URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL TURNAROUND

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THREE URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOLS ENGAGED IN THE TURNAROUND PROCESS

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This multisite case study examines how the turnaround process looks at three urban Bay Area middle schools engaged in a partnership with Partners in School Innovation between 2010 and 2013. Most case studies on turnaround schools are focused on the elementary grades, so the need for middle school case studies is crucial. This multisite case study examines the characteristics of effective middle school turnaround from three San Francisco Bay Area middle schools engaging in transformative practice with varying degrees of success. The sample middle schools effectively transforming themselves have leaders who can model a results-oriented vision while building trust among staff, aligned systems for professional learning that allow teachers to take action, and a solid core instructional program that aligns curricula, instruction, and assessments and empowers teachers to address the needs of each and every child in her classroom.
Introduction

Across the country, many underperforming urban schools charged with educating large populations of historically underserved students are working with external organizations to engage in a turnaround process. Case studies examining school turnaround have mostly been focused on the elementary grades (Schaffer, et al., 2012; Herman, et al., 2008, Borman, et al., 2003). This study is intended to provide insight into the turnaround process as it is being played out in urban middle schools to highlight potentially transformative practices designed to help some of our nation’s most vulnerable children: historically underserved middle school students living near the poverty line.

The authors examined the turnaround process in three San Francisco Bay Area middle schools over a three-year period. These three schools are in the final year of a three-year partnership with a Reform Support Organization, Partners in School Innovation (PSI), designed to transform each school and to provide the schools with the tools they need to sustain the transformation. This work is guided by building school capacity in three particular domains seen as critical for the transformation of underperforming schools: results-oriented leadership, systems for professional learning, and the core instructional program.

This examination of the turnaround process as it has occurred in the three sample urban middle schools is also focused on these domains and will address the following questions:

1. How do urban middle school leadership practices change to guide the turnaround process?
2. How do systems for professional learning drive changes in the adult capacity needed to turn around urban middle schools?
3. How does an urban middle school’s core instructional program change as a result of the turnaround process?

**Theoretical Framework**

PSI is a Reform Support Organization founded in 1993 and is currently based in San Francisco. PSI supports schools and districts in the San Francisco Bay Area and in Western Michigan. PSI works hand in hand with teachers and leaders to strengthen teaching, learning, and achievement in under-performing public schools and districts. The organization provides coaching and on-the-ground support to existing school leaders and teachers with the goal of improving literacy skills for historically underserved students and assisting with the turnaround process in underperforming urban schools. PSI’s School Transformation Approach targets three domains of transformative practice:

- Results-oriented leadership,
- Systems for professional learning, and
- A core instructional program.

The three domains of school transformation are inextricably linked. Good teaching plays a vital role in historically underserved student success (Haycock, 1998; Sanders, et al., 1997). However, any benefits from good teaching will not be sustainable without structures in place that allow for effective teaching to flourish where it exists and to spread to classrooms where it does not. These structures are maintained, and often established, by school leaders. High-achieving, high-poverty schools with large numbers of historically underserved students are results-oriented and more culturally responsive (EdSource, 2010). Teachers at such schools tend to be more
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prepared to teach. They are more likely to work together to plan and teach a rigorous, standards-based curriculum. They assess and re-teach often to bring their students toward standards mastery. Leaders at such schools support their teachers to engage in such transformative behavior by focusing on instruction and monitoring progress toward results (Marzano, et al., 2005; Fullan, 2001; Elmore, 2000).

Results-oriented leadership

Strong results-oriented leaders create an environment where high-quality teaching and learning can occur and support the school’s ownership and capacity needed to sustain improved student achievement results. Effective school leaders can incite dramatic turnaround efforts in as little as one year, while ineffective school leaders can derail school-level reforms in the same amount of time (Elmore, 2000). Results-oriented leaders build the sense of ownership and the organizational capacity needed to sustain results. Strong results-orientation enables school leaders to focus on student outcomes and align the school's resources, structures and policies to achieve those goals (Barela, 2012).

