



Turning Around Lowest-Achieving Schools

A Qualitative Report on Early Stage Implementation in Georgia

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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 (AEAH) 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.



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Table of Abbreviations

GaDOE	Georgia Department of Education	LEA	Local Education Agency (District)
US ED	U.S. Department of Education	GOSA	Governor’s Office of Student Achievement
RT3	Race to the Top	CII	Center on Innovation & Improvement
SIG	School Improvement Grant		

Introduction

“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

Across the nation, many students attend persistently low-performing schools that limit their ability to receive a high quality education. To address the significant challenge of turning around these schools, the U.S. Department of Education (US ED) has committed more than \$5 billion 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 five percent of schools in each participating state. Under state and district guidance, each school must adopt one of four reform models—turnaround, restart, school closure, or transformation—and then develop aggressive reform plans that will result in drastic improvement in student performance within three years.² The turnaround work builds upon research and experience from leaders in the field, such as Mass Insight, Public Impact, and the Center on Innovation and Improvement (CII), as well as Secretary Duncan’s prior experience turning around some of Chicago’s most challenged schools.

As part of its RT3 application in 2010, the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) identified 40 “persistently lowest-achieving” schools within the Race to the Top partner districts. Twenty-six of those schools were already designated as “persistently lowest-achieving” schools through the SIG Program. The GaDOE chose the remaining 14 schools based upon their Needs Improvement status under Georgia’s school improvement framework (see Table 2 for criteria). Twenty SIG schools began implementing the three-year grant during the 2010-11 school year, and the remaining 20 SIG and RT3 lowest-achieving schools the following year. Schools that implemented the grant in the first year will receive additional support in the fourth year through district Race to the Top funds.

Georgia’s RT3 application charges the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) with the task of evaluating the fidelity of implementation and the effectiveness of turnaround efforts in these schools. This report is the first to address this reform area.

¹ Arne 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.

² Table 3 on p. 4 describes the four intervention models.

The goal of this report is to provide the GaDOE, the Governor’s Office, the members of the General Assembly, educators, parents and other stakeholders with a formative evaluation of how the school turnaround efforts have been perceived and implemented in a sample of schools—ten of the 40 lowest-achieving schools—during the 2010-11 and the 2011-12 school years. We hope this feedback can influence future program planning and implementation. Additionally, since US ED has provided similar grants to turn around lowest-performing schools across the country, the lessons presented in this report may also be helpful to inform other states’ implementation.

Through interviews with school, district, and state personnel, we found that most schools have made strides toward improving student achievement through increased instructional time, differentiated professional learning, and collaborative planning for teachers from instructional coaches. However, the reforms have generally fallen short of grant’s expectations for transformative change thus far. The primary obstacles to effective school turnaround have been reluctance among districts to pursue dramatic reforms, high mid-grant turnover among district and school leadership, and a lack of school-level autonomy over budget and talent management.



We have organized the report to walk the reader through the various stages of implementation, highlighting some of the obstacles and opportunities that schools faced along the way. The first section provides an overview of the state’s school turnaround work. Here, we introduce the method for selecting lowest-achieving schools, SIG and RT3 requirements, and the four intervention models. Next, we explain our methodology for this study. Once the foundation has been laid, we discuss how the schools developed and implemented their turnaround plans. In this section, we detail three overarching perceptions of the work that frame the subsequent discussion of the transformation model’s four components. And finally, drawing from the interviews, the report concludes with recommendations for the GaDOE and school districts to improve further implementation of grants in Georgia.



Overview of *Turning Around Lowest-Achieving Schools*

The *Turning Around Lowest-Achieving Schools* reform area is based on the theory that if a school makes aggressive changes through one of four intervention models, receives concentrated support from the GaDOE and the LEA, and implements that model with fidelity, then students in that school will demonstrate improved outcomes. Each model calls for schools to make significant changes in a short period of time.³ However, the school turnaround field is relatively new, so little research-based evidence exists to explain how schools should choose between models, how the models should be implemented, and whether the models will be effective.⁴ As such, US ED and the GaDOE provided non-negotiable requirements and recommendations to guide schools in plan development and implementation.

As mentioned in the introduction, in fall 2010 the GaDOE identified 40 lowest-achieving schools that would implement intensive school turnaround strategies over three years. Table 2 includes GaDOE's criteria for selecting those schools and a breakdown of how many schools fit into each category. Appendix B includes a list of the lowest-achieving schools.

Table 2: Selection Criteria for Lowest-Achieving Schools		
School must be located in a Race to the Top partner district and meet one of the following criteria.		
Any school receiving a federal school improvement grant (SIG). ⁱ  26 schools (all high schools)	OR	Any middle or high school designated as NI-5 or higher. ⁱⁱ  14 schools (4 high and 10 middle schools)
ⁱ Appendix B includes the criteria for how schools become eligible to receive SIG grants.		
ⁱⁱ School has missed AYP for five or more years without making AYP for two consecutive years.		
<i>Adapted from: Georgia Department of Education, Georgia's Race to the Top Application, June 1, 2010, 38.</i>		

The following three subsections describe the similarities and differences between SIG and RT3 lowest-achieving schools.

³ Appendix A includes a GOSA-developed theory of change for the lowest-achieving schools work.

⁴ Jeff Kutash, Eva Nico, Emily Gorin, Samira, Rahmatullah, and Kate Tallant, *The School Turnaround Field Guide*, (FSG Social Impact Advisors), 2010, 3.

School Improvement Grants (SIG)

Section 1003(g) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act allows US ED to allocate funding to state education agencies for school improvement. Traditionally, US ED provided School Improvement Grants (SIG) to state education agencies to issue sub-grants to LEAs for school improvement. In 2009, the Obama administration infused \$3 billion in additional funding, nearly six times the previous annual budget allocation, into SIG and shifted the focus exclusively to “persistently lowest-achieving schools,” defined as the lowest-performing five percent of Title I schools in each participating state. Appendix B provides the criteria for determining SIG eligibility.

Each eligible school can choose whether to apply for the grant. To apply, it must develop a grant application around one of the four intervention models described in Table 3. The plan must also take into account the unique needs of each school’s student population. Each grant lasts for three years, and schools are eligible to receive up to \$2 million per year. In Georgia’s case, the GaDOE and LEAs serve as conduits for the grant funding. LEAs must apply to the GaDOE to repurpose grant funding.

Table 3: Four SIG Intervention 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.

Forty Georgia schools received SIG over two cohorts, described below:

- **Cohort 1 (2010-11).** Twenty-six of 35 eligible schools in Georgia received SIG in the first year of the program. These schools wrote their applications in spring 2010 and began implementation in fall 2010. Twenty of those 26 schools were located in Race to the Top districts, so they also became designated as Race to the Top lowest-achieving schools.

- **Cohort II SIG (2011-12).** Fourteen of 17 eligible schools in Georgia received SIG in the second year of the program. These schools wrote their applications in spring 2011 and began implementation in fall 2011. Only six of those 17 schools are located in Race to the Top districts, so they also were designated as Race to the Top lowest-achieving schools.

Of the 40 SIG schools, only 26 are located in Race to the Top partner districts. As a result, only those 26 schools are also classified as lowest-achieving schools under Race to the Top.

Race to the Top Lowest-Achieving Schools (Non-SIG)

Fourteen non-SIG schools met the second criterion of being designated as NI-5 or higher. Four were high schools and ten were middle schools. Unlike SIG, eligible schools could not opt out of the grant, so each of these schools involuntarily became a lowest-achieving school. These schools have followed the same implementation timeline as Cohort II SIG schools, meaning that they chose the intervention model and developed their reform plan in spring 2011. The first year of implementation was the 2011-12 school year.

The overall structure of grants in non-SIG lowest-achieving schools is the same as SIG schools because they also must choose one of the four intervention models.⁵ However, unlike SIG, funding for each grant comes from each district's RT3 allocation instead of directly from GaDOE's SIG allocation. As such, each LEA must apply to the GaDOE for amendments to repurpose funding.

Requirements for all Lowest-Achieving Schools

In addition to the requirements of the selected intervention model, GaDOE created a non-negotiable list for all lowest-achieving schools. While the plans in SIG schools mostly aligned with the lowest-achieving schools non-negotiable list, the schools had to amend their plans where differences existed in order to meet these requirements. Table 4 provides a list the requirements of lowest-achieving schools.

⁵ *Georgia's Race to the Top Application*, 159.

Table 4: Lowest-Achieving School Non-Negotiable List

Each Race to the Top Lowest-Achieving School must:

- Allow a GaDOE school improvement specialist to provide direct supervision over grant implementation and be directly involved in decisions regarding the replacement of staff
- Allow the GaDOE conduct an intensive diagnostic of school needs (GAPSS) at the beginning and at the end of the grant
- Participate in all relevant GaDOE and/or US ED professional learning or meetings (Summer Leadership Academy and other training for lowest-achieving schools)
- Hire at least one full time math coach
- Hire at least one full-time graduation coach
- Maintain or place a high performing principal who has autonomy over staffing and budgets.
- Add a minimum of 60 additional hours to the school year for all students.
- Establish a minimum of 60 minutes per week of common planning time for teachers without reducing time devoted to student instruction.
- Implement the new Teacher and Leader Effectiveness Systems (TKES and LKES)
- Implement the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards (CCGPS) and use Georgia's Frameworks in core academic subjects.
- Implement an assessment plan aligned to CCGPS and use assessment results to inform curriculum, instruction and individual interventions.

Adapted from: Georgia Department of Education, "Non-Negotiable Contract Elements and Customized Contract Expectations for School Improvement and Race to the Top (Lowest-Achieving Schools)," July 1, 2012.

The next section of the report provides an overview of the evaluation framework and provides demographic information about the schools selected for our evaluation.

EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

The GaDOE selected ten of the 40 lowest-achieving schools for the evaluation. While this is not a random sample of schools, it does represent urban and rural areas and various district sizes. Four schools are in SIG Cohort I, four are in SIG Cohort II, and three are non-SIG lowest-achieving schools. There are seven high schools and three middle schools. All ten schools are implementing the transformation model, so the findings from this report can only be applied directly to that model.

Table 5 compares demographics and academic performance between the sample schools and the remaining lowest-achieving schools. The table uses 2009-10 data for all schools to provide a baseline before grant implementation regardless of SIG Cohort.

Table 5: 2009-10 Summary Statistics for LAS Schools		
	Sample Schools	Non-Sample Schools
<i>Student Information (%)</i>		
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
<i>Teacher Information</i>		
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
<i>School Information</i>		
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		

Relative to non-sample schools, the sample schools have nine percentage points more minority students and six percentage points more low-income students. The sample schools also had five percentage points fewer students with 16 or more absences and an average NI-status that was 0.8 lower than non-sample schools. Despite these differences, average achievement in math, English, and

reading is nearly identical and the average graduation rates are within four percentage points. Thus, while differences exist between groups, the sample schools are still similar to the non-sample schools to the extent that the findings in this report may represent common patterns in lowest-achieving schools.

From May to September 2012, we conducted interviews with school, district, and state personnel that are involved in implementation of the SIG or RT3 grants in the ten sample schools. We interviewed all school officials before the end of the 2011-12 school year, which was the first year of the grant for the RT3 and SIG Cohort II schools and the second year of the grant for the SIG Cohort I schools. We held state school improvement specialist and GaDOE interviews in the summer.

We designed interviews based upon the grant requirements for lowest-achieving schools, which are listed in Table 4 of the previous section. In addition, we referenced interview protocols developed by Mathematica Policy Research, which is charged with conducting US ED’s evaluation of SIG and RT3 across the nation.⁶ Mathematica publicly released its interview protocols and other measurement instruments, and we referenced them to develop our school administrator, district and state interview questions. We also used the Center for Reinventing Public Education’s report on SIG implementation in Washington, *Tinkering Toward Transformation: A Look at Federal School Improvement Grant Implementation*, as a guide.⁷ Lastly, we referenced turnaround best practices from Mass Insight, Public Impact, and the Center on Innovation and Improvement (CII). While we modified some questions depending on each person’s position, each interview focused on the following areas:

- Model Selection
- Plan development
- Leadership/staff changes
- Early wins and progress
- Overall perception of SIG/RT3
- Sustainability after grant period
- Increased learning time
- Collaborative planning time
- Professional development
- Instructional reform strategies
- Parent and community engagement
- School-level operating flexibility
- Quality of communication between stakeholders
- Recommended improvements

⁶ “Impact Evaluation of Race to the Top and School Improvement Grants: Draft State Interview Protocol.” (Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research), 2012.

⁷ Sarah Yatsko, Robin Lake, Elizabeth Cooley Nelson, and Melissa Bowen, *Tinkering Toward Transformation: A Look at Federal School Improvement Grant Implementation*, (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education), 2012.

