Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools

Recommendation 1
Signal the need for dramatic change with strong leadership.

Recommendation 2
Maintain a consistent focus on improving instruction.

Recommendation 3
Make visible improvements early in the school turnaround process (quick wins).

Recommendation 4
Build a committed staff.

This recommendation is one of four described in the WWC Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools Practice Guide (Herman et al., 2008). Although each recommendation can be implemented independently, the recommendations will be most effective when implemented together as part of a cohesive approach.

Recommendation 2

Maintain a consistent focus on improving instruction.

To improve low-performing schools, maintain a strong focus on enhancing instruction. Use data to set clear instructional goals, implement immediate changes to teaching practices, and continuously evaluate student progress. Regularly reassess instructional methods to ensure ongoing improvement and goal alignment.

Strategy 1

Use data to inform decisions.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 2 (Instructional leadership), Standard 3 (Effective Management), Standard 4 (Climate), Standard 8 (Staff Development)

Data-based decision making in schools involves systematically collecting, analyzing, and using various types of data to drive instructional improvements and schoolwide reforms. Turnaround schools should leverage student achievement data, classroom assessments, and school performance metrics to identify gaps in learning and areas requiring targeted intervention. School leaders should establish data teams to lead this effort, ensuring the integration of multiple data sources, including standardized assessments, attendance, discipline, fiscal expenditures, and course enrollment trends.

Schools should analyze data at three levels: schoolwide, to address institutional weaknesses and set improvement goals; classroom-level, to refine instructional strategies; and student-level, to personalize learning interventions. Educators can use data to identify students' needs, assess program effectiveness, and guide curriculum adjustments. Observations, student work samples, and climate surveys can further inform instructional planning.

Schools can ensure continuous improvement by fostering a data-driven culture, which supports aligned instructional practices with student needs and enhances achievement and overall academic success.

Example

Jefferson Middle School, a historically low-performing school, is implementing a data-driven turnaround strategy to improve student achievement. The principal establishes a Data Leadership Team composed of administrators, teachers, and support staff to oversee the process.

Step 1: Schoolwide Data Analysis

The team first examines state assessment scores and finds that math proficiency is significantly below state benchmarks, with particularly low performance in algebraic concepts. Only 44% of eighth-grade students scored proficient or above on the state assessment, compared to a state average of 61%. Additionally, attendance data reveals a high rate of chronic absenteeism, particularly among eighth-grade students.

To address these issues, the team sets two key improvement goals:

- Increase the percentage of eighth-grade students scoring proficient or above on the state math assessment from 44% to 50%.
- Reduce chronic absenteeism by implementing targeted interventions.

Step 2: Classroom-Level Data Review

Teachers conduct common formative assessments to identify specific gaps in math instruction. The results show that students struggle with multi-step problem solving and fractions. Teachers also analyze peer observations and student work samples to refine their instructional approaches. To address these weaknesses, Jefferson Middle implements job-embedded professional development for math teachers, focusing on research-based strategies like explicit instruction and real-world problem solving. Teachers also receive support in using adaptive learning software to provide personalized math practice for students.

Step 3: Student-Level Interventions

The school disaggregates assessment data to identify individual students in need of intensive intervention. A group of at-risk students is enrolled in a daily math support class where they receive targeted small-group instruction. Teachers also track student progress weekly, making data-driven adjustments to instruction. Meanwhile, for absenteeism, the team cross-references attendance data with student achievement records. They discover that students with poor attendance are also underperforming academically. In response, Jefferson Middle launches a mentoring program, pairing students with staff members who regularly check in and provide encouragement. Additionally, family engagement efforts include home visits and family workshops to address barriers to attendance.

Step 4: Continuous Monitoring and Adjustments

Every six weeks, the Data Leadership Team reviews new assessment data, attendance trends, and discipline reports. If strategies aren't yielding the expected results, adjustments are made. For example, if math scores remain stagnant, teachers might revise their instructional strategies or increase intervention time. If absenteeism persists, the school might implement incentive programs or provide additional social-emotional support.

