make a difference for students.

*Potential SEA role.* The turnaround process is filled with hard work and unknowns. SEAs 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. SEAs could also help connect districts struggling with alignment of leadership with development opportunities to help a team craft a coherent path forward.

### **Support and Accountability**

The UVA-STP has found that most schools in need of turnaround have leadership teams that rarely receive the type of coaching, problem-solving support, and

accountability they should have. As such, districts should provide “tailored support to each school based on deep root-cause analysis and needs assessment to inform the school’s priorities (Center on School Turnaround, 2017).

Similarly, one report recommends that districts reduce their “span of control” (Gill, 2013). This means that principal supervisors ideally should be able to deliver meaningful one-on-one coaching and accountability to principals. This reduced span of control is important because, depending on their context, turnaround schools require various and highly individualized supports. Districts must first identify turnaround schools’ diverse needs and then provide support based on that diagnosis.

Schools should know clearly when and how to seek district support. And, the district should also have an executive-level person who provides regular support to the turnaround principals (Honig et al., 2010). This approach also requires rethinking the district’s resource allocation to prioritize coordinated implementation support over instructional, compliance, and operations departments, which frequently function in their own silos. Evidence from five “instructionally focused superintendents” suggests that district organization is key for supporting the district’s purpose as an instructional leader (Peterson, 1999).

One way to implement accountability is to formalize the internal reporting structure and intensify support with a person or team. This district-based team should be able to provide both 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 individual charged with monitoring and supporting dramatic improvement. Schools that regularly

report to multiple people and departments may not develop the rapport and understanding needed to monitor the turnaround. Identifying or creating a district office for school turnaround provides the necessary attention that leads to continual assessment and monitoring. This approach yields feedback and formative accountability to help schools stay on track while they navigate the turnaround process (Yatsko, Lake, Nelson, & Bowen, 2012; Perlman & Redding, 2011).

While schools need to know what is expected of them, they also need autonomy for certain matters. When it comes to staffing choices and assignments and the school schedule, as well as other processes that are context driven, the district should empower principals to take the lead on these decisions. Principal supervisors can serve as sounding boards and establish clear parameters for what is tight and what is loose, but should ultimately recognize that the 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 be largely district-driven. Removal of barriers for principals such that they can enact the needed changes and make bold decisions is a key implication for the work of a principal supervisor (Hitt & Meyers, in press).

<b>Support and Accountability Dimensions</b>
<i>School accountability.</i> District executive leadership holds principals, school leadership teams, and itself accountable for high, specific expectations.
<i>School support.</i> District leadership supports schools by providing strategic and tailored resource utilization, rapid response to key needs and regular, purposeful school presence.
<i>Defined authority.</i> District provides turnaround principals with the certain specific

autonomy to drive change in their schools.

### **An In Depth Look at Support and Accountability**

The concept of differentiated support for students has grown rapidly over the past decade. Under a typical model of differentiated student support, experts carefully assess students who are well behind grade level to identify the root cause of any deficiencies and formulate a specialized plan to address those deficiencies. The students' improvement is monitored regularly as they progress through the instructional plan. Similar to differentiated student support, school turnaround work requires targeted support that relies upon the careful execution of two equally important components: school accountability and school support. When isolated, each component is insufficient to bring about turnaround. The effective use of both levers requires a regular "embedded" district presence in turnaround schools to help assess needs, monitor progress according to school improvement plans, and provide schools with the support they need in the following ways:

- School accountability
- School support
- Defined authority

#### **School Accountability**

The district must be willing to hold schools and their leaders accountable for high expectations and focused implementation of improvement plans. The accountability a district demands must go beyond student performance on the annual assessments that state and federal policies require. Instead, districts must be willing to monitor

performance and hold principals and teachers accountable for progress throughout the year, including defined expectations for what principal excellence looks like and what types of systems need to be in place. The district thus must be willing, based on an understanding of school and initiative needs, to develop common foundational expectations for all turnaround schools that are often more explicit and deep than the expectations for other schools. These expectations must communicate the initiative's rigor and focus. Typically, this approach requires at least one person (the principal supervisor) from the district to regularly visit each turnaround school to monitor clear expectations, help brainstorm how to overcome barriers standing in the way of expectations, and provide formative feedback to the school leaders.

