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 3

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

Quick wins (visible improvements early in the turnaround process) can rally staff around the effort and overcome resistance, inertia, and initiative fatigue. Some quick wins can result from changes made quickly at the administrative level without needing teacher buy-in or approval from the district. Although these initial changes may not improve student achievement immediately, they can set the tone for change and establish a climate for long-term change. Additionally, the accumulation of quick wins can add up to substantial improvement in teaching and learning.

Schools may at times feel that they face insurmountable barriers to improvement. But when they identify one or two clear goals that can be accomplished quickly, the positive results show that it is possible to reach a school's overarching goal— raising student achievement. These quick wins help increase a staff's sense of collective efficacy and agency and build capacity to engage in continuous improvement. With that in mind, it is important to identify issues that can be addressed quickly and with noticeable success.

Strategy 1

Set narrow and achievable goals.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision), Standard 2 (Instructional Leadership), Standard 3 (Effective Management), Standard 5 (School/Community Relations), Standard 7 (Interpersonal Skills), Standard 8 (Staff Development)

School leaders should identify one or two narrowly focused and achievable goals that build on the school's needs and strengths, are important to staff, and can be achieved quickly. A narrow goal ("increasing the reading achievement of English language learners on a high-stakes test") can be achieved faster than a broad goal ("increasing the achievement of all students in all subjects"). Furthermore, a broad goal can be chunked into smaller incremental goals. For example, the reading achievement goal described above can be conceptualized as a sub-goal for the broad goal of improving achievement for all students across all subjects. The broad goal may feel overwhelming to staff, but the narrow and achievable goals provide a starting point for improvement.

The focus of the narrow and achievable goals will depend on the needs of the school. Case studies of successful turnaround schools suggest that some areas are particularly important and amenable to rapid change: the use of time, resources and the physical plan, and student discipline.

Example

At Jefferson High School, staff were overwhelmed by the enormity of improving student achievement across all subjects. While everyone agreed that raising test scores and improving behavior were priorities, the broad nature of these goals made it difficult to determine where to start. Principal Martinez knew that narrowing the focus to a specific, achievable goal would build momentum for larger improvements.

After reviewing student data and gathering staff input, the leadership team identified a specific and measurable goal: improving ninth-grade students' reading comprehension by 10% on benchmark assessments in one semester. This goal was chosen because ninth-grade students were struggling the most with reading, and early interventions could set them up for long-term success. The school launched a daily 15-minute structured reading block, where all ninth-grade students read and discussed high-interest texts. Teachers across all subjects incorporated reading strategies into their lessons and struggling readers were assigned targeted support during study hall.

By the end of the semester, benchmark assessment data showed a 12% improvement in ninth-grade reading scores, exceeding the goal. More importantly, teachers saw the impact of focused interventions and were motivated to apply similar strategies in other areas. This quick win built confidence and momentum, allowing Jefferson High to expand its efforts to other grade levels and subjects, ultimately contributing to broader schoolwide improvement.

Strategy 2

Identify strategies that can be implemented quickly.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision), Standard 2 (Instructional Leadership), Standard 3 (Effective Management), Standard 4 (Climate), Standard 5 (School/Community Relations), Standard 7 (Interpersonal Skills), Standard 8 (Staff Development), Standard 9 (Principal's Professional Development)

School leaders should consider strategies that minimize the need for others to make decisions or provide resources and financial support. A strategy that requires district review and approval or district funding is unlikely to be implemented quickly. Similarly, changing how teachers collaborate might require a consensus among all teaching staff, which takes time. School leaders should think about strategies that they have the authority and funds to implement and that do not require the involvement of all school staff.

For example, automated phone calls for absent students may reduce midday absences faster than having teachers meet individually with families of chronically absent students. However, quick wins do not preclude long-term strategies. Instead, quick wins can build momentum towards more complex and time or resources intensive improvement efforts. In the absence example, the school might immediately reduce midday absences with automated calls and then follow up with teacher-family meetings once staff are committed to the changes.

