

Leader Strategies

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 1

Signal the need for dramatic change with strong leadership.

Turning around a chronically low-performing school requires bold, decisive leadership that signals urgency and a break from the status quo. Schools in this position often do not have the luxury of slow, incremental reform; instead, leaders must commit to significant, rapid changes that can quickly demonstrate progress and build momentum for sustained improvement. Leadership is the foundation of any successful turnaround effort, but it must be anchored in clear, strategic actions that produce quick wins and set the stage for long-term transformation.

Research on school and business turnarounds highlights the importance of leadership that is willing to challenge existing norms and focus relentlessly on results. Effective turnaround leaders do not simply manage existing systems; they analyze performance data, identify the most immediate areas for improvement, and implement high-impact strategies that lead to rapid, measurable gains. These early successes serve as catalysts for deeper change, shifting mindsets and creating a culture of continuous improvement.

However, strong turnaround leadership often faces resistance. Drastic changes can be met with skepticism from staff, families, and the community, sometimes leading to calls for leadership changes. Successful turnaround leaders understand that resistance is a natural part of the process. They remain committed to their vision while also fostering collaboration among teachers and staff, striking a balance between pushing for change and building collective ownership of the school's improvement efforts. Over time, as student outcomes improve and the school culture shifts, initial resistance often gives way to a shared commitment to success.

Since the publication of this guidance in 2008, research on school turnarounds has continued to emphasize the importance of transformational leadership, but with a growing focus on distributed leadership models, equity-driven approaches, and sustainable change. Modern turnaround efforts recognize that no single leader can drive change alone—effective leaders build leadership capacity among staff, engage families and communities as partners, and prioritize culturally responsive practices to ensure that all students benefit from school improvement efforts. By combining urgency with inclusivity and a focus on long-term sustainability, today's turnaround leaders can create lasting, positive change in schools that have struggled to serve their students effectively.

Strategies

1. Consider a change in leadership.

Although not possible or necessary in all cases, one of the most visible and effective ways to signal the need for dramatic change in a struggling school is to install new leadership. A principal who has been deeply involved in past practices may find it difficult to break from ineffective strategies, making a leadership change a powerful catalyst for transformation. Case studies of successful school turnarounds consistently highlight the role of a new principal in setting a fresh course. In many cases, schools that successfully improved student outcomes began their turnaround efforts with new leadership, and all underwent significant shifts in leadership practices. Teachers frequently pointed to the arrival of a new principal as the moment when real change began.

Successful turnaround principals do not simply take on an administrative role; they enter the school with a clear vision and a strong sense of purpose. From the very start, they set high expectations for both students and staff, making it clear that complacency and low standards will no longer be tolerated. Their leadership establishes a culture of urgency and accountability, ensuring that everyone in the school—teachers, students, and administrators—understands that change is both necessary and non-negotiable. This shift is not just about enforcing new rules; it is about transforming the school’s daily routines, instructional practices, and overall mindset.

However, while new leaders bring energy and determination, they do not act impulsively.

Instead, they take the time to deeply understand the school’s challenges, studying performance data and listening to teachers, students, and families. But they do not wait for perfection before taking action. Effective turnaround principals balance thoughtful analysis with decisive leadership, making immediate changes where necessary while laying the groundwork for deeper, systemic reform.

Since this recommendation was first published, research has increasingly emphasized that sustainable leadership change goes beyond replacing individuals—it requires creating leadership structures that distribute responsibility and build long-term capacity. Today’s successful turnaround efforts recognize the importance of leadership teams, teacher leaders, and collaborative decision making to ensure that improvements do not rely solely on a single individual. While strong leadership remains central to school transformation, the most effective approaches focus on building a lasting culture of shared accountability and continuous improvement.

Example

When Dr. Angela Ramirez stepped in as the new principal of Jefferson High School, she was met with skepticism from teachers who had grown accustomed to years of leadership turnover and stagnant student performance. The hallways were chaotic between classes, attendance was low, and many teachers admitted privately that they had given up hope that things would change. Rather than making sweeping proclamations on her first day, Dr. Ramirez spent her first few weeks walking the campus, sitting in classrooms, and listening to teachers, students, and families. She wanted to understand what was truly happening at Jefferson before making any major decisions. But she also knew that immediate action was necessary to send a strong message that the status quo was no longer acceptable.

Within her first month, Dr. Ramirez made a bold move—she restructured the school schedule to include dedicated time for teacher collaboration and student intervention. She also set a clear expectation that every student deserved high-quality instruction, requiring teachers to identify struggling students early and implement targeted support. To reinforce her commitment to change, she personally led a professional development session on engaging, data-driven instruction, signaling that she was not just issuing mandates but was willing to do the work alongside her staff. Some teachers resisted at first, unsure if this was just another short-lived initiative, but as they saw students responding to the new structure, momentum started to build.