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

### **School Support**

Accountability without complementary support creates an adversarial divide between the district and the turnaround schools that will inhibit turnaround progress.

School support comes in several forms. Above all, districts must recognize each turnaround school's unique needs and provide individualized support according to those needs. Districts must help struggling schools carefully diagnose the root cause of their failures and then make plans to address those issues. The district provides the resources—including instructional support or material resources—that will help meet the school's needs and ensure that the support across the district is aligned. This support often requires the district leaders to embed themselves in the turnaround work and help school leadership solve its most pressing challenges. Helping schools through the hard work of achieving initial and ongoing success is necessary to create an environment of hope where committed teachers want to work and grow. District leaders should prove through their actions, such as spotlighting promising practices and celebrating successes along the way, that turnaround schools are a place for exemplary practices to be developed and then spread throughout the district.

### **Defined Authority**

When appropriate, districts must also give school leaders authority to act with autonomy. If coupled with accountability in foundational expectations, defined autonomy can permit school leaders to address needs in a way that best suits their school's situation. (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, 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 remove a staffing constraint that inhibits the construction of a staff that meets student needs. 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.

### ***Support and Accountability in Practice***

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

*Strengths.* BPS recently hired a new superintendent and four new principals. Prior to beginning an intensive turnaround effort in some of its lowest performing schools, BPS began to hold all schools, principals, and teachers accountable to specific indicators based on higher expectations. Simultaneously, BPS began to implement district-level supports to help schools meet the loftier expectations. Several district personnel who had been in the district prior to the superintendent's arrival commented that previously, there had been a perception across the district that the current mediocre outcomes were acceptable. In contrast, the new superintendent made it clear that his expectations were much higher than the status quo. It was no longer sufficient for the district's schools to continue with tradition for tradition's sake. The district reallocated resources at the district level to eliminate positions that did not strongly advance the work in schools and create new positions filled by several strong leaders with knowledge on building instructional systems such that central office would be in a position to intensively help all schools. The district staff became more visible in the schools by regularly visiting sites and

implementing professional development programs for teachers on site tied to achieving learning goals for their students and formal evaluation objectives. After interviews with district personnel, it was clear that the district's school staff had begun to recognize the increased standards to which they were being held, and they appreciated their purpose. Many school employees also commented that there was better communication and support from the district to complement the drive for excellence.

BPS's increased accountability and supports positioned it to be able to buttress school turnaround. As the effort began, the turnaround schools had clear expectations about what would be required of them.

*Areas for improvement.* The district had taken steps to improve support and accountability in all schools. However, it had not laid out a clear vision for how it would identify the specific focus areas for the turnaround initiative and needs of each turnaround school. Thus, support, though well intentioned, was based too much on ingrained preferences rather than data and root- cause analysis of actual needs. The district had also not examined the barriers to innovation that its policies were creating for school leadership teams and had not considered how becoming more flexible could have multiple positive effects. For example, district flexibility on staffing formulas and role definitions could then lead to attracting top talent to fill teaching and school leadership positions. Finally, as the superintendent served as supervisor to the schools and was stretched in many directions, not enough had been done to ensure a regular presence in the schools focused on building leadership capacity. The PLE would need to help the district build out its principal supervisor practice in a manner that truly cultivated leadership capacity and ensured all the support to the schools was cohesively connected

while urgently identifying and advancing the schools' most pressing goals. As the district identified those most pressing needs, the PLE needed to help the district identify where it could change policy or practice to remove barriers and allow leaders to focus on the work.

