

Tackling the Challenge of School Improvement: Identifying Promising Practices

A PCG White Paper

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Introduction

Over the past decade, significant efforts by district, state, and federal initiatives to improve low-performing schools have produced limited success (Mead, 2012). Many times, the changes undertaken are incremental, addressing only a few aspects of a school's deficiencies, and therefore ineffective in meeting the challenges facing both urban and rural schools. Recently, research has shown that no single solution is best when it comes to improving chronically underperforming schools. Moreover, strategies achieving positive outcomes may not enjoy the same results in all school settings. However, research and experience have begun to shed light on some of the conditions and strategies that maximize the chances for success (Dragoset et al., 2017). This PCG White Paper discusses leadership as a critical element of school improvement. Leadership is one component of PCG's Schoolwide Reform Theory of Action highlighted in this paper.¹

Despite the countless debates that have encompassed K–12 school reform over the past decade, there is an emerging consensus about the fundamental nature of the problem. Educational stakeholders' concerns center on student achievement and engagement, specifically focused on achievement gaps across various ethnicities, socio-economic groups, and complex learning issues (Senechal, 2015). It is also clear that through many iterations of school reform, significant effort and enormous resources have been marshalled to address the issues of lagging student achievement and growing achievement gaps. Throughout the *No Child Left Behind* era, federal, state, and local agencies created rules and regulations mandating specific school reform methods. Due to those regulations, state and local education agencies partnered with outside organizations to create school programs and interventions to solve the issues surrounding low student achievement. In addition, teachers and leaders worked directly with students, parents, and their communities to improve the outcomes. However, despite the significant efforts, sustained improvement continues to be a struggle. While there are examples of improvement efforts that have shown, and maintained, success over time, these are more the exception than the rule. Moreover, attempts to scale successful school improvement efforts has proven to be challenging (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015). In general, any assessment of education systems suggests that the problem of low student achievement and achievement gaps between groups persist (Dragoset et al., 2017).

The 2015 passage and enactment of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) presents a new opportunity to implement comprehensive, evidence-based school improvement strategies to meet the challenges of improving low-performing schools. Although the new law requires districts to implement evidence-based interventions in under-performing schools, states and districts have a great deal of discretion in the approaches they choose to implement to improve schools. ESSA provides states more latitude to develop and implement their own accountability systems and improvement guidance for districts and schools.

In most states, this flexibility presents an opportunity for schools to rethink their approach to school improvement while finding ways to be more innovative in addressing the challenges of low-performing schools including weak student performance throughout K–12; inexperienced and poorly prepared leaders and teachers; lack of high quality, well-aligned curriculum and interventions; low expectations of adults and students; and policies and practices embedded within the school and district that impede student success. Rather than prescribing turnaround models to underperforming schools, ESSA invites

¹ The other dimensions include effective instruction, rigorous curriculum, climate and culture, and parent and community engagement and will be discussed in depth in future PCG white papers on school improvement.

states and districts to be innovative and rely on research of the last decade on turnaround efforts. PCG has partnered with states to support schools in need of turnaround. In studies of that work, practices such as implementing shared and distributed leadership models, placing a relentless and intentional focus on improving instruction in every classroom, implementing student-specific supports, and fostering a school and community culture of collaboration in turnaround work, have all shown to get results (American Institutes for Research, 2016).

One of the overarching factors that has been an impediment to districts in meeting the challenges of low-performing schools is the failure to recognize that persistently low-performing schools face unique challenges that require explicit, tailored, and sustained solutions. Rather, districts tend to create one-size-fits-all solutions providing each target school with the same dollars, instructional coaches, or other support, regardless of the variety of differences and needs of each school (Baroody, 2011). These resources are typically added on top of existing policies, programs, staffing, and schedules, without addressing the root cause or shortcomings in the school's systems. The results neither address the needs of a school nor the district-based decisions that have led to the school failure. The failure of these top-down models juxtaposed against the successes of school-based efforts to improve professional practices, indicate that a tailored and needs-based approach will have success if the efforts are authentic, supported, and sustained.

