

Turning Around Lowest-Achieving Schools

A Qualitative Report on Early Stage Implementation in Georgia

Highlights

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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 (AEAH) to improve education statewide.

Highlights accompanies *Turning Around Lowest-Achieving Schools: A Qualitative Report on Early Stage Implementation in Georgia*. It is designed to facilitate communication among school, district, state and community stakeholders invested in the success of Georgia's lowest-achieving schools work. For more information on GOSA's statewide evaluation of Race to the Top implementation in Georgia, please visit gosa.georgia.gov/statewide-evaluation.

Outline

“There are approximately 5,000 schools in this chronically underperforming category, roughly 5 percent of the total. About half are in big cities, maybe a third are in rural areas, and the rest are in suburbs and medium-sized towns. This is a national problem—urban, rural, and suburban.”

- Secretary Arne Duncan¹

- I. Introduction
- II. Evaluation Framework
- III. Findings
 - i. Early Stages
 - ii. Implementation
- IV. Recommendations

¹Arne Duncan, “Turning Around the Bottom 5 Percent,” National Alliance for Public Charter Schools Conference, <http://www2.ed.gov/news/speeches/2009/06/06222009.html>, June 22, 2009.

Introduction

Addressing Low-Performing Schools

- U.S. Department of Education (US ED) has committed more than \$5 billion nationwide over the last three years to school turnaround through Race to the Top (RT₃) competitive grants and Title I School Improvement Grants (SIG).
- Both programs target the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools.
- As part of RT₃ in 2010, the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) identified 40 “Lowest-Achieving Schools” in RT₃ partner districts based on the following criteria:
 - School is receiving a federal School Improvement Grant (26 schools) OR
 - School is in NI-5 or higher status under the school improvement framework (14 schools)
- Each participating school had to adopt one of four reform models:
 - Transformation
 - Turnaround
 - Restart
 - School Closure
- Schools had to develop aggressive reform plans that would result in drastic improvement in student performance within three years.
- Twenty schools began implementing the grant in 2010-11 (SIG Cohort I).
- Twenty schools began implementing the grant in 2010-11 (SIG Cohort II & RT₃)

Evaluation Framework

- The GaDOE identified 10 of the 40 lowest-achieving schools (LAS) for the evaluation, representing urban and rural schools from across the state.
- In each school, we interviewed the following:
 - Principal
 - Assistant principal(s)
 - Instructional coaches
 - Group of 3-4 teachers.
- We also interviewed:
 - District grant coordinators
 - District superintendents or deputy superintendents
 - GaDOE senior leadership.
- We structured the interviews after the grant requirements and Mathematica Policy Research interview protocols.
- Interviews took place from May to September 2012.
- In total, we conducted 68 interviews throughout the state, each one lasting from 45 to 75 minutes. We coded and analyzed interview responses to identify the patterns and findings that are discussed in the report.

Introduction

Characteristics of Lowest-Achieving Schools

| 2009-10 Summary Statistics for LAS Schools | | |
|---|----------------|--------------------|
| | Sample Schools | Non-Sample Schools |
| Student Information (%) | | |
| English & Reading Meets/Exceeds* | 82.85 | 82.94 |
| Math Meets/Exceeds* | 56.86 | 57.39 |
| Minority | 89.40 | 80.00 |
| English Language Learners (ELL) | 3.80 | 1.59 |
| Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch (FRL) | 84.90 | 78.86 |
| Students with Disabilities (SWD) | 11.50 | 13.28 |
| Students with 16 or more absences | 16.19 | 21.47 |
| Teacher Information | | |
| Level IV or Higher Certification (Bachelor's Degree +) (%) | 97.57 | 97.82 |
| Average Years of Teacher Experience | 11.90 | 12.25 |
| Teacher/Student Ratio*** | 16.81 | 17.01 |
| School Information | | |
| Average Needs Improvement Status | 4.10 | 4.90 |
| Graduation Rate** (%) | 71.77 | 67.67 |
| *The average of the meets/exceeds rate for each CRCT or EOCT within each subject area in a school. | | |
| **Only includes high schools and uses the Leaver Rate (old formula). | | |
| ***Calculated by dividing the total number of students by the number of full-time teachers. | | |
| Source: Data provided by the Governor's Office of Student Achievement and the Georgia Department of Education | | |