Example

At Jefferson High School, chronic absenteeism was a major issue, with many students leaving campus midday or skipping entire days without consequences. While long-term strategies, such as home visits and mentorship programs, were being considered, Principal Martinez knew she needed an immediate low-cost, high-impact solution that could be implemented without district approval or lengthy staff discussions.

She started by activating an automated call system that notified families as soon as their child was marked absent. The message emphasized the importance of attendance and encouraged families to follow up with the school. To reinforce accountability, security staff were stationed at key exit points to prevent students from leaving campus without permission. Additionally, the school's attendance clerk personally called the families of students with repeated absences to schedule a quick meeting with an administrator.

Within weeks, absenteeism decreased as students realized their absences were being monitored in real-time. With momentum building, Jefferson High began implementing long-term strategies, such as a peer mentorship program and family workshops on attendance. By focusing on strategies that could be implemented immediately, Principal Martinez addressed the issue quickly while setting the stage for deeper, more systemic improvements.

Strategy 3

Focus on use of time.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision), Standard 2 (Instructional Leadership), Standard 3 (Effective Management), Standard 4 (Climate), Standard 5 (School/Community Relations), Standard 7 (Interpersonal Skills), Standard 8 (Staff Development)

Changing how a school uses time can be pursued quickly, with immediate effects on instruction. School leaders can adjust schedules to increase instructional time, to provide time for academic support, and to give teachers time to collaborate on analyzing data and planning aligned instruction. Case studies of successful turnaround schools found that changing the use of time was a quick win for several schools. Some turnaround schools changed instructional schedules to maximize learning time, while others created time for teachers to plan and collaborate with colleagues in grade-level or content planning teams.

If a low-performing school struggles with maintaining its focus on academics, an adjustment in the schedule to ensure uninterrupted blocks of instructional time could provide an immediate focus on teaching and learning. For example, in case studies of turnaround schools, several secondary schools limited student access to electives until the students were performing at grade level. The time they would have spent on electives was spent strengthening their basic academic skills. In one school, core academic classes that are required for graduation could not be interrupted for assemblies, counselor visits, or other activities that would take away from instructional time. In another school, teachers started a Discovery Room, open throughout the school day and staffed with an experienced teacher. Students could go there for extra help, especially during electives or lunch.

Example

At Jefferson High School, frequent schedule disruptions, inconsistent academic support, and limited teacher collaboration time were preventing meaningful improvements in student achievement. Assemblies, counselor visits, and non-academic activities often interrupted core instructional time, making it difficult for teachers to cover essential content. Additionally, struggling students weren't receiving enough targeted support to catch up. Principal Martinez knew that adjusting how time was used could have an immediate impact on learning.

To create uninterrupted blocks of instructional time, she implemented a policy ensuring that core academic classes would not be interrupted for non-essential activities. Counselor visits, assemblies, and extracurricular meetings were moved to advisory periods or after school. Recognizing that many students needed additional academic support, the school introduced a structured intervention period during the school day. Students who were below grade level in math or reading were scheduled for targeted support sessions in place of electives until they demonstrated mastery of foundational skills. At the same time, teachers were given dedicated weekly collaboration time to analyze student data and adjust their instruction accordingly.

Additionally, Jefferson High created a Student Success Center, staffed by an experienced teacher, where students could go for extra help during lunch, study halls, or elective periods. Within the first semester, students who participated in targeted intervention showed noticeable improvement, and teachers reported feeling more in control of their instructional time. With fewer interruptions and more opportunities for academic support, Jefferson High was able to prioritize teaching and learning, setting the foundation for long-term student success.

