DISTRICT & SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT Center
at American Institutes for Research

WORKING TOGETHER

Building Effective School Turnaround Partnerships

JULY 2014

About the DISTRICT and SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT CENTER at AIR

www.revivingschools.org

AIR's District and School Improvement Center provides an approach to school improvement that is smart, real-world, and hands-on—based on a framework grounded in research and refined by practice. Instead of implementing a one-size-fits-all program, we identify your district or school's needs and help you modify programming or start fresh.

A partnership with AIR means that your districts and schools can expect to achieve a coherent, disciplined approach to teaching and learning, improvement in school climate and culture, more effective teachers and leaders, improvement in parent and community engagement, and higher expectations and results for all students.

FOR MORE INFORMATION about AIR curriculum audits or turnaround assistance, please contact Tino Pania, Senior Business Development Consultant, by e-mail (tpania@air.org) or phone (202.403.5813).

School Turnaround Partnerships—Promising but Not Fail-Safe

Kerstin Carlson LeFloch, Ph.D., Principal Researcher
Catherine Barbour, Principal Technical Assistance Consultant

Stakes are higher than ever for struggling schools. Whether they are identified as "priority," "in need of improvement," or "chronically low-performing," thousands of schools across the nation are failing to meet state requirements for annual improvements in student test scores. If they continue to fall behind, these schools face consequences that may include loss of funding, closure, or takeover by the state, resulting in more disruption for already-disadvantaged students and families. Principals, teachers, and other staff members may lose their jobs.

For struggling schools, partnerships with external experts can seem like a critical lifeline. Education specialists experienced in turnaround help schools identify and integrate the myriad complex elements of school improvement plans to give them a better chance to succeed.

Federal education policy recognizes the role of such experts. Guidance for the School Improvement Grants (SIG) program, for example, indicates that schools awarded funds may partner with external providers for technical expertise on matters as varied as data evaluation, professional development, and school culture.[1] Some states—including Illinois and Virginia—have gone further, making SIG awards contingent on securing such a partnership.

The reality of school turnaround partnerships, however, does not always resemble the ideal. (See box, "What Went Wrong at Great Woods High School?") In some cases, schools are matched with experts who have just the right skill set for the school's needs, are adept at developing rapport, and have adequate time and resources to support the school. The school staff is ready for change and welcomes the expert's involvement. In these cases, the partnership can help improve the school's culture and climate, strengthen community connections, and restore school pride. In other cases, a partnership becomes just one more in a series of failed attempts to turn around a history of low performance. The way school improvement partnerships are conceived, established, and tended is critical to their success.

In this paper, we explore two critical questions:

1. What qualities of an external partnership indicate a greater likelihood for success?

2. What actions by school administrators may make these relationships more effective?

The recommendations in this white paper reflect lessons learned through original research by American Institutes for Research on state support for struggling schools,[2] informal feedback from staff of low-performing schools in six districts,[3] and the hands-on experience of AIR's education specialists working as school turnaround leaders and lead partners in SIG schools. By bridging research and practice in this way, our goal is to provide practical recommendations that school administrators can use to help them make the best possible decisions when selecting external partners and to build relationships that are more likely to make a positive difference for struggling schools and the students they serve.

What Went Wrong at Great Woods High School?

Great Woods High School[4] was at a crossroads. The urban, midsized school, serving a diverse and predominantly disadvantaged student population, was in its fourth year of improvement status and faced takeover by the state if it failed to improve student attendance and test scores. To support Great Woods, the state department of education assigned a veteran educator to be the school's full-time turnaround partner and to follow up on the school improvement plan.

As part of her responsibilities, the support provider compiled reports documenting the school's progress—including teachers' compliance with the use of specific instructional strategies—to school, district, and state administrators as well as to the local school board. This caused considerable concern, especially among teachers. One teacher said of the provider's function in the school, "[She] writes a report, and if we're not up to her report, then we're not doing the right thing, then the state can take us over." Another referred to the provider as "a spy."

Some staff members questioned the support provider's own aptitude and experience, pointing to her lack of experience at the high school level. In addition, she had no specific expertise in working with English learners—the largest student subgroup in the school. Several teacher leaders within the school recounted going so far as to meet to discuss ways they could subvert the support provider's efforts, out of a perceived need to protect teachers from the provider's requests.