Findings

Findings are in two sections: Early Stages and Implementation. Within each section, we found common themes related to the following:

| Early Stages Themes | Implementation Themes |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Model Selection• School Leader Replacement | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teacher and School Leader Effectiveness• Instructional Reform Strategies• Increased Learning Time and Community-Oriented Schools• Operating Flexibility and Sustained Support |

- We highlight major findings through the presentation and include page numbers indicating where the finding can be found in the main report.
- Throughout the report, we compared findings with turnaround best practices from Mass Insight, Public Impact, and the Center on Innovation and Improvement (CII).

Findings: Early Stages

Model Selection

| Four US ED Reform Models | |
|--|---|
| Transformation | The LEA replaces the principal (except in specified situations); implements a rigorous staff evaluation and development system; institutes comprehensive instructional reform; increases learning time and applies community-oriented school strategies; and provides greater operational flexibility and support for the school. |
| Turnaround | The LEA replaces the principal and rehires no more than 50% of the staff; gives greater principal autonomy; implements other prescribed and recommended strategies. |
| Restart | The LEA converts or closes and reopens a school under a charter school operator, charter management organization, or education management organization. |
| School closure | The LEA closes the school and enrolls the students in other schools in the LEA that are higher achieving. |
| Source: "The Purpose of School Improvement Grants," Carole L. Perlman and Sam Redding, eds., Handbook on Effective Implementation of School Improvement Grants (Lincoln, IL: Center on Innovation & Improvement, 2011), 3. | |

Findings: Early Stages

Model Selection

MAJOR FINDING

Changes in state leadership inhibited the GaDOE's ability to support model selection *(page 13)*.

- Georgia was awarded RT₃ in August 2010, two months prior to elections for a new governor and state school superintendent who subsequently took office in January 2011.
- These leadership changes delayed the hiring of senior level staff at GaDOE, including the Deputy Superintendent for School Turnaround, which undermined the state's ability to provide proactive support to Cohort I schools that were already implementing the first year of SIG.
 - The State Office of School Turnaround did not support SIG Cohort I schools in model selection because implementation began prior to the office's creation.
 - The office had limited engagement in model selection for the remaining schools because of the tight timeframe (SIG Cohort II and non-SIG, RT₃ lowest-achieving schools).

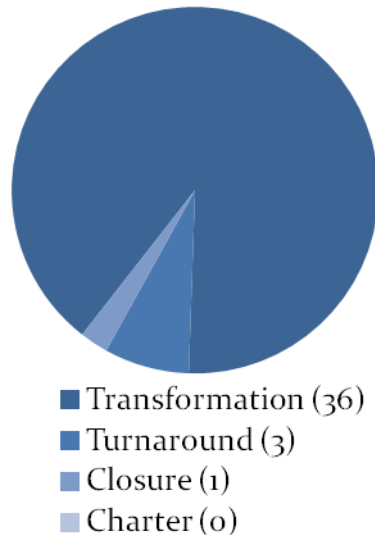
Findings: Early Stages

Model Selection (continued)

MAJOR FINDING

Most districts chose to implement the transformation model in their schools (page 14)

Model Selection Breakdown for all LAS



- All schools included in this evaluation selected the transformation model.
- In most cases, districts chose the school's model with limited or no input from school leadership.
- The reason often cited for choosing transformation was that it was the least disruptive option.
- Districts, particularly rural ones, also were concerned about replacing 50% of the staff.

"There were pockets of progress and success. That led us to believe that replacing 50% of the staff was not best, but more so we needed a plan in place that could help with continuing the success."

—District Senior Leader

Findings: Early Stages

Plan Development

Who was involved

- For the most part, the planning process involved multiple stakeholders, including teachers, parents, instructional coaches, administrators, and district leaders. However, school-level personnel in some schools reported having more of a proofreading role rather than a planning role.
- Most schools submitted their reform plans prior to removing the principal. As a result, most new principals were not involved in the planning process unless they were already working in the school in another capacity.