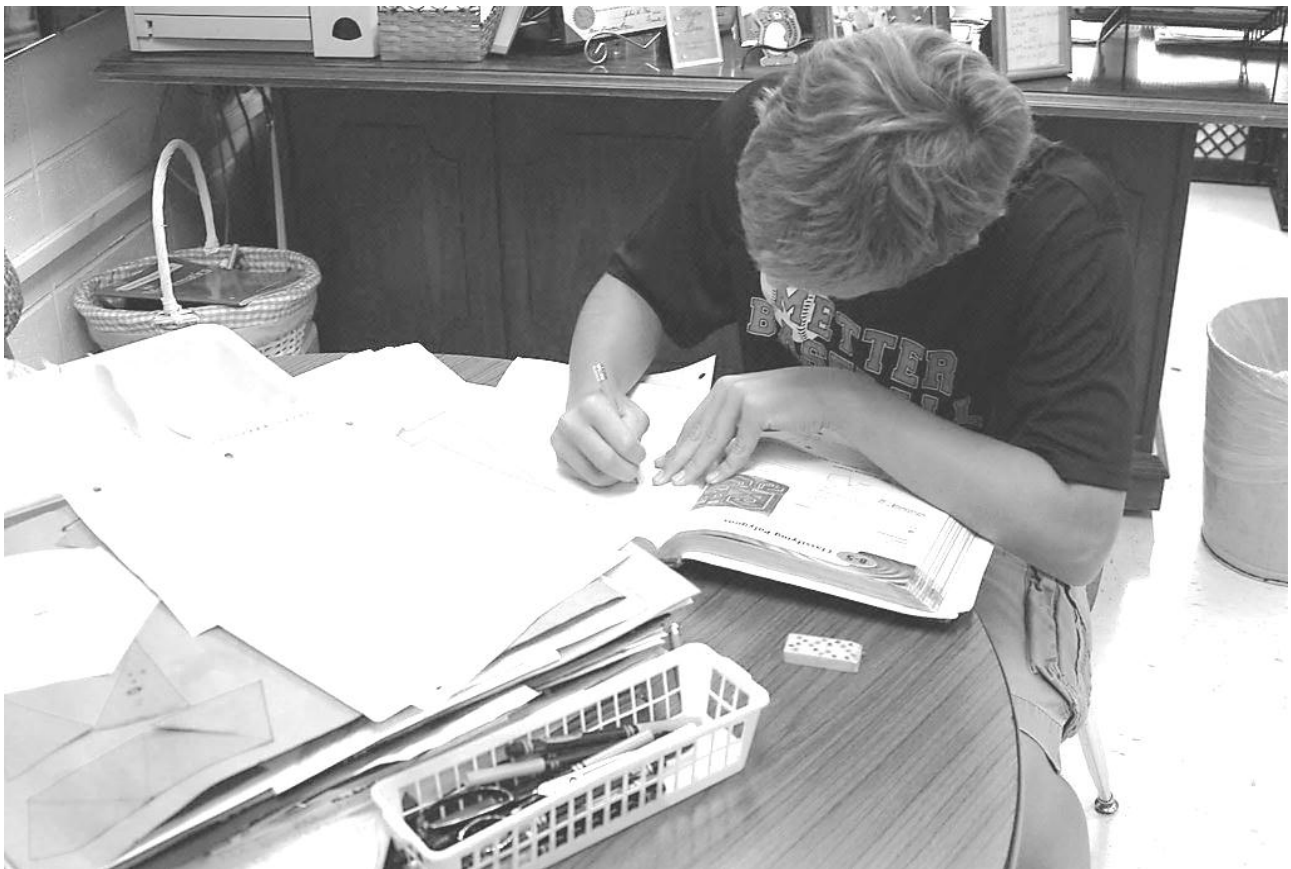
In total, we conducted 68 interviews throughout the state, each one lasting from 45 to 75 minutes. Table 6 provides a list of who was interviewed at each level. We coded and analyzed interview responses to identify the patterns and findings that are discussed in the report.

Table 6: Summary of Interviews Conducted		
School-Level (10 Schools)	District-Level (6 Districts)	State-Level
Principal	Superintendent or Deputy Superintendent	School Improvement Specialists assigned to schools
Assistant Principal(s)		Lead School Improvement Specialists assigned to schools
Instructional Coach(es)	SIG and/or RT3 Grant Coordinator	Senior GaDOE Office of School Turnaround staff
Teachers (3-4)		Senior GaDOE Race to the Top Implementation staff

The next section discusses the findings in two subsections, Early Stages and Implementation.

FINDINGS

This section is divided into two subsections, Early Stages and Implementation. Both sections compare the findings from the interviews with the requirements of the transformation model and best practices in school turnaround. For the purposes of this report, when we refer to school turnaround, we are referring to the general field of school turnaround rather than the RT3 intervention model of turnaround. As mentioned previously, none of the ten schools in our report implemented the turnaround model.



“Emerging research indicates that states and districts are well positioned to take a lead role in enabling, driving, supporting, and sustaining school turnaround efforts through the creation of a designated turnaround office.” - Mass Insight⁸

The GaDOE’s engagement in formal school improvement work predates RT3. Per one of the interviewees, the GaDOE started supporting struggling schools through its school improvement initiative eight years ago to meet the requirements for state intervention in schools through the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. This work has included:

- Facilitating Georgia Assessment of Performance on School Standards (GAPSS) analyses, which date back to 2005.
- Helping schools implement their school improvement plans through the use of short-term action plans (STAPs).
- Creating opportunities for school leadership teams to gather at Summer Leadership Academies, starting in 2008, to learn about effective school improvement practices and to plan for the upcoming academic year.⁹

In its RT3 application, Georgia proposed the creation of a new office, the State Office of School Turnaround, to focus on turning around the most persistently lowest-achieving schools, which included all schools at NI-5 and higher levels in terms of NCLB accountability and all schools eligible for SIG.¹⁰ When Georgia was awarded RT3 in August 2010, the state was two months away from elections for a new governor and state school superintendent who would take office in January 2011. These upcoming leadership changes delayed the hiring of senior level staff, including the Deputy Superintendent for School Turnaround, and undermined the state’s ability to provide proactive support to Cohort I schools that were already implementing the first year of SIG. Once the new administrations took office in January 2011, the GaDOE hired the Deputy Superintendent for School Turnaround to begin building the office.

⁸ “Organizational Structures: Creating a Turnaround Office,” in Carole L. Perlman and Sam Redding, eds., *Handbook on Effective Implementation of School Improvement Grants*, (Lincoln, IL: Center on Innovation & Improvement, 2011), 29

⁹ *Georgia’s Race to the Top Application*, 39

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 38

According to the Center on Innovation and Improvement (CII), a “turnaround office should provide concentrated and coherent resources and expertise to priority schools identified due to chronic low performance.”¹¹ CII also suggests this office should create policies or tools that help schools or LEAs choose school turnaround models and strategies. Lastly, it should provide ongoing support, guidance and monitoring of turnaround efforts.

Given this framework, this section describes how the state, districts and schools tackled the early stages of this work, which included selecting models, developing school turnaround plans, and changing school leaders.

MODEL SELECTION

One of the State Office of School Turnaround’s first responsibilities was to help LEAs select the appropriate intervention model for their lowest-achieving schools. The US ED guidance for SIG gives the LEA the primary responsibility to choose the model, unless the GaDOE has taken over the school. However, for lowest-achieving schools that do not receive SIG, Georgia’s RT3 application calls for the Office of School Turnaround to choose the model in consultation with the school and district. Despite this difference, the interviews suggest that the process for model selection was driven by the LEA for all RT3 lowest-achieving schools, SIG and non-SIG.

Major Finding

Changes in state leadership inhibited the GaDOE’s ability to support model selection.

When the GaDOE identified the lowest-achieving schools in late 2010, half of the schools, those in SIG Cohort I, were already implementing the first year of their grant. As a result, state officials did not have much insight into how these models were selected. The State Office of School Turnaround provided some support for the remaining 20 schools to choose one of the four turnaround models. However, GaDOE leaders expressed that the delayed hiring in the Office of School Turnaround had limited its ability to engage in model selection as previously intended. In addition, GOSA created a checklist to help districts and schools determine which model best fit each school’s unique situation. The checklist included components about student performance, school capacity, and community capacity.

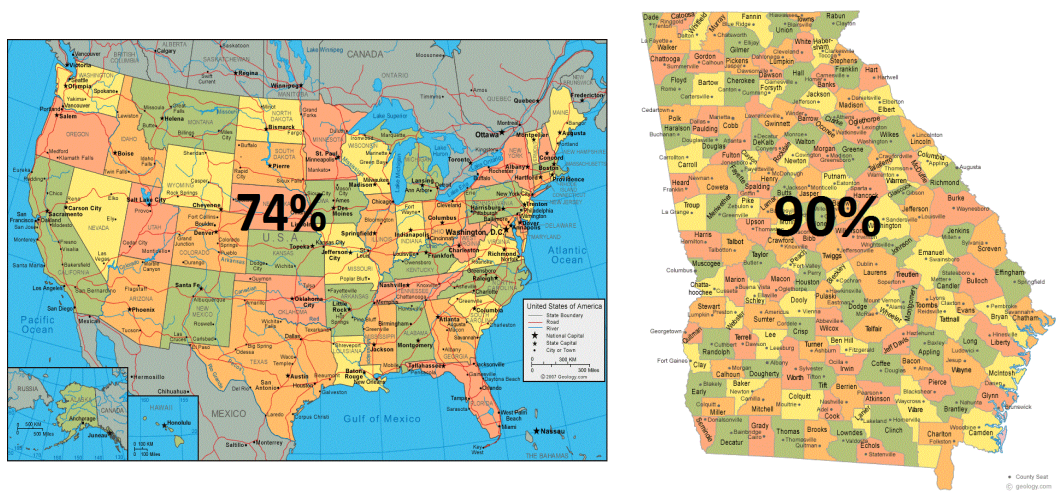
¹¹ “Organizational Structures: Creating a Turnaround Office,” 29

Major Finding

Most districts chose to implement the transformation model in their schools.

Of the 40 lowest-achieving schools, 36 chose transformation for the intervention model, three chose turnaround, and one chose closure. This pattern was generally in line with SIG schools across the country. In Cohort I, 74 percent of schools selected transformation. In rural areas, 139 of 145 schools chose transformation. All ten schools included in this study chose the transformation model.

Figure 1: Transformation Model - A Favorite in Georgia and Across the Nation



In most cases, districts chose the model with limited or no input from school leadership and did not seem to use the GOSA checklist to inform their decisions. The reason often cited for choosing transformation was that it was the least disruptive option. District officials felt that the tight timeline did not allow enough time to create a charter school or find an external turnaround partner under the Restart option. One state official captured this sentiment by saying the following about the process to get charter approval, “It has to go through a vetting process, it has to go through a six-month process and this needed to be immediate. If they had known months before that this was coming, then they might have thought about making this a conversion charter, but the designation had to be done very quickly. The timeline was a big limiting factor.” This feedback aligned with findings from SIG in Washington.¹² In addition, FSG Social Impact Advisors’ *School Turnaround Field Guide* corroborates this finding, as well as what is happening across the country, “Currently, this choice is being made largely based on resource constraints, such as the availability of new principals or high-quality school

¹² Yatsko, Lake, Nelson, and Bowen, 7

operators, and on the need to quickly employ SIG funds.”¹³ Limited human capital was the main reason districts did not choose turnaround, which requires a school to replace 50 percent of its staff. Leadership in several districts mentioned the difficulty with shifting those teachers to other schools in the district or feared litigation if the teachers were terminated. This concern was particularly strong in rural areas, as articulated by one rural district superintendent, “In a lot of the school systems in the metro areas, it can be a gain with the turnaround model where you have enough high schools and . . . enough staff, you can eliminate 50 percent and still have a pool of applicants. If we eliminated 50 percent of our staff, I don’t know if we would have enough to come back to. It’s not like we have a whole lot of applicants sitting out there, ready to go into the high school.”

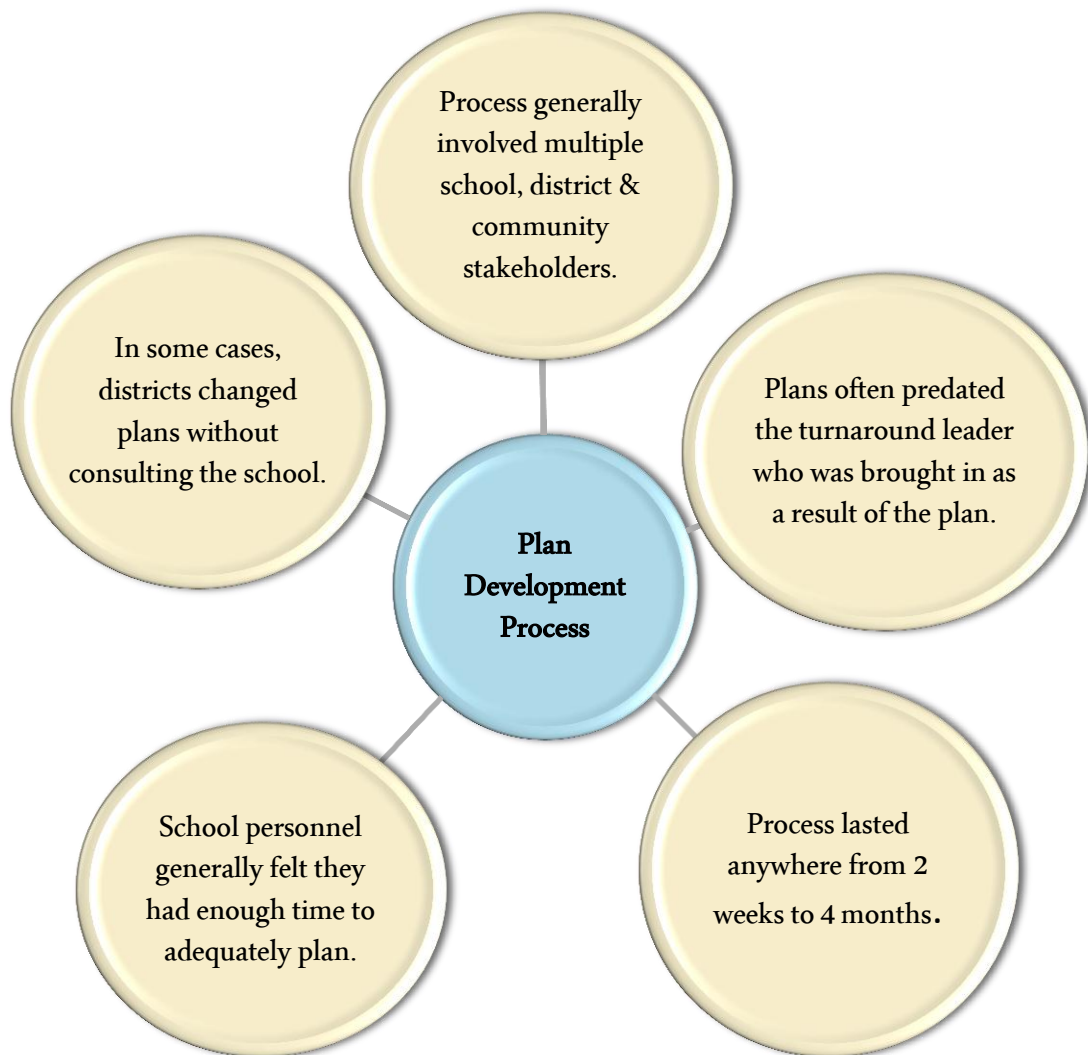
Unfortunately, research indicates that, “models requiring fewer resources are also the ones perceived to have lower potential for impact.”¹⁴ The transformation model is the most flexible and least disruptive model. Given that most of Georgia’s lowest-achieving schools are implementing this model, it is important to monitor fidelity of implementation and determine if this model helped these schools reach the greatest impact possible.