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

## **Talent Management**

Turnaround schools must be staffed with teachers and leaders who are willing and able to make the necessary changes, and the district plays a critical role in championing this lever for turnaround schools. “Policies and procedures to identify, select, place, retain, and sustain these personnel, especially teachers and school-level leaders, are a precursor to school turnaround” (Center on School Turnaround, 2017).

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 to ensure that turnaround schools have the talent they need to improve school and student outcomes. However, effective talent management is not just about getting the right people in the seats but about creating conditions where the majority of staff can rapidly enhance their effectiveness. This strategy requires building processes for effective and ongoing two-way communication between teachers and school leaders, providing meaningful professional development that is aligned with adult learning theory, leveraging high-performing teachers so that their impact may be seen beyond their classrooms, and creating authentic accountability through processes such as meaningful evaluation.

<b>Talent Management Dimensions</b>
<i>School leadership selection.</i> District leadership implements intentional, rigorous, and prioritized hiring of school leaders for high-priority schools.
<i>Teacher talent management: Recruitment and retention.</i> District leadership establishes conditions to increase the number of highly effective teachers in high-priority schools through recruitment, placement, and retention.
<i>Teacher talent management: Development.</i> District leadership develops teachers in high-priority schools and then increasingly holds them accountable for instructional performance.

### **An In Depth Look at Talent Management**

Creating conditions for effective talent management is vital to growing and sustaining effective school leadership. Successful turnaround schools have highlighted the importance of strategic and meaningful hiring practices in building a committed and capable staff (Picucci et al., 2002). How schools attract, manage, and develop talent is an

important factor to consider before implementing a district-led turnaround strategy. The following are ways to address talent:

- School leadership selection
- Teacher talent management: Recruitment and Retention
- Teacher talent management: Development

### **School Leadership Selection**

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 impact and influence, focusing on sustainable results, engaging the team, commitment to student learning, holding people accountable for school performance, analytical thinking, and conceptual thinking (see table below).

### **Model for Principal Competencies Shown to Link to Student Achievement**

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

<b>Competency</b>	<b>Level 1</b>	<b>Level 2</b>	<b>Level 3</b>	<b>Level 4</b>
<b>Focuses on Sustainable Results</b>	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
<b>Engages the Team</b>	Communicates with the group	Works with the group	Aligns team efforts towards clear goals	Empowers the team
<b>Impact and Influence</b>	Communicates own position	Acts to influence thinking and mindsets of	Adapts approach to affect actions of others	Leverages multiple stakeholders to change ingrained

		others		behaviors
<b>Holding People Accountable for School Performance</b>	Demonstrates school performance mindset	Aligns individual expectations to school performance standards	Monitors performance and helps people to improve	Strengthens organizational capability for performance
<b>Commitment to Student Learning</b>	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
<b>Conceptual Thinking</b>	Compares situations or ideas	Utilizes insight to help prioritize	Reframes situations for clarity	Generates new ideas and approaches
<b>Analytical Thinking</b>	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 mixed methods analysis of principal interview data. Shaded cells indicate the levels that distinguish outstanding 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. See Hitt, Zhu, Meyers, & Woodruff, in press for additional information.

As indicated by this model, each competency has levels. Candidates for principalships can be interviewed and then scored on these competencies (Hitt, 2016; Hitt, Zhu, Meyers, & Woodruff, in press).

With these competency levels in mind, district leaders should hire, and then make placement decisions that match the needs of the schools and community with principals' strengths identified through the interview process. Districts should also base decisions and actions regarding development and performance management in turnaround schools on clear accountability criteria aimed at improving those schools. This process often

requires overhauling the recruitment and incentive strategy to find leaders who are attracted to turnaround situations and making these critical positions the most attractive in the district. The districts most prepared for turnaround initiatives extend this intentional recruitment and placement to the entire school leadership team.

