



Turning Around Lowest-Achieving Schools

A Qualitative Report on Early Stage Implementation in Georgia

Niah Shearer

Sam Rauschenberg

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2012

This report was produced by the Governor's Office of Student Achievement as a part of Georgia's statewide evaluation of Race to the Top. The Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) strives to increase student achievement and school completion across Georgia through meaningful, transparent, and objective analysis and communication of statewide data. In addition, GOSA provides policy support to the Governor and, ultimately, to the citizens of Georgia through:

- An education scoreboard that forthrightly indicates the effectiveness of Georgia's education institutions, from Pre-K through college;
- Research initiatives on education programs in Georgia and corresponding findings to inform policy, budget, and legislative efforts;
- Thorough analysis and straightforward communication of education data to stakeholders;
- Audits of academic programs to ensure that education institutions are fiscally responsible with state funds and faithful to performance accountability requirements; and
- Collaborative work with the Alliance of Education Agency Heads (AEA) to improve education statewide.

For more information on GOSA's statewide evaluation of Race to the Top implementation in Georgia, please visit gosa.georgia.gov/statewide-evaluation.

Executive Summary

Georgia’s Race to the Top (RT3) plan charges the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) with the statewide evaluation of the grant. This report evaluates the fidelity of implementation of one of the initiatives, *Turning Around Lowest-Achieving Schools*, during the 2010-11 and 2011-12 school years.

In fall 2010, the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) identified 40 “persistently lowest-achieving” schools within the RT3 partner districts. Each school adopted one of four reform models—turnaround, restart, school closure, or transformation—and developed aggressive reform plans that would result in drastic improvement in student performance within three years. Thirty-six schools chose the transformation model.

Twenty-six of these schools received federal School Improvement Grants (SIG) while the other 14 schools used district Race to the Top funding to implement the reform model. Half of the schools began implementing the grant during the 2010-11 year, and the remaining 20 schools implemented it the following year.

The goal of this report is to provide the GaDOE and other stakeholders with a formative evaluation of how the school turnaround efforts have been perceived and implemented in a sample of schools. The GaDOE selected ten of the 40 lowest-achieving schools for the evaluation, representing urban and rural areas and various district sizes. All ten schools chose the transformation model.

To accomplish this goal, we conducted interviews with teachers, instructional coaches, assistant principal(s), the principal, and the state school improvement specialist at each school. In addition, we interviewed senior-level district and GaDOE personnel who have been involved in school turnaround implementation. The findings from these interviews are as follows:

Table 1: Race to the Top Reform Areas

1. Recruiting, preparing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals, especially where they are needed most.
2. Adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and to compete in the global economy.
3. Building data systems that measure student growth and success, and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction.
4. Turning around lowest-achieving schools.

Source: Georgia Department of Education, *Georgia’s Race to the Top Plan*, <http://www.doe.k12.ga.us/Race-to-the-Top/Pages/default.aspx>, (October 30, 2012).

Major Findings

Early Stages

- Changes in state leadership inhibited the GaDOE’s ability to support model selection (p.13).
- Most districts chose to implement the transformation model in their schools (p. 14).
- Districts struggled to change principals prior to grant implementation (p. 18).
- Seven of ten schools changed principals in the middle of the grant (p. 20).

Implementation

- School-level staff generally felt underappreciated, undervalued, and uninformed (p. 25).
- School-level staff questioned the sustainability of turnaround efforts (p. 26).
- Negative perceptions and doubts about sustainability undermined buy-in to the turnaround plan (p. 27).
- Job-embedded professional development increased and improved in perceived quality (p. 31).
- Instructional coaches were one of the most valued additions from the grant (p. 39).
- School and district staff believed that increased time for remediation, tutoring, enrichment, and collaborative planning were improving student achievement (p. 43).
- Schools did not have sufficient operating flexibility in staffing and budget decisions (p. 46).
- For the most part, the State Office of School Turnaround supported lowest-achieving schools with the same practices the Office of School Improvement used prior to Race to the Top (p. 49)
- Schools were less satisfied with support and communication from the district than from the GaDOE (p. 51).

Recommendations

Each interview concluded with asking what could be done to improve implementation for the remainder of the grant. The following recommendations are based upon interview responses and our comparison of actual implementation with best practices in school turnaround.

- Increase operating flexibility for school leaders.
- Increase direct communication between GaDOE and the school.
- Lengthen school turnaround time beyond three years or provide a plan to support schools after grant ends.

- Improve the stability of grant expectations and compliance guidelines.
- Provide training for local board members and new district leadership about grant requirements.
- Increase training and support for upcoming statewide initiatives.
- Make the RT3 and SIG district grant coordinator a cabinet level position or create a district turnaround office.
- For future grants, offer a planning grant to precede the actual grant application.