Once they selected the model, most schools used the same annual school improvement plan development process that they used under No Child Left Behind to develop their school turnaround plans. Figure 2 shows some of the specific themes from interviews on this process.

¹³ Kutash, Nico, Gorin, Rahmatullah, and Tallant, 24.

¹⁴ Ibid, 24

Figure 2: How Schools and Districts Designed Turnaround Plans



SCHOOL LEADER REPLACEMENT

The transformation model calls for the LEA to “replace the principal who led the school prior to commencement of the transformation model.”¹⁵ US ED offers flexibility for LEAs to keep principals who were hired within the past two years to implement a broader school reform effort and that has the skills and experience to implement the transformation model. However, the flexibility “is not intended to protect the job of any recently hired principal.”¹⁶

When replacing principals, districts should consider that the skills and experience needed to lead a turnaround effectively are different from the skills and experience needed to lead a successful organization. More specifically, a turnaround requires leaders that possess, “patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting [that] enable them to take on more dramatic change in shorter periods of time, and amid more controversy, than leaders in other settings.”¹⁷ Public Impact, one of the preeminent researchers in the field of school turnaround, released a comprehensive list of turnaround leader competencies that is widely used by education agencies and public policy experts to assess school leaders. During the early stages of grant implementation, the interviews suggest that districts did not use a consistent list to guide the school leader hiring process. Table 7 summarizes the list.

Table 7: Public Impact’s Turnaround Leader Competencies		
Competencies	What does it include?	Why is it important?
Driving for Results Cluster	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achievement • Initiative and Persistence • Monitoring • Directiveness • Ability to Plan Ahead 	To achieve a sharp increase in school performance results since former practices have not worked and must be changed, and multiple, significant barriers must be tackled to ensure improved student learning.
Influencing for Results Cluster	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact and Influence • Team Leadership • Developing Others 	To induce behaviors from staff members (and others) that are significantly different from those previously exhibited.
Problem Solving Cluster	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analytical Thinking • Conceptual Thinking 	To identify organizational priorities, understand which tactics are working, identify and consider alternative approaches, and clarify steps to make organizational changes that will result in improved student learning.
Showing Confidence to Lead		To both feel and appear strong and committed during the challenging early turnaround phase.
Adapted from: <i>School Turnaround Leaders: Competencies for Success</i> , Public Impact, 2008.		

¹⁵ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, *Guidance on Fiscal Year 2010 School Improvement Grants under Section 1003(g) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*, (Washington, DC: 2012), 36.

¹⁶ Ibid, 49.

¹⁷ Julie Kowal and Emily Ayscue Hassel, *Importing Leaders for School Turnarounds: Lessons and Opportunities*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia’s Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education, 2011, 3.

Despite the clear grant requirement, GaDOE experienced pushback from several districts who did not want to change the principal at the beginning of the grant. Rural areas reported concerns about having difficulty recruiting a replacement principal to the area. According to the State Office of School Turnaround, GaDOE received a waiver that extended the maximum time a principal could be in place before the grant to three years. US ED granted this waiver because 2009-2010 achievement data was not yet available at the time LEAs were making these decisions, which was necessary to analyze performance over multiple years.¹⁸

Major Finding

Districts struggled to change principals prior to grant implementation.

As mentioned, many of the district staff, especially in rural areas, reported concerns with recruiting replacement principals. In fact, there is an inadequate supply of principals across the nation with the necessary qualities to lead a school turnaround.¹⁹ As a result, a report from Public Impact and the University of Virginia (UVA) School Turnaround Program calls for schools and districts to consider finding turnaround leaders from other sectors. The report proposes that, “potentially thousands of leaders who are capable of leading successful turnarounds in public schools work outside the education setting, including leaders from hospitals and other health organizations, nonprofit and private community organizations, former members of the military, and the private sector.”²⁰ If district leaders considered hiring principals from other sectors, it would increase the pool of potential school turnaround leaders dramatically. Despite the existence of education organizations that utilize leaders from other sectors, such as the Broad Residency or New Leaders for New Schools, the interviews suggest that districts did not seek out leaders from other industries for the ten schools included in this study. However, as with the model selection process, the limited time frame may have been a factor in their search process.

¹⁸ GaDOE senior staff person, email to district leaders, 2011.

¹⁹ Kowal and Hassel, 4

²⁰ Ibid, 4

In the end, LEAs only replaced the principal in five of the ten schools prior to grant implementation. Two of the former principals were promoted to a district position to oversee the grant. Only a few districts mentioned using a different hiring process for the new principal that focused on turnaround competencies. New hires reported having limited knowledge of the grant before starting the job. The SIG applications showed that LEAs that retained principals claimed that they were hired as a part of a school reform effort. However, in most cases, other school-level personnel did not have a clear vision or knowledge of that reform.

The State Office of School Turnaround also seemed to provide more lenience to non-SIG lowest-achieving schools than SIG schools. Two of the three non-SIG principals had been in place for more than three years but were allowed to retain their jobs.

School leaders who were allowed to remain in place, along with district staff who advocated for the decision, felt they were allowed to stay because the school was making progress. However, the progress had not been enough to move the schools out of the lowest-achieving five percent. Furthermore, the examples they used to describe the progress taking place in their schools were not comparable to the examples of change presented in research.

Initially, districts may have been slow to change the principal for several reasons. First, several communities protested when districts announced that the grant required a change in leadership, which led district leaders to shift course and retain the leader. Additionally, several districts had a new superintendent who may have been hesitant to make changes without first evaluating leadership, as one district grant coordinator observed. Regardless of the reason, GaDOE provided LEAs with considerable leeway to keep school leadership in place, and districts that replaced school leaders did not necessarily prioritize turnaround competencies when identifying new principals. One benefit of keeping leaders in place is that they were able to participate in development of the reform plan, unlike new principals who were named after grant approval. However, as stated in the research, having a leader with turnaround competencies is crucial to the work, and in many cases, schools did not have that leadership at the outset of the grant.

“That’s the dilemma. And the thing on the table now is whether we keep what we have and continue to push and prod and train, or do we try to find turnaround [leaders]. Then you’re looking at the AP pool who has worked under the majority of these leaders. Then you take the chance [of] whether they have patterned their leadership style like their principal’s leadership style or will they step out and do the characteristics you need.”

-District RT3
Coordinator

In fact, choosing to retain a principal that is unable to lead the turnaround effectively can have serious consequences. According to research from the UVA School Turnaround Program (UVA) and CII, retaining the wrong leader undermines the turnaround efforts by giving the impression that change is optional and that it does not have to take place during the tight timeline that SIG and RT3 mandates. Their report, *No Time to Lose*, says, “By tolerating a leader’s inability to initiate change, the district central office and the school board are implicitly communicating that change is optional; if it were mandatory, they would not tolerate lack of ability to drive change on the part of the school leader.”²¹ As a result, the inaction on this part of the transformation model created an important barrier to implementation. By the time of our interviews one year later, several state leaders partially attributed slow progress in some schools to not having the appropriate leader.

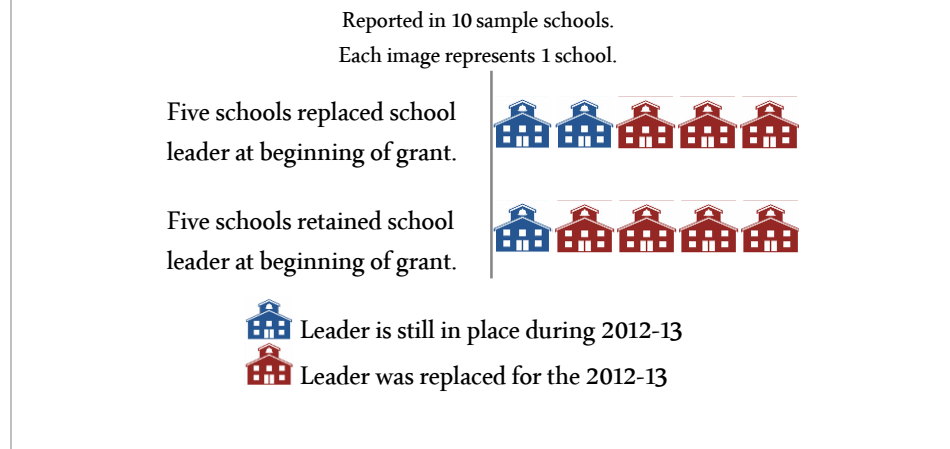
Major Finding

Seven of ten schools changed principals in the middle of the grant.

Many schools have since changed leadership in the middle of the grant. Going into the 2012-2013 school year, seven of the ten sample schools had new principals, many of whom were hired from within the district. As Figure 3 shows, of the five schools that originally retained the principal, only one school still has that leader.

²¹ Lauren Morando Rhim, *No Time to Lose: Turnaround Leader Performance Assessment*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia’s Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education, 2012), 5

Figure 3: School Leadership Changes



Some of this change can be attributed to turnover in district leadership and to the State Office of School Turnaround playing a more active role in leader selection than in prior years. The office informed districts about qualities of turnaround leaders, including the Public Impact Turnaround Leader Competencies listed in Table 7, and participated in interviews for candidates for the 2012-2013 school year.

“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

Despite potential short-term disruptions due to these changes, research 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. The same UVA and CII report states that “school turnaround success rates can improve exponentially if districts simply embark upon ‘rapid retry’ (i.e., assess and change turnaround approach if there is not evidence that it has traction within the first two years) rather than allow efforts to continue for the traditional three to five years before expecting outcomes.”²² As a whole, state and district leaders reported that they felt confidently that new leaders would be able to make appropriate changes to

²² Rhim, 5

accelerate progress in areas that have been lagging while sustaining the positive elements of the work that has taken place over the last one or two years.

In sum, districts often chose the intervention model with limited input from the school. The plan development process, however, involved many stakeholders in most cases. Districts were hesitant to change the school leader at the beginning of the grant. Instead, they changed many of the leaders in the middle of the grant.

Given the context of the early stages of grant, the next section discusses implementation of the grant. Before transitioning to that section, the next page provides details about the transformation model that guide the work and guides the structure of our evaluation.

The Transformation Model

An LEA implementing a transformation model must:

Develop and increase teacher and school leader effectiveness²³

- Replace the principal who led the school prior to commencement of the transformation model;
- Use rigorous, transparent, and equitable evaluation systems for teachers and principals that —
 - Take into account data on student growth as a significant factor as well as other factors; and
 - Are designed and developed with teacher and principal involvement;
- Identify and reward school leaders, teachers, and other staff and identify and remove those who, after ample opportunities have been provided for them to improve their professional practice, have not done so;
- Provide staff ongoing, high-quality, job-embedded professional development that is aligned with the school's comprehensive instructional program and designed with school staff; and
- Implement such strategies as financial incentives, increased opportunities for promotion and career growth, and more flexible work conditions that are designed to recruit, place, and retain staff.