Unfortunately, Great Woods operated in a policy environment that may have primed school staff against engaging in meaningful reform and diminished staff members' sense of efficacy. For one, the school had a history of mandates that overwhelmed teachers and then were abandoned without having any clear impact on student achievement. This "reform churn" had decreased school stakeholders' motivation to implement new improvement strategies.

Some teachers felt that policies outside their control were hindering them from boosting their attendance rates and test scores (e.g., lack of follow-through on local truancy laws, policies that placed a large population of English learners in the school without sufficient resources to meet their needs). The support provider reported a lack of urgency among school staff and inadequate follow-through on the part of school leaders, citing insufficient buy-in as a significant obstacle.

As a result, rather than serving as a tool for progress in their improvement efforts, the support provider's work resulted in a stalemate in which staff in the school did not adequately engage with—and in some cases, actively worked to undermine—the support they received.

"[Our support provider] had the ideal training background so that when someone said, 'You just don't understand,' he could say, 'I do!'"

—Principal in an AIR research study

Finding the Right Provider

Selecting the right provider is essential for developing an effective turnaround partnership. Districts and schools must be wise consumers, looking for support providers who best meet the individual school's needs. Interviewing prospective lead partners, visiting schools where prospective partners provide services, and understanding clearly what each partner can provide are important steps for district officials to take during partner selection.

Research about external school support is still maturing, but reports on such studies have echoed several consistent themes:[5]

Provider fit. The concept of fit encompasses many elements, including the alignment of the support provider's expertise to a specific school's needs and the connection between a school's challenges and the selected intervention.[6] If there is a mismatch—as in the Great Woods example, where a high school was assigned a school improvement facilitator with limited experience at that level—it may be more difficult to foster meaningful dialogue, identify appropriate interventions, implement plans with fidelity, and sustain improvement strategies.

Coherence. Coherence is a corollary to fit and is important both within a system of support and among the set of supports offered to low-performing schools.[7] The provider's approach should reinforce, rather than contradict, the current state and district policy environment. A lack of coherence may lead to unnecessary duplication of effort, working at cross purposes, or confusion for school staff. Too often, school officials themselves contribute to the lack of coherence, seeking support from numerous providers at once. In such a case, even if each provider has a specific role within the school improvement process, it is difficult to avoid a proliferation of improvement strategies that overwhelms the staff.

Intensity. The intensity of a support provider's approach—in terms of the number of days of assistance provided or the overall timetable for support—must be a good match for each school's needs.[8] If resources are spread too thin, the intervention will have insufficient impact. On the other hand, if a provider is on site too often, it may become a distraction for school staff members, taking time from other activities that require their attention. Districts and their schools vary greatly in the intensity of support needed; some targeted schools require single meetings and others may need nearly full-time support staff.

"[Our school improvement coach] is stretched thin, but I can e-mail her, and she will come to school with a folder of strategies I can use."

—Teacher in an AIR research study

Responsiveness. Effective support providers continually monitor their services and make adjustments that better serve school needs.[9] They also are responsive to the *individuals* they serve—that is, they respond promptly to inquiries, make themselves available at times convenient to school staff, and provide suggestions that are sensitive to the school's needs, constraints, and context.

Stability. Excessive turnover or shuffling among support providers poses serious challenges because adjusting to each new provider's personality, recommendations, and expertise can take time and energy away from other tasks.[10] Without some degree of trust that the provider's support will be lasting, school staff may be unlikely to invest in relationships that will successfully build capacity. Some turnover may be unavoidable, but any efforts to improve stability will help support these critical relationships and increase effectiveness.

Making Partnerships Work

The availability of high-quality support alone is not enough to ensure a productive collaboration and, ultimately, achieve school improvement. Research and experience working in low-performing schools have identified specific actions that administrators can take to help shape stronger partnerships between school stakeholders and external support providers.