How it was done

- In many cases, teachers, instructional coaches, administrators, and district officials reported using a GAPSS needs-analysis to develop the plan. However, some schools reported that the district made significant changes to their plans without approval or communication.

“When we do our school improvement plan, we might put a blanket amount or we might spend this on that or that, but here we really had to sit down and think about how to use this money effectively to really try to help our student achievement, which is not an easy task.”
-Principal

Findings: Early Stages

Plan Development (continued)

"I don't see how any school district could say that it was similar to any school improvement effort done in the past. If you look at it from the standpoint of integrat[ing] technology, ramp[ing] up our instructional piece, or hav[ing] a model for instructional delivery, then maybe so. But what makes this different is that it encapsulates all of those things and puts it into one plan, that's what makes it a massive effort."

- Principal

How long it took

- The planning process at each school lasted anywhere from two weeks to four months.
- While many administrators and district officials stated that more time would have helped the planning process, they generally felt like that the amount of time was adequate.

How amendments were made

- Numerous schools sought amendments after submitting their original plans. They reported facing differing levels of resistance from the state in approving the changes.
- The rationale behind most amendments stemmed from changes in either school- or district-level leadership that occurred after the original grant plan was written.

Findings: Early Stages

School Leader Replacement (continued)

MAJOR FINDING

Districts struggled to change principals prior to grant implementation (page 18)

Findings from Industry Experts

- ✓ *Public Impact:* Consider finding turnaround leaders from other sectors.
- ✓ *Public Impact and CII:* Retaining the wrong leader undermines the turnaround efforts by giving the impression that change is optional.

- The transformation model calls for the LEA to “replace the principal who led the school prior to commencement of the transformation model.”
- GaDOE experienced pushback from several districts who did not want to change the principal at the beginning of the grant.
- Factors that impacted decision to replace principals:
 - Districts thought some school leaders were making progress
 - Limited time frame may have been a factor in their search process.
 - Several districts had a new superintendent who may have been hesitant to make changes without first evaluating leadership
 - Several communities protested their school leader being replaced.

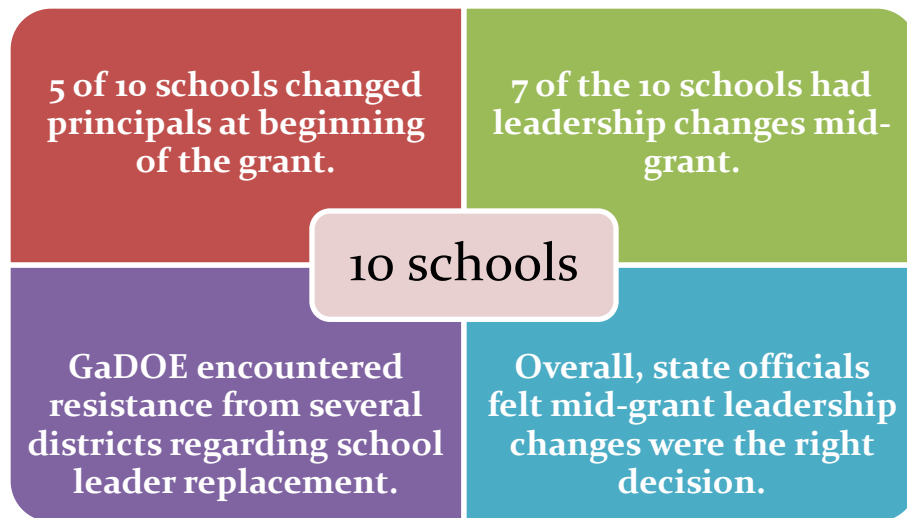
“Anytime you can make sure that leadership is in place and if you are not sure of your leadership prior to that... If they could really move that needle, you should always change it. It’s not just a ‘hold until the end of the grant.’ No, it’s about kids. It’s about the teachers.”
– GaDOE Senior Leader

Findings: Early Stages

School Leader Replacement (continued)

MAJOR FINDING

Seven of ten schools changed principals in the middle of the grant (page 20)



Findings from Industry Experts

- ✓ *Public Impact and CII*: Supports the decision to remove ineffective principals, even if the change took place in the second or third year of implementing the school's plan.