Effective school leaders are guided by a clear and compelling vision that allows them to set clear goals and expectations, enact thoughtful plans, and continuously reflect and adjust their leadership so they can navigate challenges and reach their goals (Marzano, et al., 2005). They create, model, and sustain an environment of respect, trust, and integrity (Reeves, et al., 2007; Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Results-oriented leaders also keep a close eye on the relationship between their actions and their desired results (Schmoker, 2006). They frequently review multiple data sources to determine what is and is not working and adjust plans and processes so they will move the school closer to the goals outlined in the vision and theory of action. A
highly-effective middle school is one that fosters a culture of data use, which is modeled by the
school’s leaders (Lipsitz & West, 2006).

Systems for professional learning
Leaders in transforming middle schools develop and strengthen the systems that support
teachers’ professional learning to ensure sustained student achievement gains. (Herman, 2012;
Association for Middle Level Education, 2010). Research on teacher professional learning has
demonstrated that when teachers receive high-quality professional development, have regular
opportunities to collaborate, and are supported by a skilled instructional coach, the quality and
effectiveness of their instruction improves (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Fullan,
2006; DuFour, 2004; Joyce & Showers, 2002). Such professional learning structures enable
adults to learn new content and skills and provide the opportunity for them to learn from each
other. Effective teacher collaboration is especially effective at the middle school level
(Thompson & McKelvy, 2007).

A core instructional program
Teachers are the best resource a school has, since they have the most influence over student
learning by virtue of the sheer amount of time they spend with students. Effective teaching can
outweigh the heavy burden of poverty on student achievement: it far outweighs the effects of a
student’s previous achievement level, class size or the ethnic and socioeconomic makeup of a
classroom (Sanders, et al., 1997). If a child living in poverty has a high-quality teacher for five
years in a row, the effect of poverty on achievement can be eliminated (Rivkin, et al., 2001).
A strong core instructional literacy program is at the heart of a transformed school. Teachers
must learn to implement a rigorous curriculum, purposefully use assessments and data, engage in
results-oriented planning, and strategically intervene when students may be behind. In addition,
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teachers should possess pedagogical practices designed to meet the learning needs of students of color (Goldenberg, 2008; Brown-Chidsey, 2007).

Middle School Focus

This study is focused squarely on middle schools because there is a great need for a knowledge base around effective turnaround practices in the middle grades. Middle school is an oft-neglected segment of P-20 education (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Students in grades 6 to 8 are more likely to become disconnected with school and drop out without effective and consistent academic intervention (Balfanz, et al., 2007). Consistency appears to be critical for reform in the middle grades as long-term reforms are much more likely to gain traction and succeed (Roney, et al., 2004).

Because reforms aimed at the middle grades need to be implemented over the course of several years, longitudinal case studies are especially important to study their effects. However, few case studies have been conducted that chronicle turnaround efforts at the secondary level (Schaffer, et al., 2012). This study is meant to add to our collective knowledge about the process of middle school turnaround through the use of case study methodology.

Method

This is a multisite case study (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2003) of three San Francisco Bay Area middle schools currently partnering with PSI. The phenomenon being investigated is the process of urban middle school turnaround.
Variable Definitions

It is important to define what is meant by historically underserved student populations, low income, turnaround, and transformation. While there are many student groups that have been historically underserved, the authors have chosen to define historically underserved students in this study as African Americans, Latinos, and English Learners. These are the three populations that PSI encounters most often in its partner schools. Federal eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch is being used as a proxy for low income.

The definition of school turnaround used by PSI differs from the U.S. Department of Education’s definition and is actually something much closer to transformation. While the U. S. Department of Education’s four turnaround models require changes in leadership and staff, PSI works with the existing human capital at a school to bring out transformative change. PSI holds fast to the belief that turnaround does not require a completely new school staff, that the capacity to turn around an under-performing school can, and should, be built and sustained from within existing human capital. Therefore, the concept of school turnaround in this study is the process of school transformation as being enacted by current building staff.

Sample Schools

Our three sample schools are all currently being supported by PSI and are in the final year of a three-year partnership that began in the 2010-2011 school year. Table 1 shows demographic information for our sample schools. The name of each school has been changed to maintain confidentiality. Each school has students from 6th grade to 8th grade. Schools B and C are located in the same school district. All three sample schools are in urban areas educating large populations of historically underserved and low income students.
There are some differences between the three sample schools. Schools differ somewhat in total population, with School A having fewer students than Schools B and C. School A has a much higher percentage of African American students. Schools B and C have higher percentages of Latino students. School A is the only sample school that is a School Improvement Grant (SIG) recipient.

