



Indicator: The district intervenes early when a school is not making adequate progress. (5631)

Explanation: Schools with persistently low performance, and schools with declining performance, do not tend to right themselves without intervention. The district is in the key position to detect poor or declining school performance and to take action to correct the situation.

Questions: What metrics does your district apply to determine which schools need quick and substantial action from the district? When and how often does your district make these decisions? Who in the district makes the decisions? What actions does the district take?

Because it is clear schools serving large numbers of children from low-income families or facing other challenges can be very successful in ensuring all or most students achieve high standards, district policies and practices should begin with the assumption that a turnaround is indeed possible. The challenge of improving a low-performing school is especially important from the perspective of equity since it is more likely that children at greater risk due to familial factors will be enrolled in such schools.

The problem of low-performing schools is also clearly a district responsibility. Therefore, districts should have well-developed and communicated policies and procedures in regard to them as an integral part of the reform initiative.

Drawing from research on high-performing organizations in the corporate world, a district would begin by having the right people in place in a significantly underperforming school *before* major restructuring efforts are undertaken. This might include efforts such as staff reassignments or the development and use of “turnaround principals.”

Plans for school improvement efforts should include benchmarks and timelines as well as more general goals, with explicit consequences identified for not meeting benchmarks. The message also needs to be clear in regard to expectations for what will be taught and when, if these have been established by the district.

The relationship of the district with a low-performing school should be different – tighter – from that with other schools. The low-performing school will require more attention from central office staff to provide support and monitor school efforts. Assistance provided might include, for example, helping school staff diagnose and address problems or temporarily assigning a subject area specialist to the school to work with teaching staff. The monitoring should be ongoing and might include review of data from periodic assessments, site visits, and coaches assigned to the school.

In addition, such schools may need additional resources for functions such as after-school tutoring or salary incentives for particularly effective teachers who accept reassignment to such schools. Another possibility might be a “waiver” from a district policy, for example, one that makes it easier for a principal to move a teacher out of the school.

Finally, a district should consider developing a system of incentives alongside potential sanctions. For example, a low-performing school might be given a specified period to improve. Improvement within this time would result in loosening of central office control on the school.

Source: Gordon Cawelti & Nancy Protheroe, *Handbook on Restructuring and Substantial School Improvement*. Retrieved from www.adi.org. See Download ADI Publications.

Clear district expectations that students meet standards must be accompanied by efforts to help students falling behind. While this is likely a part of every district's efforts, the approach used in the high-performing districts was characterized by an especially tight alignment between intervention and other aspects of the instructional process. In addition, the emphasis was on ensuring students were not left so far behind that they could never catch up. Thus, they provide clear lessons for other districts.

Efforts typically began with the recognition that waiting for data from the state assessment program would not allow for timely intervention. To address this problem, districts moved forward with the development and administration of periodic benchmark assessments, analysis of results to establish instructional needs, and provision of special services to students who needed them.

Districts supported the development of these processes through training of teachers and other staff in ways to generate and use data. Frequent formative and diagnostic mini-assessments allowed teachers to identify which students had – or had not – mastered content. In one district, a teacher-developed approach to monitoring student progress and addressing needs identified became a central focus for school improvement. This process included decision points at which students were provided with additional instructional opportunities if mastery was not achieved.

Another district developed an ongoing system in the elementary schools intended to provide students with practice as they worked to mastery on math concepts. The practice sheets were then used by teachers to gauge the progress of individual students. Depending on their level of need, students were provided with a range of interventions. Some of these were substantial, such as after-school or summer school programs. Others hap-

pened on a more fluid basis. For example, in one middle school, teachers of each team of 150 students discussed students on their team almost daily and reshuffled students to provide 30 minutes of tutorial time focused on students' individual instructional needs.

Sometimes district support for these approaches was financial. For example, some districts funded district-wide initiatives for extended day programs for students falling behind. Sometimes, additional financial support was allocated to schools, with schools selecting options such as a computer-based package to provide struggling students with more opportunities for reading practice. District support was also embedded in projects such as the development of mini-assessments that required teacher time – but which provided timely data for use in assessing student needs on an ongoing basis.

Source: Gordon Cawelti & Nancy Protheroe, *Handbook on Restructuring and Substantial School Improvement*. Retrieved from www.adi.org. See Download ADI Publications.

References and Resources

- Cawelti, G., & Protheroe, N. (2001). *High student achievement: How six school districts changed into high-performance systems*. Arlington, VA: Educational Research Service.
- Cawelti, G., & Protheroe, N. (2007). The school board and central office in school improvement. In H. Walberg (Ed.), *Handbook on restructuring and substantial school improvement* (pp. 37–52). Lincoln, IL: Center on Innovation and Improvement. Retrieved from www.adi.org. See Download ADI Publications.

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