- Districts with new superintendents were more likely to make school leadership changes.
- The State Office of School Turnaround played a more active role in leader selection than in prior years.
- State officials were confident with the mid-leadership grant changes.

Findings: Implementation

The Transformation Model

An LEA implementing a transformation model must:

- ***Develop and increase teacher and school leader effectiveness***
 - Replace the principal who led the school prior to the transformation model
 - Use rigorous, transparent, and equitable evaluation systems for teachers and principals
 - Identify and reward effective staff and remove ineffective staff
 - Provide staff ongoing, high-quality, job-embedded professional development
 - Implement strategies to designed to recruit, place, and retain staff
- ***Implement comprehensive instructional reform strategies***
 - Use data to identify and implement an instructional program
 - Promote the continuous use of student data in order to inform and differentiate instruction.
- ***Increase learning time and create community-oriented schools***
 - Establish schedules and strategies that provide increased learning time; and
 - Provide ongoing mechanisms for family and community engagement.
- ***Provide operational flexibility and sustained support***
 - Give the school sufficient operational flexibility (such as staffing, calendars/time, and budgeting); and
 - Ensure that the school receives ongoing, intensive technical assistance and related support

Adapted from US Department of Education SIG Guidance - <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/sigguidance02232011.pdf>

Findings: Implementation

Overall Perceptions

MAJOR FINDING

School-level staff generally felt underappreciated, undervalued, and uninformed (page 25)

- Nearly all teachers perceived the grant negatively in the first year because they experienced a significant increase in workload from professional learning, increased learning time, and paperwork as well as a reduction in unstructured planning time.
- They often did not have a full vision of the transformation plan and how their additional workload fit into that vision. As a result, they felt that the reforms were forced on them and demeaned them.
- Teachers in SIG Cohort I schools generally believed that morale was better in the second year of the grant relative to the first. They attributed this improvement to having a better understanding of expectations, improved practice, and the reality that many frustrated teachers had chosen to leave the school.

"I think if you have a supportive environment, then it's not a big deal to be tired. I can be tired, but I can't be demoralized. The nurturing climate is something that needs to be worked on."

- Teacher

Findings: Implementation

Overall Perceptions (continued)

MAJOR FINDING

School-level staff questioned the sustainability of turnaround efforts (page 26)

- In general, district officials, instructional coaches, and school leaders believed that many pieces of the work would be sustainable.
- Teachers, on the other hand, doubted that most changes would last when the funding ends.
 - This was especially true in schools that had major delays in receiving funding, which affected their ability to fully implement their proposed reforms.
- Staff were concerned that the school may invest significant resources in teachers who may transfer or quit.

“Unfortunately, my experience has been that if there isn’t a compelling reason to continue something—it is all based on the back on one person or a pot of money, and once that’s gone, then we’re not going to do it anymore.”

- Teacher

Findings: Implementation

Overall Perceptions (continued)

MAJOR FINDING

Negative perceptions and doubts about sustainability undermined buy-in to the turnaround plan *(page 27)*

- Instructional coaches, principals, district officials and school improvement specialists generally had confidence that the turnaround work would be successful.
- Teachers generally lacked confidence in its success and sustainability.
- State leadership were generally confident but measured about success because outcome is highly dependent upon the district implementation.
- Staff at all levels discussed the challenges faced to get everyone on board with the turnaround efforts.

Findings: Implementation

Teacher and School Leader Effectiveness

“I think we need more operating flexibility from our administration here.

Prime example - trying to remove ineffective teachers...we got to be sure we can remove ineffective teachers. I have data now that supports that they're effective and it shows that others are ineffective. One teacher had 0% pass rate and I can't get rid of her. We found out a teacher put a passing grade on the report card of a senior and the student learned later that they did not pass. And we can't get rid of her.”