The overall combined percentages of African American and Latino students are between 79% and 88%. Despite School A having a higher percentage of African American students, all three schools have similar percentages of English Learners. All three schools also have high percentages of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. In addition to demographic characteristics, their 2010 baseline percentages of students scoring Proficient or Advanced on the CST-ELA were all far below the California statewide percentage of 55.0%.

### Table 1

**Demographics and 2010 CST-ELA Performance in Sample Schools**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Student Population</th>
<th>% African American</th>
<th>% Latino</th>
<th>% English Learners</th>
<th>% Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch</th>
<th>2010 % Proficient/Advanced CST-ELA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School A</td>
<td>378</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School B</td>
<td>626</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School C</td>
<td>595</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Sources**

To examine the turnaround process as it has occurred in the sample schools, we have collected a variety of quantitative and qualitative data during the three years of the middle school
partnerships. The primary source of quantitative data is the California Standards Test (CST), California’s annual standardized assessment. School-level student performance on the following CSTs was studied: the CST-English Language Arts (CST-ELA), the CST-Math assessment taken by 6th and 7th grade students (CST-Math), and CST-Algebra I assessment taken by 8th grade students (CST-Alg. I). CST-ELA data were collected from 2010 to 2012 because PSI was supporting English departments in the sample middle schools. PSI did not begin to support math departments until 2011, so CST-Math and CST-Alg. I data from 2011 and 2012 were collected. The final year of student achievement data will not be available until August 2013.

Some of our qualitative data came from PSI’s School Transformation Review (STR) process. PSI created this process to measure a school’s capacity to engage in and sustain transformative practice. The STR process consists of a daylong data collection session at each school. Trained PSI employees conduct observations in every classroom, conduct focus groups with teachers, and interview the principal. Collected data are organized around the domains of results-oriented leadership, systems for professional learning, and a core instructional program. Within each domain is a set of essential practices that represent the explicit behaviors around which schools build their capacity to transform. Essential practices are grouped into larger capacity areas within each domain. Capacity is measured by the extent of implementation of each essential practice across the school. PSI categorizes school transformation into six stages ranging from no evidence that an essential practice is being implemented anywhere in the school to full implementation of the essential practice across the school that is sustainable even after their engagement with PSI ends. To determine capacity growth, the STR process is administered during both the fall and spring of the first year of the partnership and every spring thereafter.
However, if there is substantive staff turnover (e.g., a principal or at least 50% of teachers), the STR process will be conducted in the fall of the next year as well.

In addition, PSI field staff complete a STR attribution form as a means of providing qualitative data on program implementation. Field staff reflect on a school’s final STR stages and provide evidence of implemented strategies that led to the level of capacity built at that school.

To complement the STR attribution data, we interviewed the PSI employees tasked with supporting each of the sample schools throughout the past three years and school leaders about their perceptions of the capacity being built in results-oriented leadership, systems for professional learning, and a core instructional program and their perceptions of the sustainability of the work after the partnerships with PSI concluded. PSI prematurely ended its partnership with School C in early 2013, so we were unable to interview any of School C’s leaders for this study. In total, we conducted seven interviews with PSI staff and three interviews with school leaders.

We also reviewed documents related to PSI’s support of each sample school. In addition to quarterly progress reports and school strategy plans, we also reviewed each school’s Theory of Action charts. These documents are meant to align a school’s student achievement goals, the improvements in the core instructional program that need to occur, and necessary systems and leadership actions.

Analysis

Table 2 shows the inventory of data we collected that went into our analysis by year. Unless noted, STR process data, documents, interviews, and test score data were collected at all three sample schools.
Analysis began with interview data, which were first coded based on results-oriented leadership, systems for professional learning, and a core instructional program. During the second round of coding, other pertinent themes beyond the three domains were noted. After the second round of coding, documents were analyzed and coded based on the domains and expanded themes. Student achievement test scores were used as outcome measures to determine how the thematic areas that had surfaced during the coding process contributed to school turnaround.