Results and Impact

Over the course of the year, Jefferson Middle sees a 10% improvement in math scores and a 20% reduction in chronic absenteeism. Teachers feel more empowered to use data in daily decision making, and students receive more targeted support. By embedding data analysis into all levels of decision making, Jefferson Middle is steadily transforming into a high-performing school where instruction is responsive, strategic, and focused on student success.

Strategy 2

Adjust instruction based on student data.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 2 (Instructional leadership), Standard 3 (Effective Management), Standard 4 (Climate), Standard 8 (Staff Development)

Teachers should use student data to continuously refine instruction, ensuring that teaching methods and content directly address students' needs. This strategy involves ongoing assessment, teacher collaboration, targeted professional development, and curriculum alignment to improve student outcomes.

Teachers meet regularly by grade level or department to review recent assessment results, discuss student progress, and collaborate on effective instructional practices. Teachers may use this time and information to regroup students across the grade level and plan for differentiation, ensuring each student receives targeted support based on their specific learning needs. Teachers benefit from opportunities to give and receive ongoing feedback through peer observations and mentoring, further enhancing their ability to adapt instruction effectively. Regular, structured collaboration time, such as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), plays a vital role in driving such instructional improvements.

Example

At Lincoln Elementary School, teachers and administrators use student performance data to guide instructional decisions and improve learning outcomes. Each week, grade-level teams meet with the principal to analyze assessment data from core subjects. Teachers generate weekly assessments and review student results, identifying trends and areas where students struggle. This ongoing analysis helps the teachers adjust instruction in real time.

In one instance, data revealed that students were struggling with vocabulary and reading comprehension. In response, teachers incorporated visual and nonlinguistic representations such as graphic organizers to support student understanding. They also implemented small-group instruction to provide targeted support for students who needed additional practice.

Mathematics data indicated that many students were not mastering key objectives. To address this, teachers developed a student growth monitoring tool to track progress on specific math skills. They used the data to regroup students based on learning needs, reteach concepts, and measure progress over time. If students continued to struggle, teachers provided one-on-one tutoring and additional interventions to reinforce learning.

Recognizing the need for ongoing professional development, the principal organized workshops focused on data-driven instruction. Teachers participated in collaborative planning sessions, peer observations, and coaching sessions with instructional facilitators. Vertical teams were also created across grade levels to ensure curriculum alignment and consistency in teaching strategies.

Strategy 3

Identify a focus area of need and create a plan for improvement.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision), Standard 2 (Instructional leadership), Standard 3 (Effective Management), Standard 4 (Climate), Standard 8 (Staff Development)

A key strategy for improving student achievement is identifying specific areas of instructional weakness and developing a targeted plan to strengthen teaching practices in those areas. This process begins with analyzing student achievement data and conducting a curriculum review to pinpoint gaps in learning and areas that require improvement. By examining assessment results, classroom performance, and instructional trends, principals and staff can determine priority areas for instructional focus.

Once an area of need is identified—such as low proficiency in reading comprehension or weak mathematical problem-solving skills—school leaders and teachers collaborate to develop a structured improvement plan. This plan includes clear objectives, specific instructional strategies, and measurable outcomes to ensure progress. Teachers may adjust lesson plans, incorporate new teaching methods, or implement targeted interventions to address the identified weaknesses.

To support these changes, schools provide professional development opportunities, ensuring that educators have the skills and resources necessary to implement best practices. Schools may also establish collaborative teacher teams, if they don't already exist, to facilitate data-driven discussions, monitor student progress, and refine instructional approaches.

By following a structured approach to identifying instructional weaknesses, setting focused goals, and implementing a clear action plan, schools create a systematic and sustainable path to improving teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes.

Example

At Roosevelt Elementary, school leaders and teachers noticed a pattern of low reading achievement, particularly in students' comprehension of expository text. To better understand the root cause, the principal and staff conducted a data review, analyzing standardized test scores, classroom assessments, and student work. Their findings confirmed that many students struggled with understanding informational texts, and a curriculum review revealed that teachers lacked sufficient instructional materials and strategies for teaching this skill effectively.

