

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 4

Build a committed staff.

Creating a strong and committed staff is a foundational element of turning around chronically low-performing schools. Schools that have successfully improved student outcomes often share a common purpose and a deep belief that all students can learn and succeed. This shared vision fosters a sense of collective responsibility, ensuring that all educators are aligned in their efforts to improve instruction and raise expectations for students. When a staff operates as a cohesive unit, the focus remains on student success, and efforts to strengthen teaching and learning become more effective.

To build this level of commitment, school leaders may need to make strategic staffing decisions. In some cases, this means replacing or reassigning individuals who are not fully committed to the turnaround effort. In other cases, it involves hiring new staff who share the school's vision and possess the skills necessary to support rapid improvement.

However, strengthening an existing team is often just as critical. Recommendations 1–3 from the [Turning Around Chronically Low Performing Schools Practice Guide](#) (Herman et al., 2008) describe strategies to increase staff commitment to turnaround efforts. Additionally, leaders should provide professional development opportunities that build staff capacity and ensure that teachers and support personnel have the tools needed to meet the school's goals. While professional development is an essential part of all school improvement efforts, successful turnaround schools go beyond one-time training sessions. They cultivate a culture of continuous learning, collaboration, and high expectations to ensure that all staff members contribute meaningfully to the school's transformation.

Although increasing buy-in and building the capacity of an existing team are essential elements of school improvement and turnaround efforts, this recommendation focuses on how to assess, reassign, and change the composition of a school staff.

Strategy 1

Assess current staff.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision), Standard 2 (Instructional leadership), Standard 3 (Effective Management), Standard 4 (Climate), Standard 6 (Ethical Behavior), Standard 7 (Interpersonal Skills), Standard 8 (Staff Development), Standard 9 (Principal's Professional Development)

A successful school turnaround begins with a strong, committed staff, and that requires school leaders to carefully assess the skills, strengths, and mindsets of their educators. Not all teachers are equally prepared to work in high-need schools, and some may struggle to meet the unique challenges of a turnaround setting. To build a team capable of driving rapid improvement, leaders must identify which staff members align with the school's vision and are committed to helping all students succeed, regardless of their starting points.

This does not mean replacing large numbers of staff indiscriminately—research from both education and business settings suggests that wholesale turnover is not an effective strategy. Instead, a thoughtful approach that balances assessment, development, and strategic staffing decisions leads to better outcomes.

The best way for school leaders to understand the skills and commitment of their staff is through direct engagement. Observing teachers in action—seeing how they interact with students, structure their lessons, and respond to challenges—provides invaluable insight into their strengths and areas for growth. Beyond classroom observations, school leaders should take time to learn about teachers’ backgrounds, professional goals, and instructional approaches. With this understanding, leaders can make informed decisions about teacher placement, ensuring that educators are in positions where they can be most effective for their students.

Since this guide was published, additional research has reinforced the importance of targeted professional development and coaching as part of this process. Instead of viewing assessment as a one-time evaluation, school leaders should establish an ongoing cycle of feedback and support. By providing meaningful professional learning opportunities, leaders can help teachers strengthen their skills, deepen their commitment, and better meet the needs of their students. A data-driven, growth-oriented approach to staffing ensures that schools retain and develop talent while creating a culture of shared responsibility for student success.

Example

When Principal Elena Ramirez took over at Jefferson High School, she knew that turning around the school and improving student achievement would require more than just new initiatives—it would require a staff that was fully committed to the challenge. Rather than making immediate staffing changes, she spent her first few months actively observing classrooms, meeting with teachers individually, and reviewing student performance data. She wanted to understand not just who her strongest educators were, but also which teachers had the potential to grow with the right support. She quickly noticed patterns: some teachers excelled at building relationships with struggling students but lacked strong instructional strategies, while others had deep content knowledge but struggled with classroom management.

Instead of making hasty decisions, Principal Ramirez used this information to make strategic adjustments. She reassigned a veteran English teacher with exceptional classroom management skills to co-teach with a newer teacher who was strong in content but struggled with engagement. She also provided targeted coaching for teachers who showed promise but needed additional support in working with Jefferson’s diverse student population. In cases where teachers resisted the school’s new direction or showed little willingness to adapt, she had honest conversations about whether Jefferson was the right fit for them. Some chose to leave, while others embraced the challenge and committed to professional growth.