Table 2

Data Inventory by Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 1 2010-2011</th>
<th>Year 2 2011-2012</th>
<th>Year 3 2012-2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Data</td>
<td>Qualitative Data</td>
<td>Qualitative Data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• STR classroom observations</td>
<td>• STR classroom observations</td>
<td>• STR classroom observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• STR teacher focus groups</td>
<td>• STR teacher focus groups</td>
<td>• STR teacher focus groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• STR principal interviews</td>
<td>• STR principal interviews</td>
<td>• STR principal interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• STR attribution forms</td>
<td>• STR attribution forms</td>
<td>• STR attribution forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Strategy plans</td>
<td>• Strategy plans</td>
<td>• Strategy plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Quarterly progress reports</td>
<td>• Quarterly progress reports</td>
<td>• Quarterly progress reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Theory of Action documents</td>
<td>• Theory of Action documents</td>
<td>• Theory of Action documents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 2 interviews with PSI staff (Schools A and B)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• 5 interviews with PSI staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• 3 interviews with school leaders (Schools A and B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative Data</td>
<td>Quantitative Data</td>
<td>Quantitative Data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• CST-ELA</td>
<td>• CST-ELA</td>
<td>• CST-ELA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• CST-Math</td>
<td>• CST-Math</td>
<td>• CST-Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• CST-Alg. I</td>
<td>• CST-Alg. I</td>
<td>• CST-Alg. I</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings are presented by thematic area. In addition to the three domains inherent in PSI’s Approach, we are also reporting on findings related to the development of a Theory of Action and to school climate and culture. To protect confidentiality, the sample school names have been anonymized. Genders and names of some key informants have also been changed.

Theory of Action

PSI coached each sample school to develop a Theory of Action, a document containing each school’s hypotheses about what they needed to focus on in order to reach their school-wide student achievement goals. A series of focus areas for improvement are selected, then objectives and activities are written for each focus area. The objectives and activities fall under at least one of the following domains, results-oriented leadership, systems for professional learning, and core instructional program.

A Theory of Action is a tool that can help a school develop and monitor schoolwide goals and develop explicit strategies to accomplish those goals. We found that the Theory of Action as a tool for school transformation demonstrated a range of success in our middle schools. In Schools A and B, the Theory of Action contained explicit and quantifiable school-wide goals, staff were aware of and working toward those goals, monitoring of goals was included in every meeting agenda, monitoring of goals happened frequently (weekly to every 3 weeks), and the principal was very clear on the goals and school vision. The Theory of Action provided a common language for school staff to talk about transformation.

According to PSI, the Theory of Action should also include goals that are explicitly linked to equity, race and culture for the adults at the school. It is also crucial to include goals around
behavior management for middle schools and to ensure that support personnel have capacity to analyze and synthesize those data. At one school we found that the addition of goals around relationship and trust building were helpful to articulating and accelerating the school’s vision. School C’s Theory of Action had very broad goals that were difficult to monitor and were not clearly linked to instruction. There were also no goals outside of math and ELA, so many staff felt left out from the vision put forward.

Results-oriented Leadership

PSI coached leaders from all three sample schools on how to be a results-oriented leader. This involved leading the school through what PSI refers to as a Results-Oriented Cycle of Inquiry (ROCI). The components of ROCI are:

- Setting Goals,
- Planning,
- Acting
- Assessing, and
- Reflecting and adjusting.

Results-oriented leaders model the use of ROCI throughout the school year using multiple sources of student data, including formative assessments, benchmark assessments, and standardized tests. In addition to modeling how to effectively use data, PSI coached school leaders on how to set the school’s vision, distribute leadership among other administrators and teacher leaders, communicate decisions to staff, and confront issues of inequity.

The leaders in all three schools grew in their capacity to lead the ROCI process in their schools despite being in different places at the beginning of the work. The behavior of owning and
leading ROCI was already starting to emerge in School A’s leaders when the PSI partnership began. School B displayed a readiness to engage in ROCI, but needed PSI’s guidance to implement the process systematically throughout the school. The principal at School C was new and there was little to no capacity regarding ROCI when the PSI partnership began. By the end of the second year of the PSI partnership in 2012, effective leadership of the ROCI process was emerging in School C where little to no capacity had existed before. In Schools A and B, ROCI was being implemented systematically across both campuses.