Establish trust. Strong external support providers are seen as being on the same side as school stakeholders, even when they are critical of the status quo.[11] Trust can be encouraged by negotiating clear roles and responsibilities. Teachers, in particular, need to understand the role of the external partner and expectations for working together, because teachers are the group most directly affected by the change process. Without a thorough discussion of roles, stakeholders may make false assumptions about decision-making authority. It must be clear to all that the external partner is there to help—not merely to evaluate or conduct compliance checks. Communicating early and often is another way to establish and build trust. The way the support provider is first introduced to district and school staff can set the stage for initial success or for misunderstanding and conflict. Some schools have chosen to circulate a document to all key stakeholders that clearly defines the role and expectations of the key district leaders, principal, lead partner, and other external providers. Others have committed to sharing workflow plans regularly or to conducting monthly meetings with key district and school stakeholders to communicate progress, share updates on the status of key initiatives, and address potential challenges.

"[The coach's] role was to listen and support, and not to judge."

—Principal in a successful turnaround partnership

Focus on quick wins. If teachers feel disempowered, they will be reluctant to engage with support providers and may regard new suggestions as unrealistic. Early successes empower staff by signaling that the culture is shifting, change is on track, and teachers can be a part of making change occur. These quick wins must be consciously planned, executed, and celebrated. In one turnaround high school, for example, teachers complained that assessment scores were low because many students came to school late or missed first period altogether. The lead partner facilitated a problem-solving session with the principal and key district leadership that resulted in an adjustment to school bus routes, providing more time for students to arrive at school and get to class. The principal periodically shared data about the results of this plan—decreasing numbers of tardy students—with the staff and district, making it clear to teachers that the principal heard and responded to their concerns.

Identify policies and practices that hinder reform. Systemic constraints—such as personnel policies, mandated interventions, or reporting requirements—can make relationships between support providers and school stakeholders considerably more difficult. District officials can help by being aware of the challenges faced by their lowest performing schools and by being willing to examine and revise policies, initiatives, and practices that conflict with reform strategies. For example, policies that may compromise a school's focus on continuous improvement would include the imposition of "involuntary transfer" teachers, mandates for new instructional practices, and revision of catchment areas.

Moving Forward: Issues to Consider

School turnaround is a highly contextual process—there is no one-size-fits-all approach. In addition to the recommendations offered in this paper, administrators will need to consider additional questions, such as the following, when planning local turnaround efforts:

- **Are adequate resources available?** Many schools in the United States struggle with inadequate funding. To achieve successful turnaround, the level of financial, human, and material resources must not be so limited as to be a notable impediment to school improvement processes. When teachers and administrators lack resources on many fronts—severely overcrowded classrooms, no support staff, few textbooks—it is extremely difficult for them to see beyond the most pressing needs. In such contexts, the advice of an external provider, however skilled, may simply be drowned out by more urgent priorities.

- **Is the timing right?** Delays in the availability of resources—financial or human—can limit the school's capacity to undertake improvement strategies. For example, if a school improvement facilitator is not assigned to a school until February, the staff will have lost more than half the school year during which productive activities could have been initiated. If funds are not disbursed in a timely manner, then school leaders may need to scramble to cover budget shortfalls or hold off on expenditures for key resources.[12]

- **Is the current policy environment conducive to change?** Schools are nested within a state and district context that can exert a powerful force on the change process at a school level. School improvement benefits from an external policy environment that avoids reform churn, instability, and unreasonable policy demands.[13] Staff at schools in more challenging policy environments are less likely to believe that they can effect change and less likely to build effective relationships with a support provider. Challenging policy environments also can negatively affect the stability, coherence, and timeliness of the support itself.

- **What will create a sense of urgency for change?** If school staff members are to be engaged in the school improvement process—and with their support providers—they must feel a collective sense of urgency about the need for change. A prior history of high performance or a tendency to blame external factors (e.g., students' home lives, a challenging policy environment) for low performance may interfere with this sense of urgency.

External school turnaround partners offer many benefits, including new perspectives, fresh knowledge based on research and practical experience, and the ability to act as thought partners in addressing potential systemic issues. More research is still needed to explore how effective partnerships negotiate these and other contextual factors to implement school improvement plans that support higher student achievement. Research and experience suggest that taking the concrete steps described in this paper can empower schools and their chosen partners to give these efforts their best chance for a successful outcome.

Notes

1. U.S. Department of Education, SIG Guidance, question H-19, p. 45.

2. This paper draws on experiences of AIR researchers on two primary research projects: a study of state support for high schools, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation; and a study of support for low-performing schools in Michigan. For more information, see http://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/Quality_Indicator_Brief_FINAL_0.pdf.