Throughout the process, Ramirez ensured that assessment was not just about identifying weaknesses but about recognizing strengths and creating opportunities for teachers to thrive. She established a culture of continuous feedback where teachers were supported in improving their practice rather than feeling like they were under constant scrutiny. By the end of her second year, student engagement had increased, achievement scores were beginning to rise, and Jefferson’s staff felt more unified in their shared mission of helping all students succeed.

Strategy 2

Assign staff based on skills and fit.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision), Standard 2 (Instructional leadership), Standard 3 (Effective Management), Standard 4 (Climate), Standard 6 (Ethical Behavior), Standard 7 (Interpersonal Skills), Standard 8 (Staff Development), Standard 9 (Principal's Professional Development)

When possible, school leaders should redeploy staff members who offer valuable skills but are not effective in their current role and bring in new staff with specialized skills and competencies for specific positions, such as intervention or reading specialists. Rather than simply keeping teachers in their current roles, effective school leaders take a proactive approach by aligning staff assignments with their strengths and the specific needs of students. Some educators may possess valuable skills but struggle in their assigned position. Instead of losing these teachers and staff, leaders can redeploy them into roles where they can have a greater impact. For example, a teacher who is passionate about literacy but struggling with classroom management might thrive as a reading interventionist, while a strong communicator with deep ties to the community could be more effective as a school-community liaison. Additionally, bringing in new staff with specialized expertise—such as instructional coaches, intervention specialists, or technology coordinators—can help fill critical gaps in schoolwide improvement efforts.

A data-driven approach to staffing allows leaders to make intentional adjustments that better support student learning. This could involve modifying job descriptions, differentiating staffing models, or creating intervention teams. Research suggests that co-teaching models, where general education and special education teachers collaborate, can improve outcomes for students with diverse learning needs. Similarly, leveraging specialists—such as reading interventionists who provide targeted literacy support—can enhance instruction without overwhelming classroom teachers. In one successful turnaround effort, a Title I reading teacher received additional training in Reading Recovery, enabling her to offer more intensive, research-based interventions. By rethinking traditional staffing structures, schools can create a more dynamic, responsive learning environment where every staff member plays a meaningful role in student success.

Beyond instructional staff, school leaders should also consider how to maximize the roles of support personnel. Lunchroom supervisors and paraprofessionals, for example, can be trained to assist with academic interventions, mentoring, or behavioral support during non-instructional times. Schools that make full use of all available staff—whether through creative scheduling, professional development, or role adjustments—are better positioned to provide students with the individualized attention they need. When staffing decisions are made strategically, schools can build a team that not only believes in the turnaround mission but is also positioned to carry it out effectively.

Example

When Principal Carrie Guest took over at Roosevelt High School, she quickly realized that while her staff was dedicated, some educators were not in the right roles to maximize their impact. One of the school's veteran science teachers, Ms. Carter, had deep content knowledge but struggled with classroom management, often losing instructional time due to student behavior issues. Meanwhile, Mr. Diaz, a dynamic and well-liked paraprofessional, had a gift for building relationships with students but was underutilized in his role. Rather than seeing these challenges as fixed, Guest looked for ways to restructure staff assignments to better support student success.

After several classroom observations and one-on-one conversations, Guest proposed a new staffing model. She reassigned Ms. Carter to a smaller intervention-based science lab where she could work with students in targeted, hands-on settings with additional behavioral supports in place. At the same time, she expanded Mr. Diaz's role, training him to serve as a student mentor and lunchtime academic coach, helping struggling students during study hall periods. Guest also secured funding to hire a reading interventionist, allowing English teachers to focus on grade-level instruction while ensuring students who needed extra support had specialized help.

Over time, these strategic staffing changes began to yield results. Ms. Carter felt more confident in her new role, where she could focus on her strengths without the stress of large class sizes. Mr. Diaz became an essential figure in the school's support system, fostering student engagement and improving attendance. The reading interventionist provided targeted literacy instruction, leading to measurable gains in student reading levels. By carefully assessing staff strengths and restructuring roles, Principal Guest created a school environment where both teachers and students were set up for success.