While capacity growth looked similar in all three sample schools, each principal had difficulty following through on at least one part of the ROCI cycle. School A’s leaders had the most trouble with Acting. They noted that they had to learn to do what they said they were going to do. A brilliant plan with no follow-through does not help their students. School B’s principal had trouble with Planning. At the beginning of the partnership, she was prone to act without doing sufficient planning. Her capacity to act decreased while she increased her planning capacity. The principal at School C was good at Planning, but needed more skill around Acting. She was also good at Assessing, but developed very little capacity to Reflect and Adjust her practice after the Assessing phase of ROCI. Because of this, data analysis within School C could be classified as superficial since it rarely led to improved practice. School C has struggled with consistent results and our interview showed that the principal did not identify as an instructional leader. The principal was wary of monitoring classroom instruction due to a fear of teacher pushback and was not concerned with linking schoolwide goals to classroom instruction.

The leaders at the sample schools also differed in their communications with staff. The leaders in School A had worked hard to ensure that they had consistent communication with teachers. Their unwavering focus on the school’s vision served as a framework for their messaging. All of
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their communications were framed around their vision. The principal in School B acknowledged that her communication with her staff was a work in progress. She has learned to be much more consistent in her messaging, which included regular feedback to teachers concerning their instruction. Her communication strategy around the school’s vision had improved throughout the partnership, but was not yet as clear as School A’s communication strategy. At School C, the principal did not communicate the school’s vision to staff. A key informant noted that staff confusion about the principal’s direction for the school was compounded by inconsistent and sporadic feedback around classroom instruction.

One part of the PSI Approach is to work with a school to establish and build the capacity of an Instructional Leadership Team (ILT). The ILT is made up of administrators and teacher leaders from all departments. The ILT is the mechanism through which a school’s leaders distribute leadership and cultivate buy-in around the leader’s vision for the school. This means that the ILT needs to have a clear purpose that is linked to instructional improvement and a sense of collective responsibility for improving instruction. School B exhibited the strongest ILT. The principal delegated leadership responsibilities to the ILT and worked to increase their ownership of the turnaround work. PSI staff noted that the School B ILT designed and facilitated professional development (PD) activities. This was cited as an effective practice because it provided the ILT with an opportunity to showcase their content expertise while increasing their ownership of the needed work to transform.

Given the many familial and societal influences and perceptions that middle school students bring into the classroom, it is imperative for schools to address salient issues surrounding race, culture, class, and power. It is an essential component of the PSI Approach. It is also very difficult to implement. None of the sample schools showed consistency when working through
issues of race, culture, class, and power. All three schools had a similar pattern of tackling such issues. They were better at establishing a sense of urgency, creating a vision for each and every student, and using disaggregated data during the ROCI process than they were at examining, reflecting on, and learning more about the issues of race, culture, class, and power that affect their students. While the pattern was similar, School A showed that they had built more capacity around their strengths and their growth areas. They were systematic and, in some cases, transformative in their visioning and in their use of disaggregated data and there were some effective practices emerging around examination, reflection, and learning. At Schools B and C, effective practices in their strength areas were just starting to emerge. There was a demonstrated readiness to engage in examination, reflection, and learning, but there had been no action taken.

**Systems for professional learning**

When PSI codified its Approach, the three primary systems for professional learning meant to spur capacity building and a continuous improvement mindset were 1) protected teacher collaboration time, 2) relevant and actionable PD, and 3) strong instructional coaches. Unfortunately, under-resourced schools and districts are becoming even more under-resourced in the wake of state budget shortfalls and the resources for effective instructional coaching are often the first to be jettisoned. The school district where Schools B and C are located cut all instructional coach budgets just as the PSI partnership was starting. School A is a SIG grantee, which means that they have plenty of instructional coaching resources until the end of the 2012-2013 year, when the three-year SIG funding cycle ends. Given this context, our discussion of the systems for professional learning established and maintained by the sample schools will focus only on the elements present in all three schools: teacher collaboration time and PD.
To develop ownership for school transformation, teachers need to have the structures that support them to improve instruction. We have found that these structures consistently include the space and time for collaboration, as well as modeling what effective collaboration looks like. The sample schools were at three different places along a continuum of effective teacher collaboration time. School A had built the most capacity in this area. Collaboration time occurs every other week and is protected in the school schedule. Departments and grade levels have the flexibility to organize the time as they see fit. During collaboration time, most teachers at School A engage in actual collaboration using the ROCI cycle. They are planning together, examining multiple sources of student data together, and making adjustments to instruction together. At School A, teacher collaboration time is held sacred because the time is used effectively.