Addressing the Challenges

To address the challenges of improving persistently low performing schools, PCG engages educators in systemic schoolwide initiatives that are built upon data from a comprehensive needs assessment. A needs-driven approach is central to a school improvement process that considers both internal and external factors associated with the school. The comprehensive needs assessment is an objective school diagnostic process incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data that are carefully gathered through surveys, focus groups, interviews, and observations that are triangulated to ensure a true understanding of the school's strengths and challenges.

Through experience in the field, PCG developed a system-wide approach to improving low performing schools grounded in research. The approach recognizes that school improvement is more than isolated and random activities and projects intended to improve student achievement. If the intent of school improvement is to prepare and support district, school, and teacher leaders in their efforts to turn around low-performing schools, then an approach that focuses on building school capacity must be employed.

The five dimensions illustrated in Figure 1 must work together to create the conditions for sustained data-driven change.

Strong leadership and empowered teachers are able to rally support and organize for action resulting in improved student outcomes. The five dimensions of school improvement address a system-wide approach that not only



Figure 1. Schoolwide Reform Theory of Action

enables change in the trajectory of student achievement, but also builds the school's capacity and sustainability to ensure continuous improvement.²

1. Leadership: Research is clear that school leadership is a critical factor to improving low-performing schools (Wallace Foundation, 2012). Results from a six-year study showed leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning. Effective school leaders impact student achievement by providing a vision and setting direction, establishing high expectations, using data to monitor progress and performance, developing staff with the support and training to succeed; and by making the organization work through strengthening and building a collaborative culture (Seashore-Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). We will further examine the power of effective school leadership later in this paper.

2. Effective Instruction: Successful districts focus first and foremost on student achievement and learning while limiting the number of other initiatives they undertake (Soar, 2015). To accomplish this focus, school leaders must make student achievement and student learning their top, if not only, focus. This can only be the top priority if schools establish a clear vision of improved achievement, publicize this vision among all school level stakeholders, and then set out to make the improvement of achievement—through the improvement of teaching and learning—their main mission. This mission can only be accomplished if there is a clear vision for effective instruction and intervention that supports the teaching and learning needs of all students and teachers in the district.

3. Rigorous Curriculum: The result of a curriculum development and alignment process should be a clear articulation of what should be taught, and how this content and skill development will occur, in order for students to be fully prepared for college and careers upon graduation. Far beyond a mapping process, developing a rigorous curriculum requires consensus on what needs to be taught, identification and repair of gaps, support to those responsible for implementing aligned teaching and learning, and resource allocation/reallocation to ensure that content, materials, technology infrastructure, scheduling, and use of time are targeted at supporting curriculum implementation. There are implications for action on the part of school leaders related to the issue of curriculum that go far beyond assessment and instruction. Developing and aligning a rigorous curriculum is the ultimate systems issue as the maintenance of a rigorous curriculum is an ongoing effort.

4. Climate and Culture: While we know that one of the most important factors in turning around low-performing schools is improving the quality and reducing the variance of instruction, truly improving instruction is impossible without examining deeply held beliefs about student learning and how school professionals should work together. Transforming school culture requires the development of a coherent and inspirational vision for success, core beliefs that speak to high expectations and levels of support for all students to be successful, and strong alignment between all adults in the school and community to consistently execute the concrete actions needed to instill a new culture (Kutash, Nico, Gorin, Rahmatullah, & Tallant, 2010). This new culture should be built upon the foundations of academic optimism (Hoy, 2012), which features the academic emphasis of the school, the individual and collective efficacy of the faculty, and the faculty's trust in the school's parents and students. Unless we transform the school's culture, programmatic fixes, such as new

² See PCG's white papers on college- and career-ready curriculum and professional learning to support effective instruction as complementary elements of PCG's schoolwide reform theory of action.

reading programs, revised schedules, extensions to the school day, doubling up on math and reading, and even efforts to improve instruction, will have limited impact on student achievement.