Strategy 3

Replace resistant staff.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision), Standard 2 (Instructional leadership), Standard 3 (Effective Management), Standard 5 (School/Community Relations), Standard 6 (Ethical Behavior), Standard 7 (Interpersonal Skills), Standard 8 (Staff Development), Standard 9 (Principal's Professional Development)

While school turnaround efforts often focus on supporting and developing staff, there are times when replacing resistant or ineffective personnel is necessary to create meaningful change. Research on successful school turnarounds has shown that a committed team is essential, and staff members who actively resist new instructional approaches or refuse to align with the school's vision can slow progress. While replacing staff is not always possible due to district policies or collective bargaining agreements, school leaders should explore all available options to ensure that every educator in the building is dedicated to improving student outcomes.

The key to effective staffing changes is distinguishing between those who lack certain skills but are willing to grow and those who are unwilling to adapt. Educators who are committed but need additional support should receive coaching and professional development to help them meet expectations.

However, when staff members consistently resist changes that are essential to improving student learning—such as implementing new literacy approaches or collaborating with colleagues on instructional strategies—school leaders may need to facilitate their transition out of the school. In some cases, this can involve transfers to other positions where their skills are a better fit, rather than outright dismissal.

More recent research underscores the importance of building a strong professional culture alongside staffing decisions. Effective school leaders create environments where high expectations are the norm and resistance to improvement is not tolerated. However, this process must be handled thoughtfully and fairly, with clear communication and documentation. By ensuring that all staff members are invested in the turnaround process, school leaders can create a team that is fully aligned in its mission to raise student achievement.

Example

When Principal Lauren Mitchell took over at Wilson Middle School, she quickly identified a major roadblock to the school's improvement efforts: a handful of veteran teachers who openly resisted change. While most of the staff embraced the school's new focus on student-centered instruction and data-driven decision making, a small group refused to adapt. One longtime math teacher, Mr. Reynolds, dismissed efforts to incorporate small-group instruction and continued relying on outdated lecture-based methods, despite evidence that students were disengaged and underperforming. Another teacher, Ms. Vaughn, refused to collaborate with colleagues, resisting the school's push for more team-based instructional planning.

Rather than making immediate staffing changes, Mitchell first attempted to support these teachers with targeted professional development, coaching, and peer mentoring. However, after several months, it became clear that their resistance was not a matter of skill development but a refusal to align with the school's turnaround vision. Recognizing that student success depended on having a fully committed team, she worked with district leadership and human resources to explore reassignment options. Mr. Reynolds was transferred to a district office curriculum role, where he could contribute his expertise without directly impacting student instruction, and Ms. Vaughn opted to retire rather than adjust to the new expectations.

With these changes, the school's culture began to shift. Other teachers, who had previously been hesitant to embrace new practices, became more engaged when they saw that high expectations applied to everyone. New hires who shared the school's vision brought fresh energy to the team, and professional learning communities flourished. By ensuring that every staff member at Wilson Middle School was committed to the turnaround effort, Principal Mitchell created an environment where both students and teachers could thrive.

Potential Roadblock 1

"Our teacher contract makes it difficult to dismiss or reassign teachers."

Suggested Approach. Collective bargaining agreements can often forestall immediate staff changes. Usually these agreements have stipulations for seniority: staff with more seniority might have priority in transfers, be able to choose the grade level to teach, or be able to select certain subject and class assignments. Soliciting support from the union at the outset of the turnaround efforts can be a key task. When a union has an opportunity to participate as an active partner in the turnaround efforts, it may be easier to create work-arounds or renegotiate certain stipulations in the contract.

Potential Roadblock 2

“Some of our most resistant staff refuse reassignments.”

Suggested Approach. In addition to the complications that may arise from collective bargaining agreements, teachers may be unwilling to leave a school. The principal can suggest early retirement if appropriate, reassign teachers to new areas within the school, or even take more decisive steps, such as not renewing a contract or counseling an ineffective teacher to leave the profession.

Potential Roadblock 3

“We struggle to fill existing teaching positions. Replacing teachers will be difficult.”

Suggested Approach. When a principal makes targeted staff replacements, replacements are not always readily available. For rural schools, replacing teachers can be an especially large challenge. Principals may need to “grow their own” by encouraging effective instructional assistants to seek certification and apply for an emergency credential. Principals can also consider providing incentives for new teachers.

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.
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