At School B, there is also protected teacher collaboration time every other week. Departments and grade levels also have flexibility to organize their time as they see fit. PSI helped to establish time every month for department and grade level leaders to problem-solve together so they can take the information back to their respective groups. The structures for effective teacher collaboration time appear to also exist at School B, but their collaboration time as not seen by key informants to be as effective as School A’s. The reason most commonly cited for this view is based on what actually happens during collaboration time. There are not many ROCI cycles happening during School B’s collaboration time. School B’s collaboration time can be characterized as sharing lots of strategies and data for the purpose of sharing, not for continuous improvement.

School C was even further behind regarding the use of collaboration time. Teacher collaboration only occurred once per month, and the date would often be changed by the principal. Meeting formats, protocols, and structures were prioritized, often at the expense of discussing relevant
content or data. Given that the skill-building around conducting effective ROCI cycles occurs within grade level collaboration time, it stands to reason that there was little meaningful data analysis occurring in School C.

School A can be seen as an exemplar for leveraging PD to create more robust systems for professional learning. Leaders and coaches at School A worked very hard alongside PSI staff to create tightly aligned feedback loops between all systems for professional learning, using PD as the bridge between coaching and teacher collaboration. The instructional coaches were responsible for designing the year’s PD and they ensured it was aligned to what they were working on and to what departments and grade levels were working on during collaboration time. The instructional coaches were able to draw upon their content expertise to create relevant opportunities for teachers. To ensure that the PD was actionable, the instructional coaches would meet with teachers immediately after PD sessions to solicit their feedback, which would then be turned into action plans for following through on implementing the PD content.

Schools B and C did not have the coaching resources that School A had (and that even School A will not have after the end of the 2012-2013 school year) so they had to be creative with what was available to them, with mixed results. In School B, members of the ILT were responsible for developing and facilitating PD. Not all members of the ILT had the content expertise needed to create relevant and actionable PD. The principal was able to make a midyear correction and tasked department/grade level teams (made up of teachers teaching the same subject to the same grades) with creating their own lesson plans and reflection protocols to ensure that they would be able to adjust their practice as needed. The principal also conducted consistent classroom walkthroughs throughout the school year so she could monitor PD implementation.
Key informants familiar with School C reported that PD had improved since the beginning of the PSI partnership. The principal was able to create opportunities for PD on a more focused set of topics. However, it was also reported that PD in School C was focused on implementation, with no assess/reflect/adjust component. Given that this is how the principal approached her leadership, it stands to reason that her development and facilitation of PD would look this way.

It is important to note that all three schools used student achievement data to determine their PD focus areas. During the PSI partnership, each school focused on PD related to effective instruction for English Learners (ELs). In 2010-2011, the percentage of ELs scoring Proficient or Advanced on the California Standards Test- English Language Arts (CST-ELA) in the sample schools ranged from 3.6% to 5.2%, far lower than any other student group.

Core instructional program

A solid core instructional program aligns a rigorous curriculum, effective instructional strategies for each child in the classroom (as opposed to all children), and purposeful use of assessment data to help realize the school’s vision. Having a solid core instructional program is especially important in middle school because students are often transitioning from having one teacher throughout the day to having teachers for each subject. This has the potential to confuse students when there is no coherence between their curricula.

Although a school’s leaders will provide guidance and support, the alignment inherent in a strong core instructional program is necessarily maintained by teachers, who are closest to curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The influence of teacher perception around the core instructional program was apparent in School C. During our School Transformation Reviews of School C, teachers and leaders reported having trouble balancing pacing guides, standards-based
instruction, remediation, and differentiation. When asked in a focus group about how they use assessment data, School C’s teachers were much more likely to report that they could not do much with their assessment data because the assessments are inherently bad.

These responses from School C are in sharp contrast to teacher responses from School B, which is in the same school district and has a very similar student population to School C. Although School B teachers and leaders also voiced their concerns about current student assessments, they were more likely go beyond merely lamenting the test to also report on the work they need to do to increase their EL student achievement.

These prevailing attitudes of teachers in School B and School C are indicative of how they perceive the instructional support they received from their leaders. The School B principal provided consistent instructional support to their teachers. At School B, the principal conducted weekly classroom walkthroughs focused on English Language Development. She offered immediate feedback to teachers based on her observations. The School C principal gave inconsistent feedback to teachers based on inconsistently-scheduled classroom walkthroughs.

