

Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools

An [Institute of Education Sciences](#) Practice Guide¹

Purpose of the Practice Guide

This practice guide is designed to provide practical, research-based guidance to chronically low-performing schools in order to quickly improve student achievement. A panel of nationally-recognized experts analyzed the research on turnaround schools and discovered that although empirical research is sparse, case studies and theory point to effective practices. In coming years, rigorous study of the School Improvement Grant (SIG) schools will continue to add to the research base.

Discussion

'Turnaround schools' quickly transform themselves from chronically low performing to dramatically improved schools with increased rate of students meeting state standards and graduating. The key difference between school turnaround and school improvement is timing. School turnaround is a rapid one- to three-year process with quick gains, compared to school improvement which is more gradual and is planned to take place over three to five years. Turnaround schools rely on dynamic leadership, either new or existing, to radically alter and improve educational practice. Skilled teachers improve student outcomes by looking at student data and making adjustments as needed.

"A low-performing school that fails to make adequate yearly progress must improve student achievement within a short timeframe – it does not have the luxury of years to implement incremental reforms."

Leaders are cautioned not to select just one IES recommendation (see recommendations below); evidence suggests that the strategies are most effective when implemented together. For example, signaling change but not following up with actual change could breed skepticism and will not, in itself, make a difference in student achievement.

IES Panel Recommendations

(Numbered items in bold are direct quotes from the Practice Guide; bulleted items have been paraphrased and shortened.)

1. **Signal the need for dramatic change with strong leadership. Schools should make a clear commitment to dramatic changes from the status quo, and the leader should signal the magnitude and urgency of that change.**

- A new school leader is one way to signal change. Strong leaders are critical for turning around chronically low-achieving schools.

¹ This guide is part of a series of [Practice Guides](#) developed by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), a division of the US Department of Education, to address critical issues in education. A panel of nationally-recognized individuals with expertise in research and the specific topic of a given Practice Guide are enlisted to conduct a rigorous review of existing research. These experts established a series of recommended strategies which are assigned a strong, moderate, or low rating of evidence based on the degree of replicability and generalizability of the studies upon which they are based.

- Existing principals and school leaders must be willing to significantly change leadership practice. Leaders should recognize the need for change and demonstrate a willingness to change in order to raise student achievement.
2. **Maintain a consistent focus on improving instruction.** Chronically low-performing schools must maintain a sharp focus on improving instruction at every step of the reform process. To improve instruction, schools should use data to set goals for instructional improvement, make changes to immediately and directly affect instruction, and continually reassess student learning and instructional practices to refocus the goals.
- To direct staff efforts, educators must consider the following: student assessments, class failure rates, overall attendance, discipline, and student course selection (high schools). Data analysis can help staff identify gaps or areas of focus. Teachers must then adjust instruction to meet student needs.
 - Principals and school leaders must be instructional leaders: e.g. doing regular classroom observations, modeling instruction, and providing feedback to teachers.
 - Planned professional development is selected to improve content knowledge and pedagogy.
 - Curricula need to be aligned to state standards.
3. **Make visible improvements early in the school turnaround process (quick wins).** These can rally staff around the effort and overcome resistance and inertia.
- Leaders need to focus on one or two goals important to staff and that can be accomplished quickly. Implementing the goals should be within the leader's authority and financial means. Examples include the following:
 - ✓ adjusting instructional schedules to allow for common planning and collaboration time for teachers.
 - ✓ making updated instructional materials available.
 - ✓ improving the physical plant or appearance of the grounds.
 - ✓ improving safety for students and staff.
4. **Build a committed staff.** The school leader must build a staff that is committed to the school's improvement goals and qualified to carry out school improvement. This goal may require changes in staff, such as releasing, replacing, or redeploying staff who are not fully committed to turning around student performance and bringing in new staff who are committed.
- School leaders must ensure that teachers are assigned to teach subjects and students that they have the skill and the desire to teach. They should consider bringing in experts such as reading specialists or instructional coaches.

Source: Herman, R., Dawson, P., Dee, T., Greene, J., Maynard, R., Redding, S., and Darwin, M. (2008). *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools: A practice guide* (NCEE #2008-4020), Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved November 20, 2010, from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/practiceguides>.