Strategy 4

Provide common planning time.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision), Standard 2 (Instructional Leadership), Standard 3 (Effective Management), Standard 7 (Interpersonal Skills), Standard 8 (Staff Development)

Changing schedules can create common planning time for teachers. Common planning time for teachers can improve instruction and student discipline by providing a structure for problem solving and brainstorming while keeping the focus on raising student achievement. In case studies of successful turnaround schools, some teachers reported that common planning time was a critical element of their work, especially when a specific day, time, and agenda were set. Regularly scheduled planning time also provided stability and continuity in the collaboration and planning process. However, some teachers did not know how to make the most of the planning opportunities. In several case studies, the schools hired an outside facilitator or went to the district for specialized technical assistance. School leadership can also support productive collaboration, aligning practices to goals and maintaining focus. Additionally, creating teams of teachers who share common students can provide a focus for collaborative problem solving and planning.

Example

At Jefferson High School, teachers rarely had time to collaborate, and many felt isolated in their classrooms. Without a structured way to discuss student progress, instructional strategies, or behavior concerns, teachers struggled to address common challenges. Principal Martinez recognized that creating dedicated common planning time could be a game-changer for improving instruction and student support.

To make this happen, she worked with the scheduling team to adjust the main schedule, ensuring that teachers in the same subject areas had at least one shared planning period per week. She also created small, interdisciplinary teacher teams that worked with the same groups of students, allowing them to collaborate on academic and behavioral interventions. To keep these meetings focused and productive, each team followed a structured agenda, which included reviewing student data, sharing instructional strategies, and discussing student behavior concerns. Recognizing that some teachers were unsure how to use the time effectively, she brought in a district instructional coach to guide the process and model collaborative planning techniques.

Within a few months, teachers at Jefferson High reported feeling more supported and better equipped to meet student needs. They shared lesson plans, co-developed strategies for struggling students, and coordinated efforts to reinforce behavior expectations. Discipline referrals also declined, as teachers communicated more frequently about student needs and provided consistent support across classrooms. By making collaboration a priority, Jefferson High not only strengthened instruction but also built a more connected and effective teaching staff, setting the stage for long-term school improvement.

Strategy 5

Improve access to instructional materials.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision),
Standard 2 (Instructional Leadership), Standard 3 (Effective Management)
Standard 7 (Interpersonal Skills), Standard 8 (Staff Development)

Providing teachers and students with high-quality instructional materials and supplies is a simple but powerful quick win that can build trust and momentum in a school improvement effort. To ensure materials are high-quality, accessible, and available when needed, principals can take the following steps:

- **Ensure Materials are High-Quality:** Use the criteria EdReports has developed to evaluate whether instructional materials are standards-aligned, coherent, rigorous, and usable (See Recommendation 2 for a description of EdReports' high-quality instructional material criteria).
- **Streamline the Ordering Process:** Textbooks, instructional resources, and basic supplies should be ordered and ready for use before the school year begins. If the district procurement process is complex, designate a staff member to become the point person for tracking orders and troubleshooting delays. Digital tools, such as shared tracking spreadsheets or automated inventory systems, can help streamline this process.

- **Ensure Teachers Have a Well-Equipped Workroom:** A dedicated workspace with essentials such as a copier, printers, phones, computers, and collaboration space helps teachers maximize their time. This space should also include a comfortable area for teachers to connect, recharge, and collaborate with colleagues.
- **Foster a Culture of Sharing and Collaboration:** In some schools, teachers view their instructional materials as personal resources rather than shared assets. Creating a Teacher Resource Room—a centralized space stocked with high-quality curriculum materials, manipulatives, and professional development resources—can encourage collaboration. However, simply setting up a resource room is not enough. Leaders must foster a mindset shift by celebrating resource-sharing, offering collaborative planning time, and modeling transparency in instructional practices.
- **Ensure Equitable Access to Basic Supplies:** Teachers should not have to spend their own money on classroom supplies. Conduct a needs assessment to identify gaps in supply distribution across departments or grade levels. Implement a simple, predictable system (such as a monthly supply request process) to ensure all teachers have what they need without feeling the need to stockpile supplies.