Implement comprehensive instructional reform strategies

- Use data to identify and implement an instructional program that is research-based and vertically aligned as well as aligned with State academic standards; and
- Promote the continuous use of student data (such as from formative, interim, and summative assessments) 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

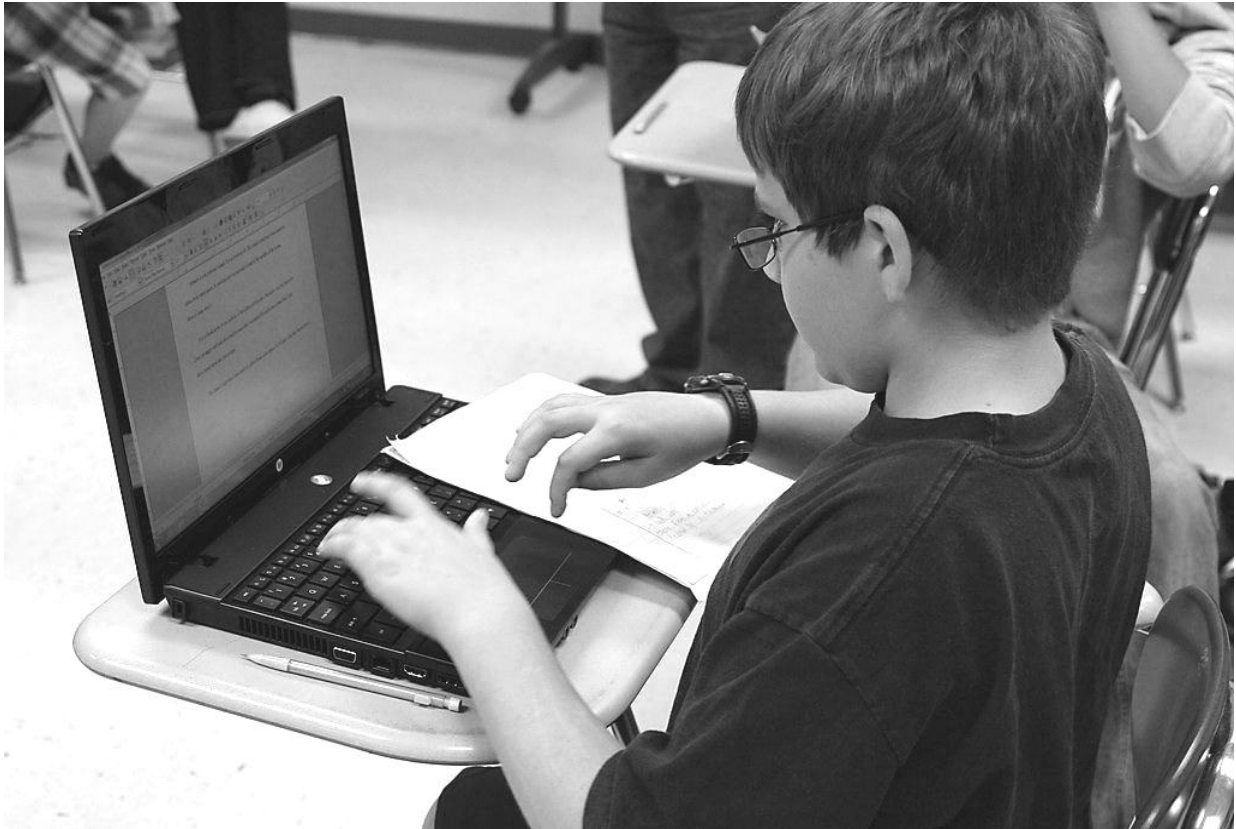
- Give the school sufficient operational flexibility (such as staffing, calendars/time, and budgeting); and
- Ensure that the school receives ongoing, intensive technical assistance and related support from the LEA, the SEA, or a designated external lead partner organization.

²³ U.S. Department of Education, 36-41

Implementation

“School improvement and school turnaround both aim to improve student outcomes by changing how schools and classrooms operate. They differ in that school turnaround involves quick, dramatic improvement within three years, while school improvement is often marked by steady, incremental improvements over a longer time.” -The Institute of Education Sciences (IES)²⁴

The ten schools included in this study are implementing the transformation model. Before presenting findings about the implementation of specific components of the model, it is important to discuss three overall perceptions from interviewees that shaped the school, district and state staffs’ ability to implement it.



²⁴ Rebecca Herman, Priscilla Dawson, Thomas Dee, Jay Greene, Rebecca Maynard, and Sam Redding, *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools: A practice guide* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2008), 5.

Major Finding

School-level staff generally felt underappreciated, undervalued, and uninformed.

Undergoing any kind of organizational turnaround involves increased workloads, higher expectations, and an overall dramatic change to the organization's culture. In schools, frontline staff, such as teachers and instructional coaches, sometimes faces the greatest brunt of these changes.

Staff at the lowest-achieving schools in this report reflected this pattern. Nearly all teachers perceived the grant negatively in the first year because they experienced a significant increase in workload from

"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

professional learning, increased learning time, and paperwork as well as a reduction in unstructured planning time. In addition, they often did not have a full vision of the transformation plan and how their additional workload fit into that vision. District and school leaders talked about not wanting to overwhelm teachers with an abundance of information that was not immediately applicable, but this tendency left them feeling uninformed and frustrated. In several schools, the staff felt that the school had been wrongly identified as a lowest-achieving school because either they had been making progress or they disputed the

methodology for selection. As a result, they felt that the reforms were forced on them and demeaned them.

School and district staff often lamented about the increased paperwork that they had to complete to comply with federal and state requirements. They felt that federal and state monitoring of their budget and compliance with grant requirements required too much time from staff that were already overburdened with increased responsibilities associated with undergoing the school turnaround. Teachers often complained that they had to maintain more files on their practices and students' progress, which took time away from instruction or planning. One school hired an instructional coach to support their ELL population, but her time was mostly spent completing paperwork on students. Staff also felt that the requirements changed frequently and with little notice. Despite this frustration, staff generally did not blame the GaDOE because they believed that it was only responding to US ED's mandates. One deputy superintendent said, "Well, we are asked to do things last minute...but as I said before, I'm not as critical about that. It's not the state trying to do something to me--they're responding too..."

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.

Major Finding

School-level staff questioned the sustainability of turnaround efforts.

SIG and RT3 funding is supposed to focus on transforming the school but also on building capacity within the school to ensure sustainability after the grant period. In general, district officials, instructional coaches, and school leaders believed that many pieces of the work would be sustainable. For example, many schools used a portion of funding to infuse technology into classrooms. They viewed this investment as sustainable regardless of district commitment beyond the grant term. Teachers, on the other hand, doubted that most changes would last when the funding ends. Some schools encountered major delays in receiving funding, which affected their ability to fully implement their proposed reforms. In these cases, school-level staff was more likely to doubt the program's sustainability.

Nearly all school personnel believed that the least sustainable components were instructional coaches, vendors, professional learning, and increasing learning time because each initiative requires funding to continue. Many of the district leaders were aware of the possibility of not being able to sustain the reform initiatives that school staff valued most and were thinking of ways to use other funding sources to support instructional coaches but usually in an abbreviated fashion.

Instructional coaches and school leaders discussed the need to develop teacher leaders who would take over the professional learning component if coaches are no longer funded after the grant. School improvement specialists also stated that one of their primary roles is to develop teachers who can carry on the professional learning component beyond the grant period. However, the reality that those teacher leaders will still be teaching while serving in that role limits their capacity to support other teachers to the same extent as coaches. In addition, staff recognized that the success of these efforts and any other professional learning will be highly dependent on the level of teacher turnover in the future, which has traditionally been higher than in other schools. They were concerned that the school may invest thousands of dollars in a teacher who can take those skills to another school, leaving the lowest-achieving school in the same position as before the grant.

Major Finding

Negative perceptions and doubts about sustainability undermined buy-in to the turnaround plan.

Most instructional coaches, principals, district officials and school improvement specialists were confident that the turnaround work would be successful. However, teachers, many of whom did not fully understand what the transformation model included, lacked confidence in its success and sustainability. State leadership in School Turnaround and Race to the Top were confident but measured about success because they noted that much of the outcome is dependent upon the district implementation. The GaDOE only has a limited role in district decision-making. For example, leadership turnover in four of six districts in this report greatly influenced the lowest-achieving school work, but the GaDOE has no control over these changes.

Staff at all levels discussed the challenges around getting everyone on board with the turnaround efforts. Staff in leadership positions tended to buy into the reform plans much quicker than the rest of the staff. Teachers who were actively involved in the planning process had higher buy-in than other teachers, many of whom did not have a clear vision of the turnaround plan. However, district amendments to the plan often left them feeling like they did not actually have a voice in plan development. Buy-in also fluctuated significantly between schools. It was lowest in schools where the teachers did not see a clear connection between the transformation work's vision and the additional workload they experienced.

Saying that undergoing a school turnaround is difficult work is an understatement. According to Mass Insight, "turning around chronically under-performing schools is a different and far more difficult undertaking than school improvement. It should be recognized within education — as it is in other sectors—as a distinct professional discipline that requires specialized experience, training, and support."²⁵ The plan requires staff to fundamentally change in ways that can be challenging, intimidating, and difficult to understand, which understandably, can cause negative reactions.

Although it may not be surprising that the reform efforts were not immediately well-received among staff, it is important to consider the impact of the staff perceptions on implementation. Negative

"I feel like everything's always bottled up in those test scores and it doesn't matter about anything else in the school, about how the teachers feel, the students feel, the parents feel, none of that matters."

-Principal

²⁵ Andrew Calkins, William Guenther, Grace Belfiore, and Dave Lash, *The Turnaround Challenge: Why America's best opportunity to dramatically improve student achievement lies in our worst-performing schools*, (Boston: Mass Insight Education & Research Institute, 2007),

perception and perceived lack of sustainability likely undermined the early stages of implementation, especially in cases where staff resisted the efforts and encouraged others to not buy-in as well. However, as mentioned above, staff in SIG Cohort I schools believed that the faculty had a more positive view of the work in the second year of the grant relative to the first year.

Now that we have discussed the general perceptions of grant implementation and sustainability, the following subsections discuss findings concerning the actual components of the transformation model.

TEACHER AND SCHOOL LEADER EFFECTIVENESS

The transformation model requires that LEAs take five actions towards developing and increasing teacher and school leader effectiveness within their lowest-achieving schools. The actions are to:

1. Replace the principal who led the school prior to commencement of the transformation model (discussed in the Early Stages section).
2. Use rigorous, transparent and equitable evaluation systems for teachers and principals.
3. Identify and reward school-level educators who are achieving successful outcomes for students and remove those who, after ample opportunities to improve, have not done so.
4. Provide staff with ongoing, high-quality, job-embedded professional development.
5. Provide incentives that will recruit and retain high-quality staff.

When we asked interviewees about their teacher and leader effectiveness efforts, interviewees often spoke favorably about their professional development efforts; however, their comments suggested that schools were not yet rewarding educators based on their performance or providing incentives to recruit and retain high-quality staff.

Transformation Model Action: Use rigorous, transparent, and equitable evaluation systems for teachers and principals

At the time of the interviews, schools were completing a pilot of the new state-developed Teacher and Leader Keys Evaluation Systems (TKES and LKES) because they were located in RT3 partner districts.²⁶ The implementation of TKES and LKES falls under another RT3 reform area, so the interviews did not focus extensively on fidelity of implementation of these systems. The GaDOE is

²⁶ TKES and LKES satisfy transformation model requirements because student growth is a significant factor in both systems. Both systems also take into account other factors, such as classroom observations and surveys. The GaDOE held steering committees involving educators and other stakeholders from around the state to develop the TKES and LKES framework.

tasked with evaluating TKES and LKES. As a result, most of this section will focus on implementation of the remaining three actions.

Transformation Model Action: Reward effective educators and remove ineffective educators

When we asked interviewees to describe the efforts taking place to improve teacher and leader effectiveness in the schools, the responses typically focused on professional development, collaborative planning, and the hiring of effective staff. Few mentioned efforts to reward effective teachers, and principals generally did not mention having new ability to remove ineffective teachers. Although our questions did not press deeply into this particular tenant of the transformation model, we can still draw some generalizations about how schools addressed this action.

In general, rewards for effective educators come in the form of performance-based monetary incentives. According to CII, “To be effective, performance-based incentive systems should involve significant teacher input at each stage of development and implementation, set clear performance goals, use multiple measures of teacher performance, provide monetary incentives that are large enough to affect teacher behavior, be sustained with resources available over the long-term, and be subject to rigorous evaluations of program implementation.”²⁷ The majority of interviewees did not mention whether schools had performance-based incentives, which begs the question of whether schools and districts are actually rewarding effective teachers and leaders. Rewards not based on performance for teachers were, however, mentioned in two districts. One district leader mentioned that they were providing iPads to all certified teachers. Teachers and district staff in another district mentioned that school staff received bonuses after signing their district’s MOU, agreeing to higher expectations and increased responsibility as part of the transformation.

Considering that effective, performance-based incentive systems incorporate teacher input, provide large monetary incentives and are based on clear performance goals, it seems that if schools and districts had effective systems in place, they would be widely-known and mentioned in the interviews. That being said, we recognize that this finding relies on an argument from silence.

In terms of removing ineffective staff, school leaders did not believe that the process was different from what was used in other district schools, which aligns with findings for SIG in Washington.²⁸ In fact, several districts continued to transfer displaced teachers to lowest-achieving schools without the approval of the principal. Despite hiring policies mostly remaining unchanged, some of the schools in this study faced high turnover. Staff in schools that were in the second year of the grant reported that a larger than normal number of teachers chose to transfer from the school between the first and second

²⁷ “Human Capital,” in Carole L. Perlman and Sam Redding, eds., *Handbook on Effective Implementation of School Improvement Grants*, (Lincoln, IL: Center on Innovation & Improvement, 2011), 93

²⁸ Yatsko, Lake, Nelson, and Bowen, 21.

years of the grant. One principal in a Cohort I SIG school reported having 15 teachers transfer or retire after the first year. However, after the second year, only two staff members left, and both were for family reasons. Staff in several first year schools expected turnover to be higher before the next year, and in some cases, they expected entire departments to leave. Generally, they believed that primary driver of the turnover was teachers choosing to leave rather than administrative or district personnel decisions.

The GaDOE expects that districts, particularly those with RT3 funding, will use data from the Teacher and Leader Keys Evaluation Systems (TKES and LKES) to inform talent management decisions in the future. Georgia’s RT3 application calls for partner districts to create retention and signing bonuses to attract and retain effective educators. Additionally, TKES and LKES should inform decisions around promoting highly effective educators, providing support to educators that need it, and removing educators who are not improving. Thus, once districts fully implement TKES and LKES, the schools in this study will be well positioned to effectively execute the transformation model’s teacher and leader effectiveness actions.

Transformation Model Action: Provide high-quality, job-embedded professional development

CII summarizes the National Staff Development Council’s Standards for Staff Development in its *Handbook on Effective Implementation of School Improvement Grants*. The following table provides examples of how schools should structure professional development.