When reviewing end-of-cycle benchmark assessment data, School B was careful to go through the entire ROCI cycle, getting back to not only adjusting practice, but also to planning for the next lesson. In School C, there would be assessment and some reflection, but the principal did not always take the ROCI cycle through adjusting practice and back to planning. When teachers and leaders do not cycle back to adjusting practice and planning, it shows that they are merely admiring the problem and not trying to do something about it.

School A’s path to maintaining a solid core instructional program highlights the necessity of quick wins early in the turnaround process (Herman, et al., 2008). According to PSI staff and
School A leaders and teachers, the focus on EL student achievement represented a cultural shift for the school. Before the PSI partnership, School A was focused on educating all students at the school. This is different from educating each and every student. The former assumes that instruction is one size fits all, while the latter recognizes that an effective teacher needs to attend to each child’s learning needs. In the first two years of the partnership (2010 to 2012), School A went from showing readiness to align their core instructional program, but doing nothing about it, to aligning their core instructional program systematically across departments and grades. In the same two-year period, the percentage of School A’s students who scored Proficient or Advanced on the CST-ELA increased by 19.8 percentage points (from 17.6% to 37.4%). The 2011-2012 school year was the first year of PSI’s explicit support of School A’s math department. In just one year, the percentage of 8th grade students scoring Proficient or Advanced on the California Standards Test-Algebra I increased by 14.2 percentage points (from 14.5% to 28.7%). While these numbers are still far below school district and state averages, they represent dramatic student achievement growth for School A. Key informants reported that this schoolwide student achievement growth early in the turnaround process led to School A shifting their collective mindset to focus their efforts on one student subgroup. A possible explanation for this is that the quick wins showed School A that turnaround is possible and attainable for the entire school, which meant that they can realign resources to provide additional focused support to the student group in greatest need.

Culture/Climate

Data gathered in the first year of PSI’s partnership with the sample schools revealed that a significantly amount of time was spent coaching leaders to attend to school culture and building relational trust among staff. While the exact reason is unclear, one hypothesis is that the larger
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staff size at middle schools and the sometimes overwhelming behavior management concerns makes it more difficult for teachers to build relational trust and buy-in to new initiatives. From this point on, it was encouraged that the sample schools develop school-wide goals around building positive school culture and climate and including those goals in their Theory of Action.

At School A we found that an indicator of success was the ability of leaders to recruit and retain the right staff. The school was able to hire an entire cohort of teachers who matched their vision for the school. Both School A and School B have annual offsite retreats with all staff where they not only work on team-building but also monitor progress and develop strategies to achieve schoolwide goals. We did find that at School B, the principal struggled with improving school culture and climate and admitted to being unsure of how to go about working on it. This finding points to the need for external partners to support middle schools with structures designed to drive both the technical and relational aspects of school turnaround.

Overall, our findings strongly point to the need for supporting a positive culture and climate at middle schools in order to facilitate turnaround. At School C, we found an almost toxic school climate in which teachers approached their students with a cultural deficit mindset where families and communities were blamed for student performance (Valenzuela, 1999), engaged in equal parts competition and isolation with their colleagues, and made little effort to build trust between themselves and the school’s leaders. PSI staff attempted to build relationships by attending staff meetings and retreat and having a strong presence, however without trust between teachers and school leaders, transformation work did not take hold.

We found that it is important for the principal to prioritize relationship building with their staff. Our support staff coached an initially reluctant principal to create a goal for staff camaraderie
and prioritize relationship building during all his interactions with staff. Relationship building was built into all agenda and staff members were given kudos at all-staff meetings. The principal also participated in several self-reflection activities, organized an offsite retreat, and regularly treated staff to meals.

We also found that building relationships with students is important to transformation work at a middle school. School A set a schoolwide goal for all staff to know every student by name. This dramatically changed the climate at a school that used to struggle with behavior management issues that distracted from transformation. They also were able to create a counseling program and a wellness office so that school administrators could be instructional leaders instead of managing behavior. Teachers regularly attend sensitivity trainings so that they understand the communities they work with, school leaders regularly track behavior management goals, and teachers can reinforce the culture of academia instead of wasting precious time managing their students.