By the end of the first semester, Jefferson High School had a different energy. Teachers who once felt isolated now met regularly to share strategies and track student progress. Dr. Ramirez continued to be a visible presence, celebrating early successes while holding everyone—herself included—accountable for improvement. While challenges remained, the school’s culture had shifted from one of resignation to one of possibility. The message was clear: real change was happening, and Jefferson High School was on a new path forward.

2. Signal a change in leadership practices.

If a change in leadership does not occur, a principal who remains in a low-performing school can still signal the need for dramatic change by transforming their leadership practices and reshaping the school’s culture. While this approach is challenging, it is possible for an established leader to create a fresh start by demonstrating a clear commitment to school improvement and a willingness to break from past routines. The key is for the principal to recognize the urgency of change, actively study best practices in school turnaround, and take decisive action to improve student outcomes.

To signal change effectively, principals must shift from traditional managerial roles to becoming instructional leaders who are deeply engaged in the teaching and learning process. This means spending more time in classrooms, closely monitoring teacher effectiveness and student progress, and addressing barriers to learning head-on. In many successful turnaround schools, principals who remained in place set a new direction by becoming more visible and accessible, directly tackling discipline issues, and ensuring that every decision aligned with high expectations for student success. By analyzing student achievement data, instructional practices, and school operations, these leaders identified ineffective policies and worked with staff to eliminate them.

A major component of signaling change is fostering a collaborative and supportive school culture. Principals who transform their leadership style often shift from a top-down approach to shared leadership, empowering teachers to take on more responsibility in decision making and instructional improvement.

Establishing leadership teams, appointing lead teachers, and cultivating teacher voice in school initiatives helps build collective ownership of the turnaround process. At the same time, strong school leaders model the behaviors and commitment they expect from their staff—demonstrating a personal investment in improvement efforts, eliminating distractions that take time away from instruction, and ensuring that the well-being of students and staff remains a top priority.

Since the original guidance was published, research has increasingly emphasized the importance of distributed leadership, staff buy-in, and sustaining long-term improvement efforts. Today's most effective school leaders recognize that transformation is not about one person dictating change but about fostering a schoolwide commitment to excellence. By adopting new leadership strategies, building trust with staff, and creating an environment where educators and students can thrive, even long-standing principals can lead their schools in bold new directions.

Example:

For years, Principal Mark Stevenson had managed Roosevelt High School much like his predecessors—focusing on administrative tasks, handling discipline reactively, and relying on teachers to manage instruction on their own. But after yet another year of stagnant test scores and declining staff morale, he realized that if the school was going to improve, he needed to change first. Rather than waiting for directives from the district or implementing another short-lived initiative, he took a deep dive into the school's data. He met with teachers to discuss their biggest challenges, listened to student concerns about classroom engagement, and observed instruction firsthand. What he saw was clear: the school lacked a shared vision, and both students and teachers needed stronger instructional leadership.

Determined to send a message that things were going to be different, Principal Stevenson started spending more time in classrooms—not to evaluate, but to support. He restructured staff meetings to focus on teaching and learning rather than administrative updates, and he created a leadership team made up of teachers who were eager to help guide the turnaround process. Instead of dictating policies, he empowered teachers to identify and eliminate ineffective practices, from outdated instructional strategies to unnecessary disruptions that ate into learning time. He also made himself more accessible, walking the halls between classes, checking in with students, and ensuring that discipline was handled in a way that reinforced a positive school culture rather than just enforcing rules.

By the end of the first semester, the atmosphere at Roosevelt High School had begun to shift. Teachers who had once felt isolated now worked together to improve their practice, and students started to take notice of the higher expectations. Principal Stevenson's willingness to change his leadership approach—by becoming a more visible, engaged, and collaborative leader—showed the entire school community that improvement wasn't just a directive from above, but a shared mission. While the work was far from finished, Roosevelt High was no longer a school stuck in old habits. It was a school moving forward.

3. Communicate the need for change.

Effectively turning around a struggling school requires not only internal change but also a clear, public commitment to transformation. By actively communicating the need for change and engaging the broader community, school leaders can reshape perceptions, build support, and create momentum for improvement. Just as businesses use marketing strategies to rebrand and attract customers, schools can launch outreach efforts to “sell” their vision of change to families, students, and community partners. These efforts not only help shift public perception but also reinforce the message that improvement is already underway.