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

### **Teacher Talent Management**

Districts should maintain a robust talent management structure that enables the district to recruit, place, develop, and retain highly effective teachers. By using clearly defined competencies and skills, districts can match high-quality teachers to high-priority schools. Districts often need to prioritize turnaround schools to receive staffing advantages that other schools may not receive. Effective districts will also monitor teacher performance so that appropriate future action can be taken, including adjusting levels of support and accountability for each teacher based on their individual growth needs. Additionally, districts can encourage and coach principals to “create timelines and other accountability systems that remind principals to regularly examine teacher performance and to rapidly adjust professional learning plans based on identified needs” (Center on School Turnaround, 2017).

Most underperforming schools have significant room to grow in creating an environment where teachers receive the individualized support and accountability they need, and it is thus critical for the district to identify common, high-leverage areas to improve teacher talent management and make those areas a focus of the initiative. Principal supervisors can coach principals in developing clear expectations aligned with adequate supports (scheduling and buffering from initiative fatigue) for teachers (Center on School Turnaround, 2017). District human resources ideally function as a strategic partner that works to improve hiring, development, and accountability.

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

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

*Strengths.* CPS demonstrated its commitment to filling its schools with strong teachers. CPS hired a new chief of human resources and a recruitment and retention specialist to improve the district's recruitment of teachers who were prepared to serve students in underperforming schools. The new chief developed screening procedures to illuminate a 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 much more rigorous and more 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 and then actively recruited from those programs. It also made changes to improve its ability to strategically staff schools with high-quality teachers. For example, the district began to offer financial incentives to encourage departing teachers to declare their intentions earlier in the year so vacancies could be more quickly identified. CPS could then mobilize and more successfully recruit better-qualified applicants because it had "first pick" in the recruitment process. In addition, by partnering with professional associations' job fairs to design and implement an in-state recruitment strategy and program, CPS was able to onboard new teachers who more closely resembled the CPS community's diversity.

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

*Areas for improvement.* The district devoted significant time and energy to improved teacher hiring, but principal hiring was not emphasized in the same way. The district needed to be more strategic in determining who would lead the turnaround schools and how it would attract strong leaders to turnaround schools. Quality teachers expect quality leaders. Without a strong leadership team, the teachers whom the district

worked so hard to recruit and retain might not stay for the long term. If quality teachers do not stay, and the school's human capital deteriorates again, the same downward cycle could repeat.

To prioritize principal selection, CPS could explore developing incentive structures (working conditions or pay) to increase their principal applicant pools, thereby enticing high quality applicants to apply. Further, CPS could explore use of the above competency model to better understand what their candidates' "talent for turnaround" seems to be so that hiring decisions are more informed by the criteria that matters for turnaround. Finally, just as CPS utilized a behavior-based component in the teacher selection process, creating an opportunity to see principal candidates in action provides valuable insight. Once CPS arrives at list of finalists, each candidate could spend the day at the campus. These visits could include a meetings with student, teacher, and parent/community stakeholder groups and a classroom visit to observe teacher 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, SEAs could offer support with how to create and robust interview process. The SEA could also participate in the interview process and provide perspective on finalists. Further, the SEA could focus effort 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 a district like this to support talent management needs, reducing potential distractions from less critical areas.

## **Instructional Infrastructure**

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

Utilizing well-designed, rigorous interim assessments, aligned to a clear, rigorous curriculum, is one way to accomplish this continual monitoring. Adjustments can be made throughout the year based upon these 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 the state testing. In its work with partner districts, the UVA-STP team experience is that most districts believe they have an effective instructional infrastructure in place, but almost all districts need to adapt critical aspects of their systems to prepare for robust implementation and ensure teachers see the tools as useful. These aspects could include the responsiveness of the data system, the rigor and alignment of the assessments, teacher understanding of how to leverage data on student learning or unpack standards, and a district calendar that prioritizes time to conduct deep data analysis and plot adjustments in instructional strategies when the new data is relevant.