Table 8: CII Professional Development Standards
<p>Professional development should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extend beyond traditional workshops. It can include activities such as “peer observation, mentoring, the creation of teacher portfolios, action research projects, whole-faculty or team/department study groups, curriculum planning and development, literature circles, critical friends groups, data analysis activities, school improvement planning, the shared analysis of student work, lesson study, or teacher self-assessment and goal-setting activities.” • Be aligned with staff evaluation systems. “Formative teacher evaluation data, as well as formative and summative student assessment data, should be used to create individualized professional development that will address a teacher’s specific challenge areas.” • Be monitored. “Data on the extent to which professional development changes instructional practice should be collected and used to make future decisions about the professional development offered.”
Adapted from “Human Capital,” 103-104

As stated, we did not ask interviewees specific follow-up questions to determine if their professional development activities satisfied these requirements. As such, this section focuses on perceptions of professional learning rather than the effectiveness of professional development. Future GOSA evaluations of the school turnaround work will include a more thorough investigation of professional development quality.

Feedback from the interviews overwhelmingly suggests 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.

Major Finding

Job-embedded professional development increased and improved in perceived quality.

Personnel in every school reported an increase in job-embedded, differentiated professional learning. Schools used grant resources to hire instructional coaches in more subjects than the minimum required math and graduation coach. Additionally, state school improvement specialists, who spent three to four days a week in each school, provided intensive instructional support. Teachers reported that coaches and the school improvement specialist observed classroom practice and provided feedback more than they did prior to the grant. Schools capitalized on the grant requirements to increase learning time to incorporate more time for staff development and collaborative planning. Schools often used planning periods and after school sessions to deliver professional development. As a result, most teachers reported that they had only one or two individual planning periods each week.

While most school staff believed the professional development was helpful, they also reported feeling overwhelmed and tired due to increased professional development, collaborative planning, and instruction and enrichment opportunities for students. Each of these activities encroached on teachers' individual, unstructured planning time. Subsequently, teachers reported taking more work home and were concerned about the time taken away from their families.

"I think our morale was really low at first, but that's because again, we weren't getting the whole picture. We didn't really know why, but now I think we do."

-Teacher

In most cases, teachers also lacked a clear understanding of the school's vision and how each professional development session connected to that vision, compounding their frustration. Schools implemented robust professional development programs as a part of the grant, especially in the first

year of the grant, and districts often required additional professional development. In some cases, school staff believed that the district and school professional development were not aligned or seemed repetitive. In sum, the sheer volume of professional development and the lack of a clear understanding of its purpose frustrated and overwhelmed staff, undermining school-wide buy-in for turnaround efforts.

Despite the early frustration that school-level staff experienced, largely as a result of the increased professional development, staff at all levels felt that the opportunities were making a positive impact on teacher practice. Several teachers reported receiving the best professional development in their entire career. As expressed in Figure 4, about half of the teacher interviews revealed that professional development was differentiated based on need. In these cases, teachers talked about not being required to attend training in areas where they were already competent or previously had received training. A common example was that schools did not require teachers to attend training to use their SMART Board if they were previously trained or already using it. However, their feedback did not suggest that schools used student achievement data or classroom observations to identify areas of improvement and provide teachers training based on their specific and individual needs for professional learning.

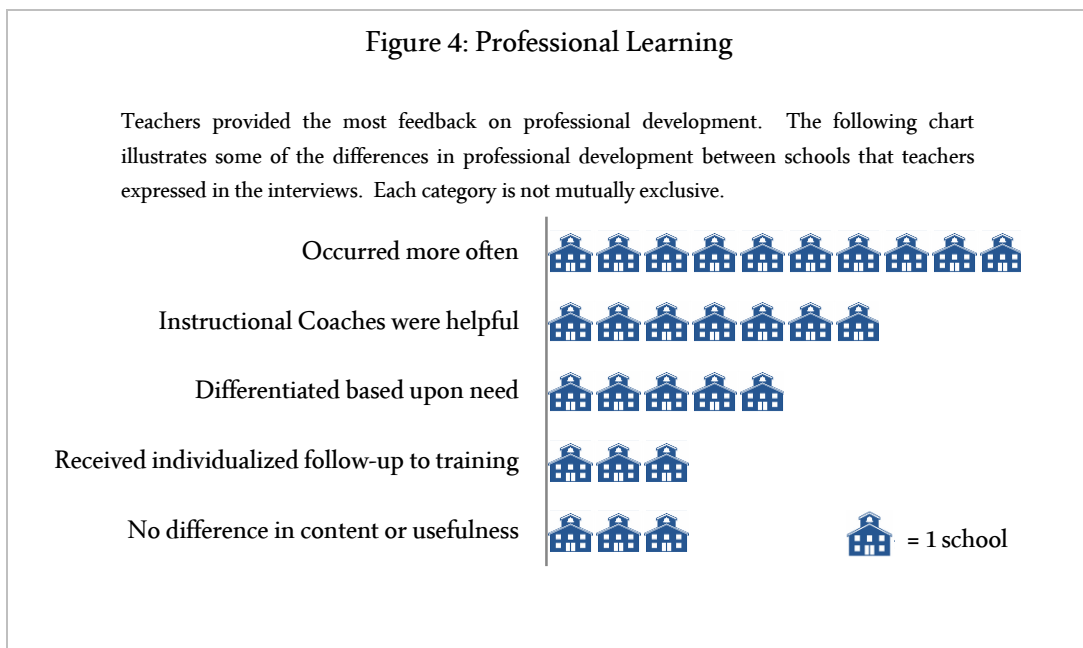


Figure 4 also illustrates that most teachers believed that instructional coaches were valuable assets. Instructional coaches supported teaching and learning in a variety of ways; however, school-based interviewees consistently spoke highly of the coaches' role in providing professional development. Coaches were able to identify resources for teachers, model and co-teach, observe classrooms and provide feedback, and inform the overall professional development program for the school.

The influx of coaches also contributed to teachers receiving more individualized follow-up. Teachers typically sought out assistance from coaches, which can explain why interviews at only three schools mentioned this support. In addition to coaches, external service providers who facilitated professional development sometimes provided individual feedback as well.

Transformation Model Action: Provide incentives that will recruit and retain high-quality staff

Hard-to-staff schools face a number of challenges related to recruiting and retaining high-quality staff. Obviously, the school's reputation, culture and achievement record play an important factor in prospective hires' career decisions. The quality of life, which includes housing and community amenities, also factor into their decisions.²⁹ Additionally, "cumbersome, delayed hiring practices [and] lower salaries" are common deterrents from working in hard-to-staff areas.³⁰ Therefore, according to CII, "Districts must address some of the hidden costs of teaching in hard-to-staff areas."³¹

First, districts need to attract high-quality staff to their hard-to-staff schools. The Southeast Center for Teaching Quality provides a list of monetary and non-monetary incentives that can be used to attract staff. These incentives are included in Table 9 below:

Table 9: Attracting Staff to Hard-to-Staff Schools	
Financial Incentives	Non-Financial Incentives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multi-year bonuses • Differentiated compensation • Loan forgiveness • Relocation reimbursement • Tuition-free advanced degrees at state universities • Housing subsidies • State income tax credits • College tuition assistance for children of teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early, streamlined hiring practices • Locating a critical mass of accomplished teachers, such as cohorts of • NBCTs, in hard-to-staff schools to reduce isolation and increase networking and support • Reduced teaching loads and smaller class sizes • Strong leadership and clear administrative support • Comprehensive induction, mentoring and coaching • Career pathways
Source: "Recruiting Quality Teachers to Hard-to-Staff Schools," (Carrboro, NC: Southeast Center for Teaching Quality, 2004), 1-2	

²⁹ For a summary of literature on hiring challenges in hard-to-staff schools, see Justin Wheeler and Elizabeth Glennie, *Can Pay Incentives Improve the Recruitment and Retention of Teachers in America's Hard-To-Staff Schools? A Research Summary*. Policy Matters Series, (Durham, NC: Center for Child and Family Policy, Duke University, 2007).

³⁰ "Recruiting Quality Teachers to Hard-to-Staff Schools," 1-2.

³¹ "Human Capital," 89

Of the incentives mentioned by the Southeast Center for Teaching Quality, school and district staff mentioned signing bonuses the most. School-based staff usually mentioned that signing bonuses were built into their SIG applications. However, most of the new teachers we interviewed either were not informed of the bonuses during the recruitment and hiring process or were assigned to the school by the district. In both cases, the signing bonus did not incentivize them to work at a particular school and as such did not accomplish the goal of improving recruitment and retention in lowest-achieving schools.

Another way that districts can recruit and retain highly-effective staff is by providing career building opportunities. Teachers in several schools mentioned having teacher leaders or mentor teachers as a career ladder, but these initiatives had been in place prior to the grant.

School and district staff did not seem to have used the reforms taking place in their schools as a tool to attract or retain staff. For example, we asked interviewees how they originally learned about their school's transformation plan. While they often learned about the grant from a school-wide meeting with the principal or a district leader, word-of-mouth and local newspapers also influenced their understanding of the plan. Overwhelmingly, interviews indicated a communication breakdown, especially among school-level staff who were not part of the school leadership team. This communication breakdown contributed to the lack of understanding of the reform plan among school-level staff, which was discussed in the previous section. Given the inconsistent communication and understanding of the work, it seems unlikely that the various initiatives involved in the turnaround work were used as a tool to recruit or retain staff. In sum, schools did not seem to be implementing non-monetary incentives to attract and retain high-quality teachers.

In addition to developing appropriate incentives to attract and retain staff, districts also should adjust their recruitment process to inform staff about the expectations and requirements associated with working in a school undergoing a turnaround. CII suggests that districts should create "information-rich hiring processes [that] allows employers and applicants to collect detailed information over time through interviews and exchanges, so as to form accurate impressions of one another. This enhances the likelihood that both the employer and teachers' expectations will be met, thereby minimizing the risk of premature attrition."³² CII provides examples of how districts can strengthen their recruitment efforts to carry out this transformation model action. Table 10 summarizes them.

³² "Human Capital," 89.

Table 10: Recruiting Staff to Hard-to-Staff Schools

- **Establish recruitment goals.** Districts should not only establish goals for the entire district, but they should also establish goals specifically for their high poverty and high minority schools to ensure that there is an equal distribution of high-quality teachers.
- **Increase the supply of highly-effective teachers through pipeline programs.** Districts can partner with universities, community colleges, and nonprofits that deliver teacher preparation, establish “grow-your-own” programs to recruit future educators from the pool of current high school students, paraprofessionals, teacher aides, and community members, and create programs to recruit former teachers, including those recently retired.
- **Provide financial incentives.** Salary increases, bonuses, and housing assistance and be used to recruit educators willing to work in high-need schools or subject areas.
- **Alter hiring procedures and budget timelines.** Districts may need to adapt their hiring procedures to ensure that the appropriate number and types of teachers can be recruited and hired before they seek employment elsewhere.

Adapted from: “Human Capital,” 89.

Interviews suggest that the districts and schools included in this study adjusted their recruitment process in some key ways but failed to make changes in other ways. Several districts used teacher pipeline programs like Georgia Teaching Fellows and Teach for America to recruit teachers. School and district staff who mentioned these programs had mixed opinions. For the most part, principals said that they were pleased with new teachers in these programs. However, GTF and TFA teachers were also overwhelmed with the program’s workload on top of the greater responsibilities required of teachers working in a turnaround school. As a result, one school reported losing a teacher midyear. One assistant principal believed that teachers from one of the programs had higher turnover than other new teachers because they had little education experience and realized that education was not what they expected. Several principals expressed frustration that district contracts with GTF and TFA required them to hire a certain number of teachers from the program, which limited their operating flexibility.

A few districts took proactive steps to explain the increased expectations and responsibility associated with working in a school undergoing a turnaround. Two districts required all staff to sign a revised MOU or contract addendum 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.

“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

Beyond these changes, districts did not seem to have changed hiring procedures to accommodate the transformation model requirements. When we asked newly hired staff to describe their interview and hiring process, they consistently said that it was no different than typical district processes. Most of them said they were not told that they would be working in a lowest-achieving school. A few new hires said that their job postings mentioned RT3, but the reference largely focused on the position being grant-funded. In sum, the reality that newly hired and existing staff did not have a full understanding of the plan may have undermined buy-in from staff and worsened teacher turnover.

Aside from not creating an “information-rich hiring process,” district policies remained an obstacle for schools trying to attract highly-effective teachers and staff. Many school leaders discussed delays in hiring due to district

policies. Three districts delayed hiring to the extent that schools were not able to fill grant-funded positions like instructional or graduation coaches until the middle of the year or later, and in one case, the position still had not been filled at the time of the interview. One district centralized hiring procedures for all schools, and lowest-achieving schools did not seem to have a priority in the new process. This centralized process dramatically limited principals’ ability to select staff, which is in direct conflict with the transformation model’s requirement for increased operating flexibility. We discuss operating flexibility in more detail later in the report.

INSTRUCTIONAL REFORM STRATEGIES

The transformation model requires that LEAs take two actions towards implementing comprehensive instructional reform strategies within their lowest-achieving schools. The actions are to:

1. Use data to identify and implement an instructional program that is research-based and vertically aligned from one grade to the next as well as aligned with State academic standards.

2. Promote the continuous use of student data (such as from formative, interim, and summative assessments) in order to inform and differentiate instruction to meet the academic needs of individual students.³³

When we asked interviewees to describe efforts toward implementing comprehensive instructional reform strategies, they typically discussed external instructional models like America's Choice or Learning Focused Schools, the use of instructional coaches, and the various ways that staff used data to drive decisions. Based upon these interviews, we have drawn generalizations about the implementation of both transformation model actions.

