

# Three School Turnaround Principles for Success

With more than a decade of experience in school reform, WestEd's Fred Tempes knows how challenging it is for chronically low-performing schools to improve, but he also knows that almost any can accomplish dramatic turnaround. What it takes is "hard work around a core set of principles over an extended period of time," says Tempes.

Sounds simple, but a basic challenge is that no one can make the improvement happen for a school. Rather, the entire school community must pull together collectively and do the work for themselves.

"People look for a magic solution — the one textbook, program, or external provider who'll come in and help them get it right," says Tempes, Director of WestEd's Comprehensive School Assistance Program. "But it's really a matter of doing what needs to be done, and doing it collaboratively and with a shared sense of responsibility."

To assemble WestEd's deep knowledge and expertise on "what needs to be done," CSAP created a School Turnaround Center last year in response to President Obama's call to turn around the nation's 5,000 lowest-performing public schools.

The center's approach to school reform is based on research indicating that successful schools share characteristics that include effective school leadership, highly qualified teachers, a rigorous standards-based curriculum, and ongoing staff development. The real challenge is how to instill these characteristics in schools that have been chronically low-performing. To do that, says Tempes, schools must establish "a culture of improvement that is sustainable."


WestEd's School Turnaround Center supports schools in creating and maintaining such a culture by focusing on three closely linked and complementary operating principles: developing *local support and collaboration*, ensuring *effective implementation*, and building *mutual accountability*.

## Local Support and Collaboration

A collaborative approach to school reform has been critical to the turnaround of Noralto Elementary School in Sacramento, California. Serving a diverse, mostly low-income population in grades K-6, Noralto repeatedly had not met achievement targets and had been designated by the state of California as a school in need of program improvement for several consecutive years prior to working with WestEd.

Joseph Sassone, Project Director with WestEd's Local Accountability Professional Development Series (LAPDS), credits the teachers with coming together to find ways to raise achievement.

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"Thirty years ago, teachers were very isolated, but we now realize how important their collective knowledge is when it comes to moving learning forward," he says. "And the Noralto teachers really ran with that concept."

In 2006, working with Sassone and LAPDS, the teachers met over several days to examine the state standards and establish an English/Language Arts curriculum that spelled out exactly which skills students would need to master in each grade. "The key was that they decided collectively to guarantee that students would reach proficiency in a set of specific skills each year," says Sassone.

The next steps in the process — designing weekly assessments and analyzing the resulting data — involved ongoing, consistent collaboration. At grade-level data meetings, for example, teachers worked together to check student progress and to plan and revise lessons on those skills students were finding hardest to master. "I'd hear teachers say, 'It looks like your students did well here. What exactly did you do in that lesson?'" says Sassone. Even Noralto's daily, 30-minute "What I Need" intervention sessions for struggling students were handled collaboratively, with teachers working with each other's students in order to increase efficiency.

Says Sassone, "Bouncing ideas off of each other, working with each other's students — it's a matter of *sharing collective knowledge*. It has a lot of power."

Noralto's collaborative approach to turnaround has helped take the school's Academic Performance Index from 672 in 2006 to 797 today.

## Effective Implementation

Generating a plan for improvement is important to school turnaround, but that is only the beginning. A key lesson learned by WestEd researchers is that even the best of plans are only as good as their implementation. And effective implementation can be difficult to achieve.

"Implementation is easy to derail," notes Shirley Houser, a team leader with WestEd's School Turnaround Center. Critical to effective implementation of school improvement efforts is a strong focus on the long-term goals and consistent leadership to keep that focus front and center, says Houser.

Before joining WestEd's staff in 2007, Houser was principal of Monache High School in California's Porterville Unified School District. Serving a diverse population of approximately 1,900 students, the school was identified in 2004 as underperforming and in need of state monitoring. Monache chose WestEd to provide the support of a state-approved, external School Assistance and Intervention Team.

WestEd's support team determined that boosting the school's performance enough to remove state sanctions would require major changes in its English and math programs, especially instructional materials, class schedules, intervention classes for struggling students, and teacher support. Implementing action plans in these areas, Houser says, took effective leadership, teacher commitment, and two years of hard work.

For example, a new intervention system aimed at closing the achievement gap between white and minority students relied on academic coaches. The coaches worked closely with teachers, analyzing student data, then developing lessons designed to reinforce concepts and skills that proved hardest for students to master. The coaches also took to the classrooms to model exem-



plary teaching practices.

Houser emphasized to her staff that she wanted improvement not just in English and math, but across the curriculum. To that end, virtually all Monache students were enrolled in college-prep classes that included extra support for students who needed it as well as additional courses in which specific learning gaps were identified and addressed.

The work paid off. Monache's API increased from 672 in 2005 to 772 in 2010. Houser is not surprised. Once "everyone knows what is being done and why," she says, implementation takes on a momentum of its own, generated by "a certain energy that actually becomes greater than the individuals involved."

## **Mutual Accountability**

These days, through her work with WestEd's School Turnaround Center, Houser frequently finds herself encouraging educators to build in accountability, both individual and collective, for the outcomes of their school improvement efforts. "The kind of accountability we're talking about goes from the superintendent down to the instructional aides and back up," says Houser. Once staff members realize they "all have a stake in how this is going and all are going to be held accountable," they're more likely to support each other's efforts.


In the Mt. Vernon School District in Washington state, stakeholders are building in mutual accountability for school improvement "from the boardroom to the bus," says WestEd's Jon Frank. A Senior Program Associate with WestEd's School Turnaround Center, Frank has been working with district staff for three years through the state's Summit District Improvement Initiative. Frank's primary role is to make quarterly implementation review visits to Mt. Vernon, a 5,700-student, low-income district in the Skagit agricultural valley.

Frank says his visits are designed to "identify and try to celebrate the district's accomplishments, identify further challenges as well as any related roadblocks and obstacles, and then determine the next best steps" in the school turnaround process. During a recent visit, Frank was heartened when Mt. Vernon staff members, and in particular members of its leadership team, assumed most of the responsibility for the review. "In the past, they were in the fishbowl and I was looking in and facilitating from outside," says Frank. "This time, 85 percent of the facilitation was handled by Mt. Vernon staff engaged in thoughtful conversation about how to bring about reform. Yes, they held me accountable for putting the improvement process in place, but now the accountability is on their shoulders. They've come to like the process, and that, in itself, is a huge success."

As a result, Frank says staff members plan to continue monitoring student progress and adjusting instruction, as needed, on their own.

The district's school improvement plan calls on staff to set achievement growth targets for every student in literacy, mathematics, and English language acquisition, then differentiate their instruction to meet individual student needs. The plan also focuses on quality instruction, with principal walk-throughs viewed as non-evaluative, non-punitive opportunities for teachers to learn about research-based best practices.

Frank says teachers across the district "absolutely feel responsible to each other," which he sees as



key to significant, lasting school improvement. Although standardized math and literacy test data show some gains, district staff members say too many students are still performing below expectations. Still, Frank says middle school teachers report that incoming students are demonstrating stronger academic skills and abilities than in the past.

The district has developed a "data dashboard" or report card that is shared with the board quarterly. The board is very adept at focusing on student growth, says Frank. "If a report is not as positive as expected, the board asks questions such as 'What needs to be changed?' or 'Where do we have to do more?' and 'How can we help?' That's really healthy, and holds incredible promise for the district's future."

For more information about WestEd's Comprehensive School Assistance Program and its School Turnaround Center, contact Fred Tempes at 916.492.4039 or [ftempes@WestEd.org](mailto:ftempes@WestEd.org).