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

<b>Dimensions of Instructional Infrastructure</b>
<i>Valid assessments.</i> District leadership ensures a rigorous assessment strategy, with interim assessments clearly aligned to standards that serve as foundational.
<i>Curriculum strategy.</i> District leadership has provided a clear, coherent and quality curriculum that guides teachers during weekly collaborative meetings, supports alignment of lesson plans to the rigor of the standards and helps build teacher understanding of each standard.
<i>Data culture and systems.</i> District leadership establishes a data-driven culture and student management data system that prioritizes responsiveness, urgency, and individual student needs.
<i>Instructional monitoring and support.</i> District leadership has established practices and systems to ensure high-quality instruction (core and interventions) through alignment to the expectations of the curriculum and assessments, and is at a high level in all classrooms to ensure student success.

### **An In-Depth Look at Instructional Infrastructure**

A school can successfully turn around only if its students are receiving daily, high-quality instruction. Often, students in turnaround settings have individualized needs that should be identified through careful diagnostic assessments and/or deep item analysis of interim assessments. Districts set the conditions for effective instruction by providing an infrastructure that allows for clear, coherent, data-driven strategies that are aligned with district and state learning objectives. Districts should also coach and encourage principals to determine how strengthen teachers' content knowledge and create vertical alignment structures to ensure more seamless instruction between grades (Center on School Turnaround, 2017). If a district is unable to provide schools with this instructional support, it is unlikely to see the kind of dramatic improvements in learning that are the hallmarks of a true turnaround. The following are processes that facilitate effective instructional infrastructure:

- Valid assessments
- Curriculum strategy
- Data culture and system
- Instructional monitoring and support

### **Curriculum Strategy and Valid Assessments**

District leadership should have a clear, coherent and 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

collaboration meetings. Optimally, time is set aside for regular, collaborative meetings and support is provided to schools with training and protocols on how to leverage that time well both to unpack standards and to meaningfully dive into data in order to plan instruction effectively.

Districts should provide schools with access to interim and formative assessments that correspond closely to the learning objectives and are tied to career and college readiness rigor reflected by and aligned to the curriculum. Interim assessments should be common across turnaround schools to promote rigor, cross-curricular learning, progress monitoring, and instructional adaptation, and allows for “diagnosis” of students’ needs (Center on School Turnaround, 2017). Too often, districts and schools use only predictive assessments that can predict student performance on state assessments but do not provide teachers with the insight needed to determine how they will adjust instruction to better meet student needs. To complement interim assessments, formative assessment, or organized, on-going check-ins for understanding, is a process that 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 depends greatly upon a teacher’s ability to engage in a cycle of individualizing, monitoring, and adjusting.

### **Data Culture and Systems & Instructional Monitoring and Support**

Teachers and leaders must be able to quickly access student data, including current and historical achievement, attendance, and discipline data. Interim and diagnostic assessment results should be generated with very short turnaround times (less than 48 hours). Using fluid and rapid assessment allows for adjusted instructional

delivery and grouping for students (Center on School Turnaround, 2017). The 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.

To monitor the progress of the instructional program improvement, the district team ensures all those influencing instructional leadership of schools' leadership teams receive professional development (internal and external) on high quality instruction and principles of effective observation and feedback processes. This includes defined "look fors" that serve as indicators of quality of instruction within the classrooms of the schools they 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 both assessment and student work data, deep item analysis following interim assessments, and the subsequent creation of data-aligned instructional action plans.

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

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

*Strengths.* DPS effectively implemented 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 common power or collective standards and curriculum pacing guides for all elementary schools, leveraging rigorous resources tied to state standards. The district's assessments in elementary were aligned to this pacing and leaders used the results of these assessment tools 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 to counteract the effects of piecemeal instructional sequences that these mobile students experienced. Collecting formative assessment data across schools enabled consistent tracking of student progress, even for students who changed schools midyear. The elementary schools tailored instructional and intervention efforts to individual students' needs. The district also provided schools with instructional tools and supplemental curricula to support instruction.