With this information, the school developed a structured improvement plan to strengthen reading comprehension instruction. First, teachers collaborated to design additional lessons focused on expository text comprehension. These lessons incorporated graphic organizers, summarization techniques, and structured questioning strategies to help students process and retain information.

To ensure teachers had the skills and resources needed to implement these strategies effectively, the school invested in targeted professional development. Educators attended training workshops on teaching comprehension and reading specialists provided in-class coaching to support implementation. Additionally, the school purchased supplemental instructional materials specifically designed to reinforce comprehension skills.

Recognizing that some students require extra support, the school implemented targeted interventions. Students who demonstrated the lowest achievement on comprehension assessments received one-on-one tutoring and small-group instruction tailored to their specific needs.

As part of the ongoing improvement effort, Roosevelt Elementary also introduced a student growth monitoring tool to track progress over time. Teachers met regularly in collaborative planning sessions to review student performance data, refine instructional strategies, and adjust interventions as needed. By aligning curriculum, instruction, and professional development with student needs, Roosevelt Elementary created a systematic and data-driven approach to improving reading comprehension, ultimately leading to stronger student achievement in literacy.

Strategy 4

Model instructional leadership.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision), Standard 2 (Instructional leadership), Standard 3 (Effective Management), Standard 4 (Climate), Standard 8 (Staff Development)

Effective school leaders actively engage in instructional leadership by being highly visible in classrooms and directly involved in improving teaching and learning. By regularly observing instruction—spending as much as 40% of their time in classrooms in some schools—principals demonstrate a commitment to high-quality teaching and ensure alignment with standards, curricula, and assessments.

Strong instructional leadership involves more than just oversight; it requires leading by example, setting clear goals, and using data to drive decisions. Principals guide the instructional improvement process by analyzing both achievement and non-achievement data, identifying areas for growth, and ensuring that teachers receive the necessary support to enhance their instructional practices.

By maintaining a focus on targeted, measurable goals, school leaders create a culture of continuous improvement. Their active presence reinforces the importance of effective teaching, fosters collaboration, and provides teachers with real-time feedback, ultimately leading to stronger student achievement.

Example

At Washington Elementary, the principal, Ms. Carter, embodies strong instructional leadership by being actively engaged in improving teaching and learning. Recognizing the need for a more data-driven approach to instruction, she established a schoolwide database tracking system to store and analyze student progress on benchmark assessments. She worked closely with teachers to disaggregate data, create spreadsheets, and conduct item analysis, helping them monitor student growth and refine their instructional strategies.

Beyond data analysis, Ms. Carter is a highly visible presence in classrooms, spending a significant portion of her time observing instruction. Alongside the assistant principal, she conducts short, informal classroom visits, providing teachers with immediate feedback through a one-page summary shared within 24 hours. These observations are used not for evaluation but as a tool to support teachers in honing their instructional practices.

Ms. Carter also ensures that instruction remains aligned with standards, curricula, and assessments by working collaboratively with school planning teams. They regularly analyze student work and assessment data, making informed decisions about adjustments needed in instruction. She actively participates in every phase of instructional planning, from setting measurable goals to guiding professional development initiatives tailored to identified areas of need.

Strategy 5

Provide tailored and differentiated professional development.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision), Standard 2 (Instructional leadership), Standard 3 (Effective Management), Standard 4 (Climate), Standard 8 (Staff Development)

Effective professional development is data-driven, differentiated, and targeted to address specific instructional needs identified through student achievement and instructional analysis. Schools must ensure that teachers have both content knowledge and pedagogical skills to deliver high-quality instruction. This includes understanding subject-specific concepts, such as how students learn to read, as well as mastering instructional strategies, like modeling thinking processes for comprehending expository text.

Professional development can be delivered through a variety of intensive, job-embedded approaches. Schools may provide:

- Instructional coaches dedicated to supporting teachers in key subject areas like reading and mathematics.
- Teacher-led modeling, where experienced educators demonstrate lessons, observe colleagues, and offer structured feedback.
- External technical assistance providers who work directly with teachers through on-site training and support.
- Specialized learning academies that deepen teachers' subject knowledge and instructional expertise.