- Principal

- When asked about their teacher and leader effectiveness efforts, interviewees often spoke favorably about their professional development efforts.
- Schools did not seem to be rewarding educators based on their performance or providing incentives to recruit and retain high-quality staff.
- Overall, districts did not seem to prioritize lowest-achieving schools in talent management decisions.
- Many school-level staff members shared that teachers continued to be “placed” in buildings, and most principals did not feel that they had increased autonomy or flexibility in making hiring decisions.
- School and district officials reported unusually high turnover after the first year of the grant. Most turnover seemed to be a result of staff choice rather than district removal of ineffective teachers.

Findings: Implementation

Teacher and School Leader Effectiveness (continued)

MAJOR FINDING

Job-embedded professional development increased and improved in perceived quality (page 31)

Findings from Industry Experts

- ✓ *CII*: Effective, performance-based incentive systems incorporate teacher input, provide large monetary incentives and are based on clear performance goals.
- ✓ *CII*: Professional development should (1) extend beyond traditional workshops; (2) be aligned with staff evaluation systems; and (3) be monitored.
- ✓ *Southeast Center for Teaching Quality*: Provide monetary (e.g., multi-year bonuses, differentiated compensation, loan forgiveness, etc.) and non-monetary incentives (e.g., early, streamlined hiring practices, reduced teaching loads and smaller classes sizes, etc.) to attract staff.

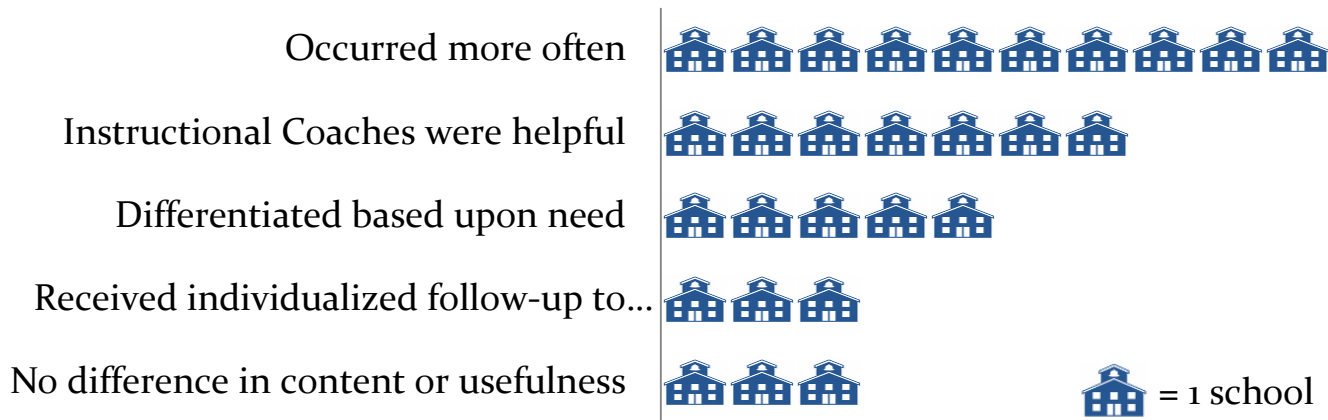
- Interviews suggest that school-level staff received more professional development, and of better perceived quality, than in previous years. School personnel commonly attributed improved teacher and leader quality at least in part to improved professional development.
- Teachers reported that instructional coaches and the school improvement specialist observed classroom practice and provided feedback more than they did prior to the grant.
- School staff also reported feeling overwhelmed and tired due to increased professional development, collaborative planning, and instruction and/or enrichment opportunities for students.

Findings: Implementation

Teacher and School Leader Effectiveness (continued)

Professional Learning Feedback from Teachers

The following chart illustrates some of the differences in professional development between schools as expressed by teachers. Categories are not mutually exclusive.



"It's not just staff development and it's over. It's been staff development, and we're going to give you three or four months, and then see how you're doing with it. There has been a lot of follow-up with staff development. I've had the best PD that I've ever received in my career as a teacher this year."

- Teacher

"I've even heard the kids make comments like, 'Man, they're really teaching those teachers.'"