In successful school turnaround efforts, leaders take proactive steps to engage families, local organizations, and even higher education institutions to secure resources and strengthen partnerships. Some schools have used community events, such as celebratory anniversaries, to reignite pride and commitment. Others have hosted informational sessions, coffee meetings, and one-on-one conversations with families to demonstrate that the school is moving in a new direction. These strategies help create a sense of shared ownership and reinforce the idea that the school is not just making small adjustments—it is undergoing a fundamental transformation.

Public campaigns can also play a crucial role in securing long-term support for turnaround efforts, particularly when a school’s future is uncertain. In some cases, community mobilization has been essential in preventing school closures, rallying support for new initiatives, and ensuring that positive changes continue. By clearly articulating a vision for improvement, celebrating early successes, and engaging key stakeholders in the process, school leaders can build the trust and enthusiasm necessary to sustain change. In today’s educational landscape, where transparency and community engagement are more important than ever, strong communication strategies remain a vital component of successful school turnaround efforts.

Example:

When Principal Dr. Angela Ramirez took over at Jefferson High School, she knew that the school’s reputation in the community was one of persistent failure. Families were enrolling their children elsewhere, businesses were hesitant to invest in school partnerships, and even longtime staff members spoke about Jefferson’s struggles as if they were inevitable. Principal Ramirez understood that turning the school around required not just improving instruction and student outcomes but also changing the way people perceived Jefferson High. If the school was going to succeed, the community needed to believe in its future.

She started small, hosting informal coffee meetings where families could ask questions, voice concerns, and hear directly about the school’s new vision. She reached out to local businesses and universities, securing tutoring partnerships, internship opportunities, and guest speakers to show students that Jefferson was becoming a place of possibilities. To rally support and renew school pride, she led an effort to celebrate the school’s 50th anniversary with a community-wide event that showcased student performances, academic achievements, and alumni success stories. What had once been a school viewed as struggling was now positioning itself as a place of transformation and potential.

As word spread, so did engagement. More families attended school events, local organizations began investing in student programs, and teachers felt a renewed sense of purpose. Principal Ramirez's commitment to sharing Jefferson's new direction had turned the school into more than just a campus—it had become a movement. By making the turnaround effort visible and inclusive, she ensured that the entire community played a role in Jefferson High's success.

Potential Roadblocks



Our staff is skeptical that change is possible and are tired of repeated improvement efforts that fail.

Suggested Approach.

Staff may be convinced that the school does not have the potential to change or will never change. Some staff believe that reforms “come and go,” so they can patiently wait out this set of reforms. When leaders in the school can couple signaling change with quick wins (see Recommendation 3), they may be able to dispel the entrenched mindset that the school will never change.



We do not have the ability and/or desire to change school leadership.

Suggested Approach.

If leadership does not change, the leaders may find it much harder to signal change immediately. They may not be able to separate themselves from the policies and practices that prevented changes in the past. In such situations, the district may want to consider providing specialized training for its principals through established programs that focus on intensive training in turnaround leadership skills, develop a school turnaround plan with a district team, and collaborate with a school support team on such content areas as data analysis, target setting, and action plans.

Principals can do other things to build stronger leadership for the turnaround:

- Visiting and learning from other schools that face similar challenges.
- Immersing themselves in student benchmark and achievement data and nonachievement data such as disciplinary referrals, class size, and use of instructional time to make informed decisions for the school.
- Engaging in additional instructional support activities.
- Drawing on district resources for help in responding to problems constructively.
- Seeking professional development focused on leadership.



Our community does not believe that the school can improve.

Suggested Approach.

Signaling change may be difficult when the prevailing community perception of the school is negative. School leaders may need to initiate a public campaign in the community to develop immediate support. In one case study, families had little confidence in the school, feeling that many students did not receive a quality education. To bolster the community's trust, the principal initiated early morning meetings with families when they dropped off their children at school, videotaped classroom and special activities for families, and invited families to observe classes.

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.

Strategies

1. Use data to inform decisions.

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.

2. Adjust instruction based on student data.

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.

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

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.

4. Model instructional leadership.

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.

5. Provide tailored and differentiated professional 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.

6. Conduct a comprehensive curriculum review.

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.

7. Progress monitor regularly.

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 Roadblocks



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.



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.



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.

Strategies

1. Set narrow and achievable goals.

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.

2. Identify strategies that can be implemented quickly.

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.

3. Focus on use of time.

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.

4. Provide common planning time.

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.

5. Improve access to instructional materials.

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.

6. Use improvement to school facilities to signal change.

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.

7. Establish a safe and orderly school environment.

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 Roadblocks



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.



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.

Content Area	Level of Evidence
Leadership	 Minimal

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.

Strategies

1. Assess current staff.

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.

2. Assign staff based on skills and fit.

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.

3. Replace resistant staff.

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 Roadblocks



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.



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.



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.

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