Transformation Model Action: Implement instructional programs that are research-based, vertically-aligned, and aligned to State standards

Lowest-achieving schools implementing the transformation model must deliver instructional programs that are research-based, vertically-aligned and aligned to their state's performance standards. Instructional programs usually incorporate both intended curriculum (such as content standards, curriculum frameworks/guidelines and state assessments) and enacted curriculum (teacher practice). According to CII, the "alignment of instruction links the content of state standards and district curriculum frameworks (the intended curriculum) with what is actually taught in the classroom (the enacted curriculum)."³⁴

Georgia joined 45 states and the District of Columbia (D.C.) in adopting the Common Core State Standards, which are vertically-aligned performance standards for kindergarten through high school in English language arts, mathematics, and grades 6-12 literacy in science, history/social studies, and technical subjects. Each state was able to make slight modifications to the standards to meet its needs, and starting in the 2012-2013 school year, Georgia is implementing its version of the standards, the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards (CCGPS). CCGPS builds upon the Georgia Performance Standards, which laid a foundation for standards-based instruction in the state.

Since every school in Georgia will be using the CCGPS, the schools included in this study should be aligning their instructional programs with CCGPS. While the interviews did not examine the alignment between CCGPS and each school's instructional program in detail, we asked school and district staff about early preparation for implementation. For the most part, preparation focused on information-sharing and general overviews of the standards. 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. Furthermore, they

³³ U.S. Department of Education, 27

³⁴ "Curriculum and Instruction," in Carole L. Perlman and Sam Redding, eds., *Handbook on Effective Implementation of School Improvement Grants*, (Lincoln, IL: Center on Innovation & Improvement, 2011), 109

found the state-developed webinars to be inadequate and were concerned that they had not yet received any curriculum frameworks from the state or districts at the time of the interviews. School-level staff seemed to be waiting for guidance from the state or district before working in school-based teams to prepare for CCGPS implementation.

While school improvement specialists generally were more optimistic about CCGPS implementation, several had reservations. One lead school improvement specialist felt that some of her schools were going to be unprepared because they were waiting for district guidance as opposed to developing their own frameworks and preparing on their own, which aligns with school-level interviews. Other school improvement specialists felt that the state-developed webinars provided higher quality training than the previous “train-the-trainer” approach that was used for GPS, but they were concerned that the number of wide-scale reforms in addition to CCGPS could overwhelm teachers and hinder the transition.

In terms of specific instructional reform strategies, schools and districts developed instructional reform strategies based upon the results of GAPSS review prior to the grant. America’s Choice and Carnegie Math were the most commonly mentioned service providers and/or models. In many cases, schools that already had contracts with vendors used RT3 or SIG funding to continue working with the same vendor or expand usage. In all but one school, the district chose an external service provider for the reform strategy with limited or no input from the school. Schools that did not previously use an external partner usually did not bring one in to implement the model. One reason for the lack of significant change in terms of external service provider usage may have been the short time frame schools had to draft and submit their turnaround plans.

The scope of services varied widely across schools, from simply using a vendor’s framework to create a customized plan for the school to actively involving vendor representatives in day-to-day professional learning. Schools used external service providers primarily for remediation, credit recovery, or professional learning on standards-based and differentiated instruction. In the interviews, we did not ask specifically if school staff thought they needed additional training that they were not receiving. However, in several interviews, primarily with teachers, interviewees shared that they wanted additional training on how to handle students with social and emotional challenges since the students faced many obstacles outside the classroom. One school included funding for training to address this need in its original school turnaround plan, but the district did not approve the contract, citing a lack of research base supporting the success of the external service provider.

Major Finding

Instructional coaches were one of the most valued additions from the grant.

In almost every school, the most positive aspect of each school's instructional reform program was the hiring of instructional coaches. The grant required schools to hire a math and graduation coach. However, most schools hired additional instructional coaches in areas such as English/Language Arts, science, social studies, or other areas to meet the specific needs of their student population.

We began to discuss the value of instructional coaches in the subsection on professional learning earlier in the report. As mentioned, the interviewees suggested that the primary roles of instructional coaches were to coordinate professional learning, observe classroom practice, provide feedback to teachers, and develop teachers into leaders. Teachers viewed coaches as partners rather than evaluators, so they were more open to learning from them. Across the board, teachers had a positive perception of their support. In addition, most principals recognized the important role of coaches and hoped that the district would sustain funding for them after the grant period.

Transformation Model Action: Continuous use of student data in order to inform and differentiate instruction.

Across the board, school and district staff discussed their reliance on using data to drive decisions. Staff who had been involved in the development of SIG applications and RT3 school turnaround plans consistently said that they based the plans on comprehensive data analyses of school needs. They most commonly mentioned the GaDOE's GAPSS review as an important component of plan development.

Table 11 provides five recommendations from US ED's Institute of Education Sciences (IES) for how schools and districts should use data to drive decisions and differentiate instruction.

Table 11: Using Student Achievement Data to Support Instructional Decision Making

- **Make data part of an ongoing cycle of instructional improvement.** This recommendation emphasizes the use of data at the classroom-level. Here, IES recommends that teachers employ a data analysis cycle that uses multiple sources in order to set goals, make curricular and instructional choices, and allocate instructional time.
- **Teach students to examine their own data and set learning goals.** This recommendation also emphasizes the use of data at the classroom-level. Here, IES recommends that teachers instruct students on how to interpret their own assessment data to develop personal achievement goals and guide learning. These student-developed goals can be another tool that teachers can use to better understand what motivates students and differentiate instruction accordingly.
- **Establish a clear vision for school-wide data use.** This recommendation emphasizes the organizational and technological conditions that support data use. Here, IES acknowledges the importance of having a school culture that supports strong and collaborative data use. IES suggests school leaders establish well-documented policies and protocols that guide data use and incorporate feedback from educators in developing these policies and protocols.
- **Provide supports that foster a data-driven culture within the school.** This recommendation also emphasizes the organizational and technological conditions that support data use. Here, IES encourages school leaders and districts to provide professional development and support to educators to aid them in using data to drive instructional decisions. They recommend having a school-based “data facilitator” to provide coaching and feedback to teachers on using data as well as provide structured time for teachers to collaborate and review data together.
- **Develop and maintain a district-wide data system.** This recommendation emphasizes the organizational and technological conditions that support data use as well. Here, IES encourages districts to develop and maintain high-quality data systems that enable all decision makers to access the necessary data in a timely fashion. This system should be comprehensive and integrated, linking disparate forms of data for reporting and analysis to a range of audiences.

Adapted from: Laura Hamilton, Richard Halverson, Sharnell S. Jackson, Ellen Mandinach, Jonathan A. Supovitz, and Jeffery C. Wayman, *Using student achievement data to support instructional decision making*. (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2009), 6-45

Feedback from the interviews suggested that the schools and districts included in this study are following US ED’s recommendations. As it relates to the first two recommendations that focus on classroom-level data use, teachers talked about using data to guide instruction more than in previous years. Additionally, staff at different levels, from teachers to district leadership, shared that students were beginning to learn how to monitor and interpret their own assessment data. Several schools started posting student assessment data publicly so that students could track their progress.

Schools and districts also seemed to take proactive steps towards creating organizational and technological conditions that support data use. First, it was clear that school leaders generally expected teachers and instructional coaches to review data on a regular basis. Most schools had data

rooms where teachers could research trends for students, and principals expected them to shape instruction around that data. School staff met regularly to conduct “data walks” and review data, and district staff and/or state school improvement specialists often joined them. Several staff referred to their data room as the “war room,” suggesting that nearly all major decisions regarding teaching and learning were made there.

Prior to the grant, school and district staff believed they had a high comfort level around data use. However, as part of the school turnaround process, schools had an increased presence of instructional coaches and state school improvement specialists to support and encourage teachers to use data. Instructional coaches and/or state school improvement specialists often acted in the “data facilitator” role mentioned in the fourth recommendation from US ED.

Lastly, the GaDOE has been working with LEAs across the state to develop comprehensive data systems that will facilitate data sharing among a variety of stakeholders. The districts included in this study all have data systems that met the requirements mentioned in the practice guide. In addition to their data systems, many of the interviewees said that district-wide benchmark assessments have helped teachers and other school staff monitor student progress and identify areas of need.

INCREASED LEARNING TIME AND COMMUNITY-ORIENTED SCHOOLS

The transformation model requires that LEAs take two actions towards increasing learning time and fostering a community-oriented disposition within their lowest-achieving schools. The actions are:

1. Establish schedules and strategies that provide increased learning time.
2. Provide ongoing mechanisms for family and community engagement.

We asked interviewees to provide a general description of their efforts toward increasing learning time and creating community-oriented schools. Feedback suggested that most schools were not yet implementing an increased learning time program that met the US ED requirements, and family and community engagement efforts were largely focused on increasing parent and family participation at school events.

Transformation Model Action: Establish schedules and strategies that provide increased learning time.

To meet this requirement, schools are supposed to use a longer school day, week or year schedule to significantly increase the total number of school hours. They can use the additional time for

instruction in core academic subjects, instruction in other subjects and enrichment activities, and collaboration and professional development for teachers.³⁵

Feedback from the interviews suggested that most schools did not make significant changes to the school schedule. However, most schools provided opportunities for students to get remediation, tutoring, or enriching before, during, or after school as well as on Saturday mornings. These activities were optional. While programming in most schools was open to all students, it typically targeted struggling students who needed extra help, credit recovery or time to make up assignments. In some cases, the schools offered higher achieving students opportunities for additional support in advanced courses. Many schools also shared that their increased learning time efforts, particularly sessions on Saturdays, were focused on preparation for state standardized exams. A few schools mentioned that they were using advisory periods or student and staff mentorship programs to help build relationships within the school, which aligns with an example provided in SIG guidance.³⁶

The main difference between how the schools included in this study described their increased learning time efforts and the US ED guidance is that most schools were not consistently providing increased learning time for all students. Interviewees were asked to generally describe their efforts related to increasing learning time. We did not ask probing questions to determine whether each school was satisfying the specific requirements outlined in US ED's guidance. However, based on their comments it seems that schools focused their increased learning time efforts on providing targeted support to specific groups of students, as opposed to increasing learning time for all students for core content courses and enrichment activities.

To meet this requirement, schools are supposed to use a longer school day, week or year schedule to significantly increase the total number of school hours. They can use the additional time for instruction in core academic subjects, instruction in other subjects and enrichment activities, and collaboration and professional development for teachers. However, schools were unclear how many hours they needed to add and whether before- or after-school programs counted toward this requirement. As a result, US ED clarified the definition of increased learning time in its March 2012 SIG Guidance. It recommends that schools add 300 hours, clarifies the importance of offering programming to all students, and recommends that time spent on core subjects should come from extending the actual school day, week or year rather than providing before- or after-school programs. US ED acknowledges that increasing learning time via before- or after-school program is difficult to implement well for all students because schools must closely integrate and align their out-of-school efforts with school day efforts.³⁷ While US ED did not set a minimum amount of time, the Office of

³⁵ U.S. Department of Education, 23

³⁶ Ibid, 40

³⁷ Ibid, 24

School Turnaround set a minimum of 300 hours for the 2012-13 year based upon the SIG Guidance recommendation. As a result, implementation across lowest-achieving schools should be more uniform during the 2012-13 year than in the last two years.

School and district staff also explained challenges that prevented them from making more substantive changes to their schedules. School officials cited a lack of operational flexibility, particularly as it relates to transportation, as a reason for not making more changes to the schedule. In some cases, schools faced an inflexible bus schedule that did not allow them to extend the day before or after school. In other cases, officials had difficulty gaining approval for buses to take students home who stayed for optional extended learning. Another school wanted to pursue an open campus format with flexible hours, but the district denied the request.

Major Finding

School and district staff believed that increased time for remediation, tutoring, enrichment, and collaborative planning were improving student achievement.

Despite the lack of wide-scale changes to school schedules to provide increased learning time for all students, school-level personnel generally believed that increased learning time was having a positive impact on student achievement. They were committed to implementing programs that met the needs of the students and acknowledged that students often had difficulty completing their homework or assignments due to part-time jobs and other personal obligations. Therefore, they felt that initiatives that increased time for students to complete make-up assignments, earn additional credits, and receive tutoring were beneficial for them. Some school-level staff believed increased learning time efforts led to improved standardized test performance.

Though school staff recognized the impact of reforms, some were concerned about the sustainability of increased learning time efforts after the grant period. The SIG guidance allows schools to use grant funds to pay teachers for working increased learning time, so school paid teachers for providing instruction and support to students beyond normal classroom hours.³⁸ Overall, the perceived success of ILT appeared to be highly dependent upon whether the school provided adequate staffing and transportation for the program.

This action step also requires schools to increase collaborative planning time for teachers. Feedback from the interviews suggested that schools were able to do this successfully. Schools implemented common planning time for teachers once or twice a week either outside of school hours or during their planning periods. For the most part, teachers met within subject level or grades. Interviews suggested

³⁸ Ibid, 24

that nearly every school used common planning time to facilitate professional development, data analysis, lesson planning, and in some schools, vertical planning within the school. Several schools created common planning time opportunities that paired core content teachers with CTAE and non-core content teachers. As discussed in the previous section on professional learning, many teachers believed that professional development opportunities due to the grant were more beneficial than previous efforts. One veteran teacher said, “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.” Many school-level staff felt that collaborative planning and professional development efforts had improved teacher relations and increased professionalism among the staff.