5. Parent and Community Engagement: Decades of research confirm the strong correlation between parent involvement and student achievement. Given the limited resources in many communities, parent-school partnerships are crucial in turning around low-performing schools. Parental views may shape their children's attitudes about school, affect their levels of family-school engagement, and influence their school enrollment decisions (Schueler, Capotosto, Bahena, McIntyre, & Gehlbach, 2014). Parents' impressions of school climate can influence whether and how families engage with the school (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Given that family engagement with children's learning is strongly associated with students' academic outcomes and well-being (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2005), schools might better support student success by understanding and improving the way parents view the school (Schueler, et al., 2014). In a study of high-performing, high-needs schools, supportive relationships with families were among the most important factors for school success (Barley & Beasley, 2007). Another meta-analysis of parent involvement research not only documented the positive correlation between parent involvement and student outcomes, but also established that the single most powerful factor is parental expectations (Jeynes, 2005). Parental expectations for learning are expressed in the home as well as in their level of involvement in school matters. Families expect high-quality schools, want their children to succeed, and need strong schools to ensure the long-term viability of the local economy.

The Influence of Effective School Leaders

Effective school leaders matter to school improvement. Research on the effect of school leadership on student outcomes has found that leaders contribute twenty-five percent of the total school influences on a child's academic performance, and that school leadership is second only to teaching among school-related factors that influence student learning (Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). In addition, research has found the school principal to be the single biggest determinant of whether or not teachers want to stay in their schools, suggesting a link between effective leadership and teacher retention. Specifically, in one study, researchers discovered that schools led by the top sixteen percent of principals achieved an additional two- to seven-month gain in student learning above schools with less effective leaders (Branch, et al., 2009). To accomplish better outcomes for students, principals must have the skills, strategies, practices, and beliefs to establish and maintain highly effective school settings where students can be successful, and they often begin their first day on the job with limited training in any of these roles.

To have an effect on student achievement, school leaders must be steadfast and determined, but they also benefit from engagement in professional learning and a network of support. According to a Wallace Foundation report on school leadership training, "principals need high-quality mentoring and professional development tailored to individual and district needs" (Wallace Foundation, 2012). From experience in the field, PCG concurs that leadership training can be invaluable. By providing principals with evidence-based supports, including access to a community of peers, job-embedded professional learning, and high-quality tools and resources that build their capacity to be more effective school leaders, it is possible to increase the likelihood of consistent and effective leadership that increases the likelihood that teachers can improve student achievement.

Supporting Effective Leadership

PCG has worked with leaders in persistently low-performing schools throughout the last decade. For example, as part of an ongoing effort to improve school performance, PCG partnered with the Florida Department of Education on the Florida Rural Turnaround Leadership Project to provide professional development and coaching to school and district leaders of ten rural districts that included failing schools. Specifically, through the Florida Rural Turnaround Leadership Project, PCG provided focus and support to a newly appointed leader who recognized his lack of experience in building a network of school leaders and the need for professional learning to improve student achievement in science.

At the time of the project kickoff, “JO” was a newly appointed assistant superintendent, leaving his role as a school principal in the district. He recognized his lack of experience in forming teams to work systemically to address the needs of the district. As a leader, he committed to full participation in PCG-facilitated professional development and coaching sessions with his newly formed team of principals to develop and implement a plan for improved student achievement. Moreover, JO was committed to accessing a network of support from other school and district leaders who were also facing the challenge of improving a failing school.

JO’s team partnered with PCG coaches and began to examine student data. It was the first time a team of principals analyzed data through the lens of a student feeder pattern. The leaders began to identify gaps and looked at them as opportunities to make change as opposed to achievement gaps that they could not close. PCG coaches provided support that enabled the principals to align resources and allocations to better meet their goals.

The result of this work was a stronger alignment of curriculum and instruction in the science content area. This resulted in increased student achievement in science as evidenced by the Florida state assessment results. The Turnaround Leadership project, through its professional development and coaching, validated that making changes to school processes must be collaborative, methodical, and data-driven. JO’s experience strengthened his leadership ability and provided him with skills that could enact and sustain positive change for schools within his district.