*Areas for improvement.* The district has not yet established a regular cycle to improve the rigor and alignment of the assessment process each year. Additionally, all schools needed to improve the process by which teachers received feedback following interim assessments so that the teachers could subsequently adapt instructional plans based on the data. Finally, even in pockets where they knew what to improve, teachers struggled too much with the 'how' given poor instructional planning processes. The district needed intentional efforts to build out model practices at the beginning of the year and periodically to help teachers learn to unpack standards and apply evidence of student learning towards tier one and tier two structured planning activities. Thus, the district needed to identify promising practices in these areas and identify and build proof points within the district to aid in building capacity of all teachers to be data-based

problem solvers. These proof points could be leveraged to build out training for all administrators. Furthermore, the middle and high schools were not moving as quickly as the elementary schools to align their instruction. The district still needed to strengthen the rigor of assessments, culture of data use among teachers and leaders at the secondary level.

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

### **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 lever, let alone all four. For example, each of the districts highlighted in this guide had some very positive things happening, but each also had room for improvement and needed to better understand how changing system-level practice was essential to prepare for sustainable school improvement. This situation is typical for districts ready to embark on turnaround. If a district is truly exemplary in all four levers, it is unlikely that it will have schools in need of turnaround. With this in mind, it is important to approach a district readiness assessment as an opportunity to better understand a district’s strengths and highest leverage opportunities to improve. A readiness assessment helps identify where the district would most benefit from piloting or changing practice to effectively prioritize and drive bold change in turnaround schools, which can produce learning for the district that might inform how

they support all schools.

The process of assessing district readiness can have important implications for how useful the data are. The following are some key questions for consideration in conducting a district readiness assessment.

### **Who Benefits from the Assessment?**

The assessment process benefits districts and SEAs in several ways. First, it allows SEAs to have a baseline diagnostic that can guide their support and resources. The assessment process also helps districts recognize how their strengths can be leveraged, and it identifies issues that should be addressed and potentially a common understanding across LEA and SEA leadership on 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. It is best to use interviewers who will be working with the district throughout the turnaround process. The team should be relatively small. It should include four or five members at most, interviewing in teams of two or three, so that the process does not overwhelm the district and strong relationships can be built. A small team also allows the interviewers to more readily compare notes and triangulate the data collected.

### **How Should the Assessment Be Conducted?**

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

## **Interviews**

One-on-one, semi-structured interviews usually allow the interviewees plenty of time to express and expand upon answers. Because of the confidentiality afforded by an interview format, the interviewees provide insightful responses; they are not concerned with how their peers might perceive their answers, as they might be in a focus group, discussed next. During interviews, interviewers should ask a mix of pre-determined “scripted” questions and unscripted follow-ups to better uncover nuances in the interviewees’ responses. Scripted questions are an important part of the interview. They provide structure for the interview and ensure open-ended (rather than leading) questions that maximize insight and ensure that the interviewees are able to cover predetermined topics. In semi-structured interviews, interviewers have the discretion to adjust the interview’s focus based upon what the interviewee shares. For example, if an interviewee does not understand a question as intended, the interviewer can rephrase it. Or if in answering a question, the interviewee shares information that is relevant, the interviewer can ask further probing questions. In these ways, semi-structured interviews are more flexible, responsive, and accurate than other data collection methods.

## **Focus Groups**

While beneficial in terms of the depth of information provided, interviews do not allow for the dynamics of a group setting that a focus group promotes. Often, during focus groups, participants’ responses trigger the thinking of another participant in ways that a single interviewee would not have considered. This approach results in a broad spectrum of responses from multiple participants. The focus group’s social setting can lead to more conversational interaction, with the moderator asking predetermined

questions. Much of a focus group's value is in the interaction around the questions. Moderators can access multiple perspectives and see and hear others' reactions. Focus groups also make it possible for the moderator to observe intrapersonal dynamics and professional relationships among participants.