Example

At Jefferson High School, teachers were frustrated by the constant struggle to get basic instructional materials and supplies. At the start of the school year, some teachers had full sets of textbooks, while others were missing key resources. The copy machine in the staff lounge was frequently broken, and teachers often purchased their own supplies rather than wait for slow district procurement. Recognizing that these challenges were hurting both morale and instruction, Principal Martinez made it a top priority to ensure that every teacher and student had what they needed.

She assigned an administrative assistant to track and expedite textbook and supply orders, working directly with the district office to cut through red tape. To foster collaboration, the school converted an underused classroom into a Teacher Resource Room, stocked with extra instructional materials, curriculum guides, and supplies. Teachers were encouraged to borrow and contribute resources, and a shared digital inventory system ensured that materials were easy to find. Additionally, the school implemented a monthly supply request system so teachers no longer had to worry about running out of basics like paper, markers, and sticky notes. Within months, teachers felt more supported, and they began collaborating more—sharing lesson plans, classroom strategies, and materials—helping to strengthen instruction across the school.

By making these practical improvements, Jefferson High School not only removed logistical barriers but also reinforced a culture of teamwork and support. Teachers reported feeling more valued, and student learning benefited as instructional time was no longer lost to resource shortages. Principal Martinez's focus on addressing these basic but critical needs provided a quick win that signaled to staff that the principal was serious about improving teaching conditions. This quick win laid the groundwork for deeper instructional improvements and a stronger school community.

Strategy 6

Use improvement to school facilities to signal change.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision), Standard 3 (Effective Management), Standard 4 (Climate), Standard 5 (School/Community Relations), Standard 7 (Interpersonal Skills)

Making improvements to school facilities, such as painting, fixing broken fixtures, and cleaning school grounds, can be a quick win that signals change for staff, students, and families. It is likely that the staff and the community will notice the improvements in the school's appearance. Although improving the appearance of a school will not directly impact student achievement, it can create a more welcoming learning environment and provide a visual symbol of improvement.

A school can start with small improvements, like replacing old displays with new displays of student work every two to four weeks. Larger facility improvements may require coordination with district maintenance staff, who can do many little things to improve the learning environment in classrooms, such as maintaining stable room temperatures.

Although painting the school may not be feasible, adding murals, posters, and student work to hallways can make a dramatic difference. Students can also contribute to the facility improvement efforts by painting murals or creating artwork that can be posted in hallways and classrooms. Other examples of quickly improving facilities are replacing broken chairs, painting lockers, displaying student work, and buffing floors.

Example

At Jefferson High School, years of neglect had left the building looking worn and uninviting. Hallway paint was chipped, student work was rarely displayed, and many classroom chairs and desks were broken or mismatched. The school community had become accustomed to the run-down environment, but Principal Martinez knew that small, visible improvements could help signal a fresh start.

She started with simple but noticeable changes. Teachers and students began rotating hallway displays of student work every three weeks, making the school's walls a celebration of student learning. She secured a small grant to replace broken chairs and desks in classrooms that needed them most, and worked with the district maintenance team to ensure that classrooms had stable temperatures. The biggest transformation came when students, in partnership with the school's art teacher, painted a mural in the main hallway depicting the school's history and values. Families and community members were invited to a "Jefferson Pride" clean-up day, where they helped plant flowers and decorate lockers.

Within weeks, both students and staff noticed a difference. Teachers reported that students took more pride in their school, and families commented on how much more welcoming the campus felt. While these improvements didn't immediately impact test scores, they contributed to a renewed sense of community and optimism, laying the foundation for deeper school improvement efforts.