Transformation Model Action: Provide ongoing mechanisms for parent and community engagement

Schools implementing the transformation model are encouraged to be community-oriented by implementing “strategies to increase the involvement and contributions, in both school-based and home-based settings, of parents and community partners that are designed to support classroom instruction and increase student achievement.”³⁹ These activities may include:

- Establishing organized parent groups
- Holding public meetings involving parents and community members to review school performance and help develop school improvement plans
- Using surveys to gauge parent and community satisfaction and support for local public schools
- Implementing complaint procedures for families
- Coordinating with local social and health service providers to help meet family needs

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

- Instructional Coach

³⁹ Ibid, 39

- Providing parent education classes (including GED, adult literacy, and ESL programs)⁴⁰

School personnel believed that increasing parental engagement is a critical component of successful transformation and reported making efforts to involve parents and the community. However, when asked if efforts were different than what was done prior to receiving the grant, most of them said that activities were similar to what was already being done. Nonetheless, they at least partially attributed improvement in school culture and climate to increased parent, student, and staff engagement.

In terms of specific efforts to engage parents and the community, feedback from the interviews suggested that:

- The majority of schools consulted parents and community members while developing their grant plan.
- Several plans included funding for a parent liaison. However, 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.

In sum, schools made some effort to engage parents with grant funding. However, with the exception of schools that hired a parent liaison, the programming seemed to be an expansion or continuation of what was already being done rather than starting new efforts.

OPERATING FLEXIBILITY AND SUSTAINED SUPPORT

The transformation model requires that LEAs take two actions toward providing operating flexibility and sustained support to their lowest-achieving schools. The actions are to:

1. Give the school sufficient operational flexibility (such as staffing, calendars/time, and budgeting).
2. Ensure that the school receives ongoing, intensive technical assistance and related support from the LEA, the SEA, or a designated external lead partner organization.

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. However, school-

⁴⁰ Ibid, 39

and district-level officials were satisfied with the level of support and communication from GaDOE leadership and state school improvement specialists.

Transformation Model Action: Providing sufficient operating flexibility

US ED suggests that districts provide schools with flexibility around staffing, calendars/time, and budgeting, but it is not a specific requirement. According to US ED, “An LEA is not obligated to give a school implementing the transformation model operational flexibility in these particular areas, so long as it provides the school sufficient operational flexibility to implement fully a comprehensive approach to substantially improve student achievement outcomes and increase high school graduation rates.”⁴¹ Therefore, LEAs are required to give schools the operating flexibility that they need to fully and successfully implement their turnaround efforts.

Major Finding

Schools did not have sufficient operating flexibility in staffing and budget decisions.

Most principals felt that they had some flexibility over building-level decisions with limited external impact. In other words, principals could implement school programs, like silent lunch or an awards assembly, without facing obstacles from district policies. However, they did not have sufficient autonomy when making decisions regarding talent management, finances, or changes in the school schedule.

Regarding talent management, school personnel, GaDOE school improvement specialists, and GaDOE senior staff believed that districts did not prioritize lowest-achieving schools in human resources decision-making. Many school-level staff members shared that teachers continued to be “placed” in the school, and most principals did not feel that they had increased autonomy or flexibility in making hiring decisions. District hiring policies often delayed important hires, placed staff in schools without principal input, and overall, challenged the schools’ ability to implement their work.

“In terms of hiring, I think districts should stop placing teachers because I don’t think that has stopped.”

–School Improvement Specialist

For example, several schools were unable to hire instructional coaches or parent liaisons until nearly the end of the school year. Several grant-funded positions were still unfilled at the time of the interviews. Because principals did not always have the flexibility to make their own hiring decisions, some of their efforts to retain and recruit teachers went unnoticed. Some schools included signing bonuses in their school turnaround plans; however,

⁴¹ Ibid, 41

centralized district hiring policies or policies that did not allow prospective hires to select their school undermined the effectiveness of those incentives.

School improvement specialists reported being involved in staffing decisions to differing degrees based upon district hiring procedures. At a minimum, they sat in on the interviews and provided feedback but felt that their input was not considered in the decision. In other cases, they played a more prominent role in helping the principal select the staff.

Many school leaders, particularly in large districts, cited significant district oversight in budget decisions as well. School staff often complained that their districts did not change policies or grant waivers regarding budgeting and purchasing. Like hiring decisions, district policies significantly delayed the purchase of technology, instructional support materials, and products and services provided by external service providers, which again, challenged those schools' ability to implement their turnaround efforts with fidelity. In one school, when asked about how the grant had changed the school, a teacher wondered whether the school had even been awarded the grant because the technology written into the grant still had not arrived after a full year.

As previously mentioned, some schools also faced challenges when trying to get district support for implementing their increased learning time programs. One of the most cited problems was with transportation as some schools were unable to get flexibility with bus schedules. In one school that increased learning time at the beginning of school, students routinely arrived to school late because of challenges with the LEA's transportation, which undermined the program's effectiveness.

Based upon these findings, inadequate operating flexibility appears to have been a serious barrier to implementation. Several school improvement specialists believed that one reason for the lack of district support could be that they 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. Instead, schools often received fragmented support from a variety of district staff from different departments and levels of authority. They often interacted most closely with lower-level staff, such as the RT3 grant coordinator or their immediate district supervisor, who either had limited knowledge of the grant or limited ability to get buy-in from other offices.

Even though GaDOE senior staff recognized that limited school autonomy was a significant barrier to implementation, they cannot force districts to increase autonomy due to limits in authority. As a

"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 hoops."

-School Improvement Specialist

result, the lack of flexibility may continue to undermine grant implementation unless districts decide to prioritize lowest-achieving in accordance with US ED recommendations.

Transformation Model Action: Providing sustained support to schools

Georgia's Race to the Top application and US ED SIG Guidance call for districts, the GaDOE, or a lead partner organization to provide support for lowest-achieving schools. None of the sample schools used an external "lead partner" to manage their turnaround efforts. Lead partners are often nonprofit organizations that contract with the LEA or state agency to lead the turnaround efforts. CII explains that lead partners usually:

- Sign a 3-5 year performance contract for student achievement
- Assume authority for decision making on school staffing (as well as time, money, and program)
- Provide core academic and student support services
- Have an embedded, consistent, and intense relationship with each school during the turnaround period (Five days per week)

Contracting with a lead partner to manage school turnaround efforts can be advantageous for many reasons. Lead partners can coordinate state and district agencies, as well as service providers, to create seamless support for schools. Successful lead partners, like Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL), Mass Insight or Green Dot, have experience and proven track records of successfully and rapidly turning around lowest-achieving schools. Lead partners also have contracts that dictate their role and responsibilities and give them the necessary authority and autonomy to make decisions to lead the work.

We did not consistently ask interviewees why they chose not to use lead partners. However, the interviewees we asked, typically district staff, explained that they were concerned about sustaining lead partners' efforts and preferred to build internal capacity to ensure sustainability once the funds were not available. One state leader suggested that another reason schools and districts did not contract with lead partners is that they were not knowledgeable about the concept of lead partners or potential external service providers that could lead turnaround efforts. Lastly, the short time frame to develop each school's turnaround plan may have limited the leadership team's ability to research lead partners.

Instead of contracting with leading organizations to manage or at least serve in an advisory capacity, the GaDOE and districts led the turnaround efforts, using external service providers for specific products or services. As discussed in the instructional reform strategies section, typically districts already contracted with providers and only used the RT3 or SIG funding to maintain or expand service delivery. The GaDOE supported schools through the newly-created Office of School Turnaround

while districts supported schools through the district RT3 grant coordinator and various district departments.

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.

As mentioned, the Georgia's Race to the Top application created the Office of School Turnaround as a separate entity from the Office of School Improvement to provide intensive and specialized support to the most persistently lowest-achieving schools in the state. However, 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 was that the grant funding allowed GaDOE to assign school improvement specialists to one or two schools instead of three or more schools. As a result, they were in the school more often than in previous years. In addition, the grants provided schools with more resources to implement proposed initiatives, whereas in previous years school improvement specialists felt that they made recommendations that schools rarely acted upon because of a lack of financial and human resources.

“It seems we have more focus on urgency. Effective practices and concepts are the same, but there is increased urgency in the division of school turnaround.”

–School Improvement Specialist

The Offices of School Turnaround and School Improvement use the same GaDOE School Improvement Fieldbook to guide their work. According to this process, each school is assigned a school improvement specialist to support schools in the school improvement planning process, data analysis to inform instruction, professional learning, and curriculum implementation.⁴² School improvement specialists also serve on the school leadership team and in some cases serve as a coach for school leaders. Each school improvement specialist served one or two schools and typically supported each school for

two to four days a week. Lead school improvement specialists supervise school improvement specialists and conduct quarterly monitoring visits with school and sometimes district leadership. Lead school improvement specialists are also the liaison between school improvement specialists and district officials.

⁴² Georgia Department of Education. *Georgia's School Improvement Fieldbook: A Guide to Support College and Career Ready Graduates*, 2012, 16-17.

Most school improvement specialists worked for the Office of School Improvement prior to moving to School Turnaround. Without exception, they said that their practices were identical to their prior work. They often explained that the state’s practices were “best practices” and were applicable to any school improvement situation. As one lead school improvement specialist said, “Best practices are best practices. Research proven practice is going to be the same. It is how you aggressively implement them and how serious the school takes it. . . . In the past, when there was little or no money involved, they liked to listen to us, but the implementation phase was slower to come.” Most school improvement specialists are retired principals, superintendents, or curriculum directors, so they believed that their vast experience demonstrated that they had a strong understanding of how to turn around a school.

Despite these similarities in practice, school improvement and school turnaround have important differences. One of the biggest differences is the aggressive timeline. A school undergoing a turnaround is expected to demonstrate dramatic change in 18 to 24 months whereas school improvement focuses on incremental change.⁴³ To achieve this goal, schools need to have well-coordinated and seamless support from agencies that have the authority and capacity to make the decisions necessary to lead these efforts. As mentioned, this level of support can be provided from a lead partner or turnaround office. Our interviews suggested that this role was supposed to be satisfied in part by the school improvement specialist; however, they did not seem to have the necessary authority to make these changes. While SIG and RT3 schools had more specific expectations and funding to carry out changes than previous efforts, the school improvement specialists did not have any additional authority. For example, they often mentioned a lack of school-level operating flexibility, but despite being on the ground and having first-hand knowledge of the school’s challenges, the GaDOE school improvement process still required them communicate with districts through their lead school improvement specialist. The lead school improvement specialists often communicated with mid-level district officials with limited authority to make changes, particularly in larger districts. If this method did not work, then the lead school improvement specialist would communicate with the GaDOE Race to the Top or School Turnaround Office who would then reach out to the district superintendent. While this protocol provided a clear way to communicate challenges, it often delayed decision-making and change.

The interviews also suggested a disconnect between the school-based staff, including the school improvement specialists, and district and state leadership regarding challenges and barriers to implementation experienced in the school. In our interviews with district and state leadership, they often had more positive reports about school operations, culture, and results than school staff. This disconnect may explain why some of the barriers to implementation were not resolved within the first

⁴³ Rhim, 1

year or two of implementation. If higher-level staff did not acknowledge the barriers or minimized their importance, then it seems unlikely that they would have acted quickly enough to address them.

The Office of School Turnaround also supported schools through an annual Summer Leadership Academy. The Summer Leadership Academy provided a weeklong, structured opportunity for school leadership teams, which included administrators, instructional coaches, and teacher leaders, to develop their school improvement plans. As a whole, school personnel believed that the academy was pivotal in building a culture of collaboration at the school and developing a unified vision. Additionally, GaDOE also offered fall and spring RT3 and SIG conferences to update schools on grant implementation that school leadership also believed were helpful.

In addition to using the GaDOE school improvement process to support lowest-achieving schools, the RT3 and State School Turnaround Office were responsible for communicating with districts and schools about the grants. GaDOE leadership typically communicated directly with districts, who would then share the information with their schools. Overall, school- and district-level officials were pleased with the quality and frequency of communication from GaDOE officials and school improvement specialists. Without exception, district officials found that the state officials were accessible and responsive to questions. School officials relied heavily on their school improvement specialist for information directly from the state, even though a senior official in the Office of School Turnaround said that informing schools about state initiatives was not part of their job description.

Many school leaders said that they filtered information to their staff rather than passing it directly. As a result, teachers and coaches frequently suggested that the GaDOE should communicate directly with them to improve information consistency.

Overall, school and district staff were pleased with the level of support and communication that they received from the RT3 and State School Turnaround Offices. We sometimes asked district staff if they felt the support they received was more focused on compliance or support. The responses were mixed, but across the board, school leaders and district staff felt they received the support or assistance that they needed. At the same time, they complained that the compliance guidelines seemed inconsistent, repetitive, and burdensome at times.

Major Finding

Schools were less satisfied with support and communication from the district than from the GaDOE.

While the feedback about the state support was generally positive, school-level feedback on district support and communication was more negative. As mentioned in previous sections, 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. The dissatisfaction was most concentrated in districts that changed superintendents in the middle of the grant. Four of the six districts included in this study fell into this category. In many cases, the staff responsible for writing the SIG applications or RT3 turnaround plans no longer worked for the district, so superintendents and new staff had to learn about grant requirements and try to restore institutional knowledge. Implementation was delayed as superintendents and new senior staff learned about the grant requirements. In some cases, the new superintendent's vision did not seem to align with the grant, so school staff experienced more barriers to implementation than before the change.

Another possible explanation for why districts were not able to provide adequate support from the perspective of school staff is that they lacked a well-coordinated, seamless approach for support and communication. Our interviews indicated that only one school felt like it had a strong working relationship with its respective district. The school was located in a small district with only one lowest-achieving school, so the principal had direct communication with the superintendent and the district grant coordinator. The three of them met regularly, and the interviews with each person individually reflected the high degree of collaboration that existed between them. Unfortunately, the larger districts did not have that degree of collaboration. Often school leaders reported to mid-level

supervisors who reported to deputy superintendents who reported to superintendents, which led to breakdowns in support and communication. Instead of one department being able to offer comprehensive support, inclusive of human resources, purchasing, facilities, curriculum, transportation, and other necessary areas, to all schools, district personnel assigned to the school had to negotiate with various departments for important decisions.