- Instructional Coach

Findings: Implementation

Teacher and School Leader Effectiveness (continued)

- School and district staff did not seem to have used the reforms from the grant as a tool to attract or retain staff.
- Several districts used Georgia Teaching Fellows and Teach for America to recruit teachers; however, several principals expressed frustration that district contracts with GTF and TFA limited their operating flexibility.
- Two districts required all staff to sign revised MOUs or contract addendums that outlined the increased workload and higher expectations of the model. One school re-interviewed all existing staff for their current positions in an effort to identify ineffective or resistant staff members.
- Many school leaders reported facing delays in hiring key positions due to district policies
- One district moved to a centralized hiring process, which further limited principals' ability to select staff.

"And I tell my principals...you can't let [teachers] feed their families at the expense of these children who will have a family to feed. It is our obligation as administrators to give them the best education. So you can't worry about them feeding their families if they're ineffective because you have an obligation to teach these children so that they can feed their families."

– District Senior Leader

Findings: Implementation

Teacher and School Leader Effectiveness (continued)

The following quotes represent the range of improvements that school and district staff noticed over the last two school years.

"And I can even recall some teachers saying, 'Why do you have to do that?' But now I think they know that that is just what is expected...that you need to activate the mind or the brain before you move on to the lecture. Now, we still have a ways to go, but I still see growth and understanding. But that's a part of the process. It takes time."

- Instructional Coach

"[The Principal] thought instruction was his APs' and instructional coaches' job. But what he realized was that if he went into the classroom, then it would make things happen...He's really made a transition about being involved and what instruction looks like and talking the talk and walking the walk. [Another principal] realized that he has to be the instructional person, so this year he's a totally different person. When people come to do focus walks, he makes sure someone else looks at the hallways because he's going to go in those classrooms."

- District Senior Leader

"So now you had more individuals working with the teachers. And camaraderie even changed. It's a part of that culture now. Now it's like, 'this is the problem I'm having with this student. What are you doing to make it work?' You now had that collaborative, professional development [and] professionalism developing between them."

- Principal

Findings: Implementation

Instructional Reform Strategies

- Overall, teachers reported that they used data to guide instruction more than prior to the grant.
- In many cases, schools that already had contracts with vendors used RT3 funding to continue working with the same vendor and in some cases expand usage.
 - Vendor usage varied widely across schools, from simply using a framework to create a customized plan to actively involving vendor representatives in day-to-day professional learning.
 - America's Choice and Carnegie Math were the most commonly mentioned service providers and/or models.
 - Schools used external service providers primarily for remediation, credit recovery, or professional learning on standards-based and differentiated instruction.

Common Core Georgia Performance Standards (CCGPS)

Beginning in the 2012-2013 school year, Georgia schools must teach the CCGPS. Thus, the schools included in this study should be aligning their instructional programs with CCGPS. Some interviewees expressed concerns about implementing CCGPS. School-level staff were concerned that they had not been properly informed about or trained in CCGPS, despite state and district rollout efforts. School improvement specialists generally were more optimistic about CCGPS implementation.

Findings: Implementation

Instructional Reform Strategies (continued)

MAJOR FINDING

Instructional coaches were one of the most valued additions from the grant (page 39)

Findings from Industry Experts

- ✓ *US ED's Institute of Education Sciences (IES):* Schools and districts should follow these recommendations to use data to drive decisions and differentiate instruction: (1) Make data part of an ongoing cycle of instructional improvement; (2) Teach students to examine their own data and set learning goals; (3) Establish a clear vision for school-wide data use; (4) Provide supports that foster a data-driven culture within the school; and (5) Develop and maintain a district-wide data system.

- Instructional coaches were one of the most appreciated and sought after resources that the grant provided to schools. Teachers and principals emphasized the important role of coaches and hoped that the district would sustain funding for them after the grant period.
- Instructional coaches and state school improvement specialists observed classroom practice and provided feedback to teachers more than prior to the grant.
- Feedback from the interviews suggested that the schools and districts included in this study are following the recommendations in the “Findings from Industry Experts” box to the left.
- An increased presence of instructional coaches and state school improvement specialists further supported and encouraged teachers to use data.