Strategy 7

Establish a safe and orderly school environment.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision), Standard 2 (Instructional Leadership),
Standard 3 (Effective Management), Standard 4 (Climate),
Standard 5 (School/Community Relations), Standard 6 (Ethical Behavior),
Standard 7 (Interpersonal Skills), Standard 8 (Staff Development)

Addressing student behavior can be a quick win that can create the type of learning environment that supports improvements in student achievement. Developing student behavior plans or implementing practices from Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS) can reduce disruptions and increase the time and attention that teachers can devote to instruction. Addressing student behavior and discipline can also secure buy-in and support from teachers and lay a foundation for future improvement efforts focused on instruction.

In case studies of successful turnaround schools, the schools were able to quickly implement behavior strategies that helped create safe and orderly learning environments. Examples from the case studies include the following.

- One school had teachers and administrators maintain a visual presence in hallways and common areas during lunch and passing periods.
- A middle school partnered with families. The dean of students called the parent of every child who had a disciplinary issue and asked the parent to come to the school that day to reinforce the urgency of correcting the behavior.
- A low-performing middle school with 500 students logged 1,181 disciplinary referrals in one fall semester. The school made sweeping changes to the school schedule and reduced transition between classes, and disciplinary referrals dropped to 205 in the next semester.

Example

At Jefferson High School, student behavior issues were a major barrier to learning. Frequent disruptions, fights in the hallways, and a lack of clear expectations left both students and teachers feeling frustrated. Many teachers felt unsupported when addressing behavioral challenges, and disciplinary referrals were piling up. Principal Martinez knew that without a safe and orderly environment, meaningful academic improvements would be nearly impossible and staff would be unwilling to make changes to their instruction.

She started by implementing a schoolwide behavior expectations plan, drawing from Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Staff collaborated to define three clear, schoolwide expectations: Be Respectful, Be Responsible, Be Ready to Learn. These expectations were posted throughout the building, explicitly taught in classrooms, and reinforced with a new recognition system that rewarded students for positive behaviors. To address hallway disruptions, Martinez had all teachers and administrators present in hallways during passing periods, lunch, and before and after school, creating a visible and proactive adult presence.

One of the biggest changes was how Jefferson High handled discipline. Instead of sending students out of class for minor infractions, the school created a restorative reflection space where students could de-escalate, reflect on their behavior, and re-enter class quickly. For more serious issues, the assistant principal and dean of students personally called families the same day and requested that they meet in person to discuss solutions. This immediate response sent a strong message that behavior concerns would be addressed with urgency.

Within just a few months, disciplinary referrals dropped by nearly 50%, and teachers reported feeling more supported in managing student behavior. Students, seeing the consistent expectations and positive reinforcement, responded with improved behavior, leading to fewer disruptions and more instructional time. By taking quick but strategic action, Jefferson High established a safe and structured environment, laying the groundwork for deeper academic improvements.

Potential Roadblock 1

"Our school has a lot that it needs to improve and we do not know where to start."

Suggested Approach. A failing school needs to change in many areas, and families and school/district staff may push for addressing many goals simultaneously and immediately, making it difficult to focus on any one goal. The principal must be willing to keep the focus, even when pressured to broaden the goals pursued. Setting a goal that is clearly a priority for most stakeholders eases that pressure by ensuring an initial base of support. Setting a very short timeline for accomplishing that goal can also help. A quick win on one goal and turning right away to other important goals can help staff and families feel that their concerns will eventually be addressed.

Potential Roadblock 2

"Our staff is skeptical that leadership is serious about maintaining a focus on improvement. They have seen improvement initiatives come and go."

Suggested Approach. A quick win that is not sustained becomes yet another example of the transience of school reform and fodder for those who resist change. Accomplishing a quick win can persuade school staff that the school can and will change. But it is equally important to follow up the quick win with strategies to sustain that success. Cleaning and fixing the school could be followed with regular inspections and maintenance. Establishing a resource room for teachers could be followed with funds set aside to continually update the room. Providing uninterrupted blocks of instructional time could be followed with a review of how that time was used and professional development for teachers to use large blocks of time.

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