Our interviews with district staff painted a different picture. District staff often acknowledged challenges with early implementation but overall felt hopeful that the remainder of the grant would be implemented fully and successfully. District staff often spoke in great detail about the level of support that they provided to schools. In most cases, the district staff shared that district curriculum staff provided professional development, participated in school data analysis, and made frequent visits to the schools. Overall, the districts reported a high-level of engagement with schools. However, many

“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

of the school interviews did not reflect the same level of engagement. Teacher and instructional coach interviews rarely even mentioned district support. As such, it seems that there is a disconnect between either the support that districts are providing or how school staff perceive that support.

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. In some cases, they said that they received conflicting messages from different district departments. As a result, the perceived disconnect among teachers and coaches may be due to a breakdown in communication between the principal and staff, between district departments, or between the school and the district.



Recommendations for Improvement

GOSA concluded each interview by asking the school or district officials how the work can be improved going forward. Most of the feedback centered on 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.

Increase operating flexibility for school leaders.

One of the largest commonalities across schools was the lack of operating flexibility for principals, particularly in terms of staffing and budget decisions. Many school leaders faced delays in hiring or acquisitions of technology due to district red tape. Additionally, principals often did not have freedom to control hiring and firing within their school. Without this power, school leaders cannot be expected to make dramatic transformation over the three year period.

Increase direct communication between GaDOE and the school.

School-level personnel often reported hearing inconsistent messages from the principal, district leadership, and GaDOE officials. Teachers and staff recommended that GaDOE provide direct communication, whether through email or newsletters, with school staff to ensure that initiatives are properly understood. In the absence of this communication, they depended on school improvement specialists to answer questions, which is not part of their job description.

Lengthen school turnaround time beyond three years or provide a plan to support schools after grant ends.

Many interviewees believed that dramatic school turnaround could not occur in just three years. They believed that if the turnaround time was lengthened to between five and seven years, it would allow a cohort of students to matriculate through a school. As one school improvement specialist stated about progress at his school, “Right now, it’s in the jello and its firm, but it’s not concrete yet. . . . It is a different culture, but it is still fragile. They have to be allowed to hang onto the components they have worked to put together.” While this recommendation does not align with the structure of the grants, the GaDOE and LEAs should consider how lowest-achieving schools can sustain these reforms after the grant ends. Additionally, any planned efforts to sustain reforms should be communicated to schools as early as possible to minimize uncertainty about programming, which could undermine staff retention.

Improve the stability of grant expectations and compliance guidelines.

School personnel felt like grant expectations and compliance guidelines changed frequently, and they often wasted valuable time filling out duplicate forms or meeting changed expectations. As a result, they believed that GaDOE and their respective district should streamline reporting and keep expectations consistent.

Beginning in fall 2012, the Office of School Turnaround implemented Indistar, a new online performance management system, in lowest-achieving schools. Indistar allows school, district, and state personnel to update progress toward school turnaround goals in a central hub. While this system will not increase stability of grant expectations, GaDOE hopes this system will streamline the reporting process.

Provide training for local board members and new district leadership about grant requirements.

Interview participants at all levels believed that one barrier to implementation was that LEAs did not prioritize lowest-achieving schools when making decisions. Part of this barrier may have been a result of having new superintendents in four of the six districts. The new superintendents were forced to implement the former superintendents' plans and may not have placed as much priority on lowest-achieving schools. In addition, the tight timeline to apply for SIG may have pushed some LEAs to participate in SIG without full understanding of what the grant would require. In the case of RT3 lowest-achieving schools, districts did not have a choice in whether to participate once the GaDOE identified the lowest-achieving schools because they had already signed the Memorandum of Understanding for RT3 participation. Regardless of the source, the widespread pushback on certain aspects of the plan, such as changing the school leader and prioritizing hiring, demonstrated a lack of buy-in. Additionally, staff members in departments without a direct connection to the work, such as human resources and operations, lacked an understanding of the scope of the work. Going forward, GaDOE should provide information and training to school board members and district staff about the requirements of the grant, particularly where the funding can and cannot be spent.

Increase training and support for upcoming statewide initiatives.

On top of feeling overwhelmed by the turnaround work, school staff felt unprepared for statewide initiatives like the implementation of Common Core Georgia Performance Standards (CCGPS), the new Teacher and Leader Keys Evaluation Systems (TKES/LKES), and the requirements of Georgia's waiver from parts of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Consequently, they asked for more training and support on current reforms before the GaDOE pursues further initiatives.

Make the RT3 and SIG district grant coordinator a cabinet level position or create a district turnaround office.

While the SIG grant requirements call for a district-level grant coordinator to support the work, the person in this position often has limited authority to advocate for lowest-achieving schools to ensure the grant requirements are met. Several interviewees recommended that the grant coordinator should be elevated to a cabinet level position so that he or she has the ability to remove district barriers to implementation. Without this authority, grant coordinators can only inform senior level officials in operations, finance, and human resources about the grant requirements, but they still have ultimate responsibility over policies that have the potential to undermine the work. In some cases, larger districts could form a school turnaround office to support the efforts.

For future grants, offer a planning grant to precede the actual grant application.

While school-level officials reported having a tight but manageable timeline in most cases, they also operated without the framework of the transformation model. If districts had more time to plan and investigate the feasibility of other reform models, more of them may have chosen to implement other reform models or sought external partners for the turnaround work. As a result, one state-level official recommended that future grants should offer a planning grant or extended time that would provide schools with more time to decide whether they want to apply and develop a plan tailored to their needs. When offered a three-year grant for up to \$2 million a year to one school, districts may have jumped at the opportunity without adequately understanding what would be required or developing a plan to seek radical change.

Conclusion

“I hate to be cynical, but it is like, ‘race to where?’ It doesn’t seem like we’re racing. It’s more of a trot.”
—Instructional coach

Georgia’s lowest-achieving schools have embarked on a journey to drastically improve their culture and operations and ultimately achieve better outcomes for their students. As evidenced by the feedback from the interviewees involved in this study, this work has not been easy. Early implementation of the transformation model included principal changes, significant teacher turnover, increased time spent on professional development, collaborative planning, and learning time, greater monitoring of teacher practice, and an overall disruption to the status quo. The school turnaround efforts deeply affected all schools involved, even those that were not fully implementing every component of the model.

As stated in research and reiterated throughout our findings, successfully turning around a school requires certain conditions, including strong leadership and collaboration at the school, district and state levels. The schools and districts included in this study had varying degrees of these conditions, which resulted in a variety of perceptions of and reactions to this work, as well as varying results for students. Delays at the state-level due to administration changes, significant turnover in district leadership, and lack of operating flexibility at the school-level were some of the most common barriers to successful implementation.

Regardless of the causes, dramatic improvement has been slow for most of the schools in this study. The quote from an instructional coach at the beginning of this section demonstrates a common perception among school staff—this work cannot be achieved quickly and is not sustainable. Delayed purchases and critical hires, unclear visions for the future, and overall fatigue from constantly changing school reform efforts have biased some staff against the reforms. The instructional coaches’ words are poignant because they articulate the challenges that lie ahead. In general, these schools have a lot of ground to cover in a short amount of time, and many of them are playing catch-up due to slow early implementation.

State and district leaders are confident about the schools’ chances. Seven of the ten schools in this study entered the 2012-2013 school year with new leaders, and all of them had firmer directives from the GaDOE. As one GaDOE senior leader said, “Last year was a compliance year. This year is more quality. . . This year is more fidelity of the work.” Prior to the current school year, GaDOE took a more active role in ensuring that schools had effective turnaround leaders at the helm and that districts clearly understood the non-negotiable elements of the grant. With the right people in place and districts that understand the importance of providing operating flexibility and removing barriers that inhibit implementation; these schools will have a much greater chance of success than in the past two years.

We hope this study not only shines light on early implementation in a sample of Georgia’s lowest-achieving schools but also initiates a larger conversation on how state, district, school and community stakeholders can work together to

support school turnaround efforts in Georgia. The recommendations from the interviews offer some ways that leaders can strengthen this work.

Going forward, the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement will continue monitoring and evaluating Georgia’s efforts to turn around lowest-achieving schools. As mentioned in the Introduction, this evaluation is the first report in a series about this Race to the Top reform area that will stretch through fall 2014. Figure 5 provides an overview of the multiple methods GOSA will use in future evaluations.

Table 12: Evaluating Lowest-Achieving Schools in the Future
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. We expect to disseminate a final report in December 2014
Case study. GOSA will employ the “success case study” method to look at practices that have proven successful in terms of outcomes. We expect to disseminate the case study in November/December 2013.
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.

In conclusion, research shows that low-performing schools can dramatically change in as little as 18 to 24 months.⁴⁴ The work of organizations like Mastery Charter Schools, Academy for Urban School Leadership, and Green Dot demonstrates that while school turnarounds require significant investment and commitment, they are possible.⁴⁵ We know that Georgia’s educators and students are capable of accomplishing this goal, and through effective collaboration and determination, Georgia will have fewer low-achieving schools as a result of this important work.


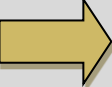
⁴⁴ Rhim, 3

⁴⁵ Arne Duncan, June 22, 2009.



Appendix A: School Turnaround Theory of Change

Table 13: School Turnaround Theory of Change

<i>If schools that have been struggling with persistently low achievement receive the following:</i>		<i>Then the schools will have the following:</i>		<i>And then finally,</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly effective educators • Operating flexibility to make decisions that are in their best interest • Increased time for instruction, enrichment, collaboration and professional development • Appropriate social-emotional and community-oriented services and supports; 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School leaders that demonstrate turnaround leader competencies and take actions aligned with turnaround success • Teachers that deliver standards-based, data-driven, and differentiated instruction • Schedules that provide more time for productive learning and opportunities for teacher planning, collaboration and professional development • Positive and supportive learning environments with high expectations for students that have been created, in part, by engaged parents and community partners 		<p>The schools will demonstrate improved student outcomes.</p>
<p>Source: Governor's Office of Student Achievement</p>				

Appendix B: School Improvement Grant Eligibility Criteria

Table 14: U.S. Department of Education Eligibility Criteria for SIG

School Improvement Grant Eligibility Criteria

Tier I schools: any Title I school in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring that:

- (1) is among the lowest-achieving 5% of those schools in the State (or the lowest- achieving five such schools); or
- (2) is a high school that has a three-year average graduation rate < 60%.

Calculations to identify **Tier I** schools were based on:

- (1) 2009-10 Title I schools in improvement, corrective action, and restructuring,
- (2) lack of progress in academic achievement over a two-year period for all students in reading/language arts and math combined

Tier II Schools: any secondary school that is eligible for, but does not receive, Title I, Part A funds and

- (1) is among the lowest-achieving 5% of such secondary schools in the State or the lowest- achieving five such secondary schools); or
- (2) is a high school that has a three-year average graduation rate <60%.

Calculations to identify **Tier II** schools were based on

- (1) Proficiency combined with lack of progress over time for all students
- (2) Proficiency based on combined scores for reading/language arts and math for all students
- (3) Lowest-achieving schools chosen from lowest to highest proficiency rates stopping at 5%

*SIG also defines Tier III eligibility. However, only Tier I and II schools were selected as lowest-achieving schools

Source: Georgia Department of Education & Georgia's Race to the Top Application

Appendix C: School Improvement Grant Eligibility Criteria

Table 15: List of 40 Race to the Top Lowest-Achieving Schools

School	District	Category
Crim High School	Atlanta Public Schools	SIG Cohort I
Douglass High School	Atlanta Public Schools	SIG Cohort I
Therrell School of Health and Science	Atlanta Public Schools	RT3
Harper-Archer Middle School	Atlanta Public Schools	RT3
Therrell School of Law, Government and Public Policy	Atlanta Public Schools	SIG Cohort II
Fitzgerald High School	Ben Hill County	RT3
Rutland High School	Bibb County	SIG Cohort I
Northeast High School	Bibb County	SIG Cohort I
Southwest High School	Bibb County	SIG Cohort I
Central High School	Bibb County	SIG Cohort II
William S. Hutchings Career Center	Bibb County	SIG Cohort I
Burke County High School	Burke County	SIG Cohort I
Beach High School	Chatham County	SIG Cohort I
Groves High School	Chatham County	SIG Cohort II
Lovejoy Middle School	Clayton County	RT3
Dade County High School	Dade County	SIG Cohort I
Freedom Middle School	DeKalb County	RT3
McNair High School	DeKalb County	SIG Cohort I
Avondale High School	DeKalb County	RT3
Towers High School	DeKalb County	SIG Cohort II
McNair Middle School	DeKalb County	RT3
Clarkston High School	DeKalb County	SIG Cohort I
Albany High School	Dougherty County	SIG Cohort II
Henry County High School	Henry County	SIG Cohort I
Greenville High School	Meriwether County	SIG Cohort II
Greenville Middle School	Meriwether County	RT3
Baker Middle School	Muscogee County	RT3
Spencer High School	Muscogee County	SIG Cohort I
Eddy Middle School	Muscogee County	RT3
Jordan Vocational High School	Muscogee County	SIG Cohort I
Peach County High School	Peach County	SIG Cohort I
Hawkinsville High School	Pulaski County	SIG Cohort I
Butler High School	Richmond County	RT3
Josey High School	Richmond County	SIG Cohort I
Laney High School	Richmond County	SIG Cohort I
Glenn Hills High School	Richmond County	SIG Cohort I
Murphey Middle Charter School	Richmond County	RT3
Griffin High School	Spalding County	SIG Cohort I
Cowan Road Middle School	Spalding County	RT3
Newbern Middle School	Valdosta City	RT3

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