3. In October 2013, AIR staff members met with school and district administrators to hear their observations about the key factors in working with external support providers. The responses of these administrators supported our observations and provided additional insights into effective partnerships.

4. The school's name has been changed.

5. See A. Boyle, K. C. Le Floch, & S. Therriault, *State support for school improvement: School-level perceptions of quality* (AIR Research Brief; Washington DC: AIR, 2009), for a more detailed discussion of these features; some quotes used here were previously reported by those authors. See also M. Huberman, L. Dunn, J. Stapleton, & T. Parrish, *Evaluation of Arizona's System of School Support* (Phoenix, AZ: Arizona Department of Education, 2008a), retrieved from https://www.azed.gov/wp-content/uploads/PDF/EvalAZsSystemOfSchoolSupport021308.pdf; M. Huberman, L. Shambaugh, M. Socias, M. Muraki, C. Liu, & T. Parrish, *Evaluation of Nevada's school improvement system: Interim report* (Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research, 2008b); T. Kerins, C. Perlman, & S. Redding, Coherence in statewide systems of support, in S. Redding & H. J. Walberg (Eds.), *Handbook on statewide systems of support* (Charlotte, NC: Academic Development Institute and Information Age Publishing, 2008).

6. C. Asher, K. Ikeda, & N. Fruchter, *Schools on notice: A policy study of New York State's 1996–1997 Schools under Registration Review process* (Final report; New York, NY: Institute for Education and Social Policy, 1998); J. David, P. Kannapel, & G. W. McDiarmid, *The influence of distinguished educators on school improvement: A study of Kentucky's school intervention program* (Lexington, KY: Partnership for Kentucky Schools, 2000); Rennie Center, *Reaching capacity: A blueprint for the state role in improving low performing schools and districts* (Boston, MA: Author, 2005).

7. Education Alliance at Brown University, *Developing and implementing statewide systems of support for low-performing schools: Design elements of statewide systems of support* (Providence, RI: Author, 2006); A. C. Porter, National standards and school improvement in the 1990s: Issues and promise, *American Journal of Education, 102* (1994), 421–449; P. Reville, *Components of a well-crafted statewide system of support* (Presentation for the New England Comprehensive Center, January 24, 2007).

8. M. M. Davis, D. H. McDonald, & B. Lyons, *A preliminary analysis of the Kentucky Distinguished Educator Initiative: A new approach to educational change* (Frankfort, KY: Kentucky Department of Education, 1997); Education Alliance, 2006; K. G. Laguarda, *State-sponsored technical assistance to low-performing schools: Strategies from nine states* (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL, 2003); H. Mintrop & T. Trujillo, Corrective action in low-performing schools: Lessons for NCLB implementation from state and district strategies in first-generation accountability systems, *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 13,48* (2005), 1–30; L. M. Rhim, B. Hassel, & S. Redding, State role in supporting school improvement, in S. Redding & H. J. Walberg (eds.), *Handbook on statewide systems of support* (Charlotte, NC: Academic Development Institute and Information Age Publishing, 2008); Reville, 2007.

9. K. Finnigan & J. O'Day, *External support to schools on probation: Getting a leg up?* Chicago, IL: Consortium on Chicago School of Research at the University of Chicago, 2003), retrieved from http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/p63.pdf; Kerins et al., 2009.

10. David et al., 2000.

11. J. L. David, P. Coe, & P. J. Kannapel, *Improving low-performing schools: A study of Kentucky's highly skilled educator program* (Lexington, KY: Partnership for Kentucky Schools, 2003); Huberman et al., 2008a, b.

12. Huberman et al., 2008a, b.

13. K. Finnigan, C. Bitter, & J. O'Day, Improving low-performing schools through external assistance: Lessons from Chicago and California, *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 17,7* (2009), retrieved from http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/9/9; Finnigan & O'Day, 2003.

About AIR

Established in 1946, AIR is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit organization that conducts and applies behavioral and social science research both domestically and internationally in education, health, and workforce productivity, all with an emphasis on aiding the disadvantaged. AIR is dedicated to improving people's lives with the best research and with adoption of evidence-based practices.

AIR®
American Institutes for Research®

1000 Thomas Jefferson Street NW
Washington, DC 20007-3835
202.403.5000

www.air.org

1270_07/14