Findings: Implementation

Increased Learning Time & Community-Oriented Schools

MAJOR FINDING

School and district staff believed that increased time for remediation, tutoring, enrichment, and collaborative planning were improving student achievement (*page 43*)

Feedback from interviews suggested that,

- Most schools did not make significant changes to the school schedule. A few schools changed the schedule to increase learning time in core content areas.
- Most schools did not provide increased learning time for all students, which is a requirement in the US ED SIG Guidance.¹ Instead, most schools implemented optional ILT two days a week and on Saturdays for remediation, tutoring, or enrichment classes targeted to specific groups of students.
- Several schools cited a lack of operational flexibility, particularly as it relates to transportation, as a reason for not changing the schedule. For example, one district denied a school's proposal to create an open campus format with flexible hours.
- Most school personnel believed ILT directly improved student achievement. However, they frequently expressed concern that the programs may not continue after the grant ends. The perceived success of ILT is highly dependent upon whether the district provided adequate staffing and transportation for the program.

¹US ED provided more specific guidance in March 2012. GaDOE officials stated that schools should be in compliance during the 2012-13 year.

Findings: Implementation

Increased Learning Time & Community-Oriented Schools (continued)

"We sent post cards home with every single student in the building. We had subs for two weeks in what would be their planning period make live calls home at targeted 9th graders...and put flyers and in the bathroom stalls. Our principal offered incentives for the teachers to personally invite students and also sent letters home to with RSVP. We had a food giveaway. Coordinator was on the calling post, we had door prizes."
- Instructional Coach

In general, most schools and districts reported improvements in school culture and climate, which they partially attributed to increased parent, student and staff engagement.

We found that,

- Most school personnel believe that increasing parental engagement is critical for successful transformation.
- Several school leaders reported that district hiring processes delayed the hiring of parent liaisons.
- Efforts to increase parent engagement ranged from showcasing student talent at parent meetings, offering school-based classes and resources for parents, and visiting student homes to invite families to school.
- A few schools implemented alternative discipline efforts, like Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) or silent lunch, to decrease negative behavior.

Findings: Implementation

Operating Flexibility & Sustained Support

MAJOR FINDING

Schools did not have sufficient operating flexibility in staffing and budget decisions (page 46)

"I don't think the school has any control over the budget. It has the budget, but the district still had the purse strings. We had a budget for the RT3 schools, but nothing happened until we had to jump through the hoops."

- School Improvement Specialist

In general, school-level staff, state school improvement specialists, and GaDOE leadership did not believe that schools had sufficient operating flexibility to implement reform model.

- Most principals felt that they only had flexibility over building-level decisions with limited external impact.
- Inadequate operating flexibility appears to have been a serious barrier to implementation.
- Districts did not create a division focused on school turnaround or at least put someone in a cabinet level position with sufficient authority to advocate for lowest-achieving schools in district decision-making.
- School staff often complained that their districts did not change policies or grant waivers regarding hiring, budgeting and purchasing for lowest-achieving schools.

"I mean, within the parameters. When I got here there was no ISS, so I instituted in school suspension and silent lunch. I think yes, building wide...I think any administrator within [this district] has the ability to..."

- Principal

Findings: Implementation

Operating Flexibility & Sustained Support (continued)

MAJOR FINDING

For the most part, the State Office of School Turnaround supported lowest-achieving schools with the same practices that the Office of School Improvement used prior to Race to the Top *(page 49)*

Findings from Industry Experts

- ✓ *CII*: Lead partners usually: (1) sign a 3-5 year performance contract for student achievement; (2) Assume authority for decision-making on school staffing; (3) Provide core academic and student support services; (4) Have an embedded, consistent, and intense relationship with each school during the turnaround period.