To maximize the impact of professional development, schools should also offer ongoing pedagogical and structural supports that encourage collaboration among teachers. As teachers implement new instructional strategies, they benefit from regular coaching, peer support, and opportunities to refine their practice. By aligning professional development with instructional goals and ensuring sustained support, schools empower teachers to translate their learning into daily classroom instruction, ultimately improving student achievement.

Example

At Lincoln Academy, school leaders recognized that student performance in mathematics and science was below expectations, and a review of instructional practices revealed that teachers needed additional content knowledge and new strategies to improve student learning. To address these gaps, the school implemented a targeted professional development plan designed to strengthen both subject expertise and instructional techniques.

As part of this initiative, several teachers participated in weekly mathematics and science courses at a nearby technology institute. The school provided substitute teachers to cover their classrooms, allowing them to fully engage in these learning opportunities. The training sessions focused on deepening teachers' understanding of key mathematical concepts, integrating hands-on science activities, and using inquiry-based instructional strategies. To ensure that teachers effectively applied their new skills in the classroom, experts from the institute made on-site visits to observe instruction and provide coaching and structured feedback.

In addition to external training, Lincoln Academy organized teachers into grade-level and subject-area teams that met regularly to collaboratively plan lessons, share strategies, and analyze student progress. These professional learning communities fostered a culture of continuous growth, allowing teachers to support one another in implementing new instructional approaches.

Strategy 6

Conduct a comprehensive curriculum review.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision), Standard 2 (Instructional leadership), Standard 3 (Effective Management), Standard 4 (Climate), Standard 8 (Staff Development)

A comprehensive curriculum review ensures that instructional materials are high-quality and align with state and local standards while meeting the diverse needs of all students. This process requires teacher involvement, but schools may also seek external expertise from curriculum specialists to help align instructional content with standards effectively. Teachers must have a clear understanding of the standards, curriculum units, and effective teaching strategies for delivering instruction.

During the review, educators can apply the high-quality instructional material (HQIM) criteria EdReports has developed to evaluate whether instructional materials are high-quality, standards-aligned, and usable. EdReports has organized their criteria into three gateways.

Gateway 1: Focus and Coherence.
This gateway assesses whether the materials:

- Focus on key grade or course content (e.g., math concepts, ELA standards).
- Reflect a coherent and consistent progression of learning across grades.
- Reflect appropriate content and rigor for the grade level.

Gateway 2: Rigor and Mathematical Practices/ELA Knowledge Building
Gateway 2 assesses whether the materials:

- Balance conceptual understanding, procedural skill, and application (Math).
- Integrate the Standards for Mathematical Practice with content (Math).
- Support building knowledge through content-rich texts (ELA).
- Use complex texts aligned to grade-level standards (ELA).
- Provide opportunities for evidence-based reading, writing, and discussion (ELA).

Gateway 3: Instructional Supports and Usability
Gateway 3 assesses whether the materials:

- Are easy for teachers to use, adapt, and implement.
- Include supports for diverse learners (e.g., ELLs, students with disabilities, advanced learners).
- Offer tools for progress monitoring and assessment.
- Provide professional learning support and scaffolds for teachers.

Schools can conduct curriculum reviews in various ways. Leaders may provide a stipend for teachers to work on a committee to review curriculum for an agreed upon length of time, or time may be built into the school day, with substitutes provided, for teachers to collaboratively review curriculum. Collaboration is a key element of curriculum review. Districts can support the work by providing technical assistance and tools to support curriculum development and assessment alignment.

Example

At Franklin Middle School, administrators and teachers recognized inconsistencies in the curriculum that were impacting student achievement. A review of student assessment data revealed gaps in mathematics and science instruction, prompting school leaders to initiate a comprehensive curriculum review to ensure alignment with state standards and assessments.

To begin the process, the principal formed subject-specific curriculum committees, each consisting of teacher representatives from different grade levels. The science team discovered that while some concepts were reinforced across multiple grade levels, others were missing entirely, leading to knowledge gaps. Similarly, the math team identified skills that were inconsistently taught, creating difficulties for students transitioning between grades. Using this information, teachers worked together to map out a more coherent, sequential curriculum that ensured essential concepts were covered at the appropriate grade levels.