### **Other Data Collection**

Beyond interviews, the SEA should consider other data collection methods. It might be more enlightening to ask someone to demonstrate how teachers access student data in the district's data system in addition to asking about it in interviews. Likewise, strategically chosen document reviews and observations might yield important insights. Public-facing documents like brochures, strategic planning documentation and letter to the community can be useful, particularly in comparison with reality of what is conveyed in the interviews.

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

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

quickly identify potentially insightful responses and then develop questions to encourage participants to explain more specifically their experiences, beliefs, and perspectives.

Interviewers should be inquisitive and focused while conducting interviews.

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

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

### **How Long Do the Interviews Take?**

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

### **How Long Does the Whole Assessment Take?**

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

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

### **How Do You Arrive at a Consensus?**

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

### **What Happens at the End of the Assessment?**

Following a readiness assessment, the SEA readiness assessment team (or contracted organization working on behalf of SEA) should schedule a meeting with the district leadership team to share its findings. The findings will help the district to implement changes that will put it in a better position to support an effective turnaround

effort. The assessment's results contribute to a dialogue about what commitments from both the district and SEA leaders would be necessary from each entity to embark upon and realize a successful turnaround. This process can be useful to specifically identify contributions and commitments that will enhance alignment and partnership between districts and SEAs. In order for the assessment to result in a greater level of collaboration across districts and LEAs around defined areas of need, it is essential to be transparent about what level of information from the assessment, if any, will be presented publicly and to whom.

### **Are there less resource-intensive mechanisms to understand district needs?**

Even a two- to three-day visit only provides the starting point for the depth of work and understanding required to help a LEA transform practice. We recommend prioritizing this work at least for the most critical partnerships or finding an external partner that can help the state do the work. Though, if a SEA does not have capacity and ability to advance this work formally, the framework provided by the four levers and the four domains can provide a useful starting point to inform check-in meetings with district leadership and to capture data during school-level visits to report trends to district leadership on how their practice is impacting schools.

### **Implications for SEA and District Collaboration**

School turnaround is a challenge for not only schools, but also districts and SEAs. When districts utilize key anticipatory processes to prime the system for school support, turnaround becomes a much more achievable goal. SEAs can partner with districts during this process to facilitate review and consideration of current practices to determine which

adjustments may need to be made. Districts may not be able to best identify and develop solutions in isolation without the SEA's guidance.

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

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## **Appendix A**

### **Sample Interview Questions**

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

Leadership

- Describe the district's plan for raising achievement in high-needs schools?
- What do you see as the strengths and barriers to a successful turnaround initiative?
- What support do you have from the school board regarding pursuing significant changes in your lowest performing schools?
- What support do you have from key stakeholders in the district, schools and community with pursuing improvements for students? What changes do they want to see in the schools?
- What are the district leaders' greatest strengths?

## 2. Infrastructure to Provide Differentiated Support and Accountability

- Describe the district's role in improving schools.
- What support structures are currently in place for schools that need help?
- What financial or material resources are available to turnaround schools? How is this differentiated from other schools?
- Who do you see playing a significant role in leading this work and in supervising the schools? What strengths do they bring and do they have time to more intensively support schools?
- How is the principal's performance currently monitored during the school year? Is this monitoring due to change as the district embarks upon school turnaround?

## 3. Conditions for Effective Talent Management

- Describe your process for recruiting and selecting school leaders.
- How does the district identify the top performers?
- How will you make turnaround schools attractive to the best talent?

- What is the process for identifying and addressing underperformance?
- How does district determine top professional development needs of teachers?
- Does district differentiate coaching and support to novice or underperforming teachers?

#### 4. Effective Instructional Infrastructure

- Describe your district's assessment strategy.
- How does the district view its role in ensuring effective instruction?
- What data systems are in place, and how do they inform practice?
- How do teachers and principals use data in the district?
- Are data analyzed to understand differences between teachers?
- How are curriculum maps and pacing guides used in the district?
- How do you know observation and feedback enhances quality of instruction?