- The schools and districts in this study did not use lead partners. The cited reasons were:
 - Concern around sustaining lead partners' efforts and preference to build internal capacity instead.
 - Lack of understanding and awareness of potential lead partners.
- Instead, the GaDOE (via school improvement specialists) and districts led the turnaround efforts, using external service providers for specific products or services.
- Feedback from state school improvement specialists and GaDOE senior leadership suggested that the framework for support was essentially the same as previous school improvement efforts.
 - The primary difference is that school improvement specialist were assigned to fewer schools and therefore, spent more time in each school.

Findings: Implementation

Operating Flexibility & Sustained Support (continued)

MAJOR FINDING

Schools were less satisfied with support and communication from the district than from the GaDOE *(page 51)*

- While the feedback about the state support was generally positive, school-level feedback on district support and communication was more negative.
- School staff expressed frustration with districts not providing adequate operating flexibility, delaying hiring and purchasing decisions, changing school plans without school input, and not effectively communicating the overall vision or expectations for the grants.
- School staff felt that districts lacked a well-coordinated, seamless approach for support and communication. However, district staff often spoke in great detail about the level of support that they provided to schools.
- In terms of communication, school-level personnel had mixed opinions on the quality and frequency of communication between the district and the school. Principals generally felt like they had good communication with the district, but coaches and teachers were more likely to feel disconnected and unclear about district expectations.

Findings: Implementation

Operating Flexibility & Sustained Support (continued)

The following quotes represent the range of opinions regarding support and communication from the LEAs or GaDOE over the last two school years.

"I cannot say enough about [state leadership]. I can't see how anyone of those people could have a sense of how much comes through in a week from how many different people. How many people communicate with us in a week...sign up for this training, turn in this report, webinar Friday, conference call tomorrow."

– District Senior Leader

"I think that [the district is] learning as they get their information too... I guess if we were all at the table in the beginning, instead of the State telling them and then them telling us...if we were at the table together, so everybody hears the same thing. Even though we may interpret it differently we could sit down and explain what we thought we heard. And then get it straight at that point as opposed to further down the line. "

- Assistant Principal

"[The district official] did a very good job of sifting through everything to understand and get clarification if we didn't understand. I really think he's done a great job of that and I think that's really helped, that we've had that point person. And sometimes that's where the confusion comes in...when you don't have that single person to help you understand."

- District Senior Leader

Recommendations from School and District Officials

GOSA concluded each interview by asking the school or district officials how the work can be improved going forward. Most of the feedback centered around improving operating flexibility, communication, and having more time to implement their plans. The following recommendations are based upon interview responses and our comparison of actual implementation with best practices in school turnaround.

Specifically,

- Increase operating flexibility for school leaders, particularly in terms of staffing and budget decisions.
- Increase direct communication between the state and the school to improve consistency.
- Increase the turnaround time to five years or provided a plan for supporting schools after the grant period.

Recommendations from School and District Officials

- Improve the stability of grant expectations and compliance guidelines.
- Provide training for local board members and new district leadership to ensure that they understand the requirements and expectations of the turnaround work.
- Increase training and support for upcoming initiatives (e.g., CCGPS, TKES, ESEA waiver) before expanding to further initiatives.
- Make the RT3 and SIG grant coordinator a cabinet level position or create a district turnaround office with sufficient authority to influence district decisions.
- For future grants, offer a planning grant to precede the actual grant application

Next Steps in the Lowest-Achieving Schools Evaluation

- Over the next two years, GOSA will conduct quantitative and qualitative evaluations of grant implementation in lowest-achieving schools. The following table provides an overview of those activities.

| Future Lowest-Achieving Schools Evaluations | |
|--|----------------------------|
| Type | Estimated Date |
| Dashboard: GOSA will create an internal dashboard to collect and review pertinent leading indicators of school turnaround. The dashboard will inform ongoing program development. GOSA, the Governor's Office and GaDOE will review it two to four times a year. | Early 2013 (ongoing) |
| Case study: GOSA will employ the "success case study" method to look at practices in schools that have had successful outcomes. | November/ December 2013 |
| Quasi-Experiment: GOSA will compare the results of the lowest-achieving middle schools to similar middle schools in RT3 districts using a regression discontinuity design. This will allow us to establish a causal relationship between improved student outcomes and RT3 school turnaround efforts. | December 2014 |