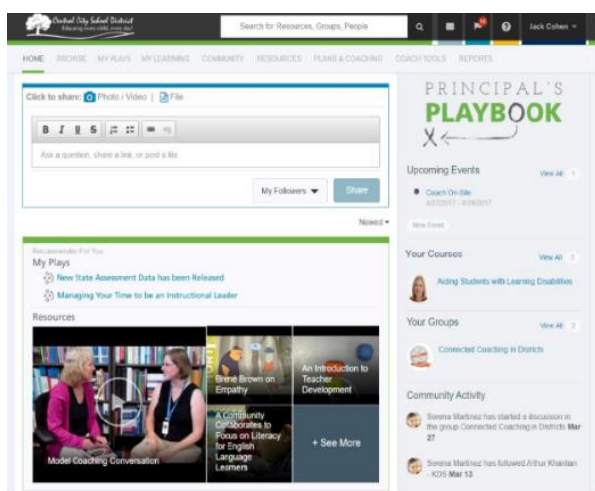


Figure 2. PCG's Principal's Playbook

Building leadership capacity through a series of professional development and coaching sessions is only one approach PCG employs to support school and district leaders. Within Michigan’s Saginaw Intermediate School District (ISD), PCG is building school leadership capabilities implementing a blended model of onsite coaching and online support through PCG’s Principal’s Playbook (figure 2). In this project, PCG provides embedded professional development through a coaching model designed for newly appointed priority school principals who are tasked with leading school turnaround. A personalized needs assessment provides a foundation for face-to-face coaching that focuses on research based turnaround strategies. When PCG coaches are not onsite, the Principal’s Playbook provides resources and coaching

support that are action oriented, creating a framework of continuous school improvement. Moreover, the Principal's Playbook builds a network that facilitates principals' connections to peers who are facing similar struggles, diminishing isolation. In the Saginaw ISD, the Principal's Playbook is providing a platform for principals in priority schools that are facing state actions to form a virtual professional learning community (PLC) to share practices to address the pressing issues facing each school. Through coaching and the newly created network, the principals of first time priority schools in the ISD are relying on their peers for support and strategies to meet the challenges of improving failing schools.

Building a network of charter school leaders through the Principal's Playbook was also of importance to the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE). Florida charter schools are diverse and number more than 600 statewide. The FLDOE recognized that there were many charter school leaders facing seemingly insurmountable challenges as they worked, in many instances, in isolation, leading a school with little support or experience. Similar to the Saginaw ISD, the FLDOE realized that the potential of PCG's Principal's Playbook to increase the collaboration and decrease isolation of charter school leaders. The project consisted of onsite coaching and access to the Principal's Playbook, as well as online courses and webinars. In addition, PCG recruited successful charter school principals to lead discussions and provide examples of effective practices implemented within their school. The online mentoring led to statewide symposiums where the mentor principals hosted regional sessions at their school to not only showcase successful practices in action, but also to continue building the network created by the Principal's Playbook. One school leader noted, "The Principal's Playbook is a very good source for principals and related school administrators to have a secure network of like-minded professionals in which to interact. We often provide support to our teams but neglect our own personal professional support systems."

Conclusion

No school can turn around through the efforts of a single person. It takes a collaborative, mission-driven community of stakeholders to break through persistent challenges and overcome them. However, the success of school turnaround requires a strong and dedicated principal who sets the vision and tone and coordinates resources and support. Leadership is critical for any organization, and a strong principal is integral to building the culture of collaboration that supports teachers' efforts to increase student achievement.

Leadership skills can be learned, but not in a classroom or single workshop. Principals must be facilitators of organizational change, a skillset that is acquired and honed through trial and error within an organization as the leader calibrates the approach with the culture of the organization. That learning curve can be accelerated and significantly improved by helping a principal reduce errors through a network of professional support and coaching. All too often, there are limited opportunities for principals' professional learning that are differentiated by principals' years of experience. Short-term face-to-face workshops simply cannot address these differences in a meaningful way for the range of abilities and experiences that exist in most districts. However, by leveraging direct coaching support and technology in a peer-based network, principals' ongoing learning and growth can be supported to drive schoolwide change and increase student achievement.

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