To support the review process, Franklin Middle provided stipends for teachers to meet in early mornings for 16 weeks to align the curriculum with standards and develop new lesson plans. Teachers in each department collaborated to revise instructional materials, ensuring they were research-based and focused on key learning objectives.

Additionally, the school restructured its instructional approach, creating four academic houses, each specializing in related subjects—mathematics, science, and technology. This new model allowed for greater interdisciplinary collaboration, with teachers working together to integrate concepts across subjects and reinforce learning in a cohesive way.

For further refinement, weekly grade-level meetings were implemented where teachers analyzed student work, developed aligned lesson plans, and adjusted instruction to better meet student needs. To ensure continuity, teachers also met periodically with cross-grade-level teams, verifying that curriculum progression was smooth and that students were well-prepared for the next grade.

To provide additional support, the district supplied technical assistance and digital tools to help teachers develop assessments aligned with the revised curriculum. These tools allowed for ongoing monitoring of student progress, ensuring that instructional adjustments could be made in real time.

Strategy 7

Progress monitor regularly.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision), Standard 2 (Instructional leadership), Standard 3 (Effective Management), Standard 4 (Climate), Standard 8 (Staff Development)

Consistently monitoring progress is essential for improving instruction and ensuring student success. School leaders and teachers must regularly analyze data, track student performance, and make instructional adjustments as needed to strengthen teaching and learning.

Principals play a key role in this process by conducting frequent classroom walkthroughs, reviewing lesson plans, and providing feedback on instruction. Their active presence helps maintain a focus on high-quality teaching and ensures alignment with instructional goals. Additionally, teachers should collaborate in teams to review student progress, identify struggling learners, and implement targeted interventions.

Example

At Horizon Elementary School, the principal and teachers implemented a systematic approach to monitoring progress to ensure continuous improvement in student learning. After identifying reading comprehension as a key area for improvement, they developed a targeted plan to strengthen instruction and track student growth.

To facilitate this process, the principal established a schoolwide database tracking system where teachers could easily access and update student performance data from benchmark assessments. The principal also trained teachers on disaggregating data, creating spreadsheets, and conducting item analysis to pinpoint student strengths and weaknesses. By using this system, teachers could regularly review assessment results and adjust instruction based on student needs.

In addition to data tracking, the principal and school planning teams conducted frequent classroom observations. These observations allowed administrators to evaluate instructional effectiveness, provide immediate feedback to teachers, and identify areas where additional support was needed.

Based on ongoing analysis, school leaders made targeted adjustments, such as adding professional development sessions focused on comprehension strategies and integrating supplemental curriculum materials to reinforce key skills. Teachers also met in weekly collaboration sessions to review student work, analyze progress data, and share best practices for improving instruction.

Potential Roadblock 1

Teachers may be unfamiliar with data-driven instruction and hesitant to analyze student achievement data in depth. Additionally, they may fear negative consequences or reprisals if their classroom data is closely examined, making them reluctant to fully engage in the process.

Suggested Approach. To ease teacher concerns about data analysis, school leaders should promote a problem-solving mindset rather than a culture of blame. Modeling data use as a tool for improvement and providing ongoing guidance can help teachers see its value in enhancing instruction. Specialized training or external support can build teacher confidence in using data effectively.

Potential Roadblock 2

A turnaround effort can be derailed by a weak or poorly designed plan, resistance from staff or the community, or a lack of strong commitment to change.

Suggested Approach. To successfully change instructional practices and improve learning, goals must be realistic and strategies must be effective enough to achieve meaningful results. A strong turnaround plan should be data-driven, clearly communicated to the school community, executed with competence, and adjusted as needed based on experience.

References

Herman, R., Dawson, P., Dee, T., Greene, J., Maynard, R., Redding, S., & Darwin, M. (2008). *Turning around chronically low-performing schools: A practice guide* (NCEE #2008-4020). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/WWC/PracticeGuide/7