**Summary of Findings**

By way of summarizing our findings, we are providing the percentages of students scoring Proficient or Advanced (% P/A) on the California Standards Test for 6th grade to 8th grade English Language Arts (CST-ELA) and 8th grade Algebra I (CST-Algebra I) in each sample school during the years of the current PSI partnership in Table 3 below. The ELA percentages are calculated over the two-year period of the partnership (2010-2011 and 2011-2012). The math percentages from only 2011-2012 are shown because that was the first year that PSI provided explicit support to the math departments of its partner middle schools. According to our case study findings:
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- School A is the farthest along in the turnaround process.
- School B is engaging in transformative practices similar to School A, but are not as far along.
- School C is having difficulty engaging in the turnaround process.

The student achievement numbers corroborate our case study findings. School A and School B attained dramatic increases in their percentages of students scoring Proficient or Advanced on the CST-ELA while School C exhibited a much more modest increase. When examining CST-Algebra I performance, each sample school’s progress in turnaround is even more apparent, where School A showed another dramatic increase, School B achieved a modest increase, and School C dropped precipitously from its 2011 percentage. The numbers of 8th grade students taking the CST-Algebra I in each sample school are comparable.

Table 3

Percentages of Students Scoring Proficient or Advanced on the California Standards Test in 6th Grade to 8th Grade English Language Arts and in 8th Grade Algebra I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CST-ELA</th>
<th>2010 % P/A</th>
<th>2012 % P/A</th>
<th>Percentage-point Growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School A</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>37.4%</td>
<td>19.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School B</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
<td>46.8%</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School C</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
<td>39.2%</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CST-Algebra I*</th>
<th>2011 % P/A</th>
<th>2012 % P/A</th>
<th>Percentage-point Growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School A</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School B</td>
<td>65.9%</td>
<td>70.1%</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School C</td>
<td>82.3%</td>
<td>47.1%</td>
<td>-35.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*n of School A = 94, n of School B = 107, n of School C = 85*
**Discussion**

How do urban middle school leadership practices change to guide the turnaround process?

In the sample schools that are on the path to turnaround, leaders are modeling a culture of continuous improvement. They are communicating their visions for school turnaround in such a way that teachers understand what that vision is and feel supported as they work to achieve that vision. School leaders are leading their schools through a ROCI process to continually monitor the realization of the school’s vision. They are distributing leadership through their ILTs, which allows for increased transparency, communication, ownership, and ultimately a positive adult culture. This is especially important in middle schools relational trust is crucial due to more administrative roles and structural divisions among grade levels and departments.

How do systems for professional learning drive changes in the adult capacity needed to turn around urban middle schools?

School A and School B have teachers engaging in high-quality collaboration around meeting the school’s vision. Collaboration time is protected in the school calendar, is monitored to ensure that it is being leveraged effectively, and is flexible enough for departments and grade levels to get the most appropriate support to meet their needs. School A is able to take full advantage of its instructional coaching resources while School B’s principal is stepping up to be more of an instructional leader in the absence of coaches. School A is using PD to coordinate these different systems by making sure these opportunities are built from within and are aligned with the school’s vision and goals. Additionally, School A is creating the space for teachers to create action plans so they can follow through with the presented strategies.
How does an urban middle school’s core instructional program change as a result of the turnaround process?

Based on our case study findings, we did not uncover major differences between the curricula, instructional practices, and assessments used in the sample schools. Where the schools differed markedly was in how they perceived their work with their school’s core instructional program. Schools A and B were able to get beyond admiring the problem and work on solutions in part because they felt supported by the school leaders. School A was able to use quick wins during the turnaround process to change to a mindset about supporting each and every student, as opposed to considering all students as one monolithic group. These changes in adult perceptions around the core instructional program highlight the importance of fostering relational trust amongst leaders and teachers.

Conclusion

Given that we are PSI’s internal evaluators, the concept of sustainability of turnaround is of paramount importance to us. Acknowledging that closing the inequitable gaps in student achievement is a long-term goal, PSI strives to create practices and transformations that will sustain even after our three-year partnerships end. We want to move our schools from turnaround to “stay around” (Leithwood, et al., 2010). Further, given that schools are volatile environments with frequent turnover of leaders and teaching staff, the goal of reform efforts needs to focus on systems-level changes that are not reliant on any one individual.

We found common themes across our sample middle schools when we asked what makes school transformation sustainable: 1) mindsets that support transformation, 2) relationships that
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courage collaboration and high expectations, 3) a recruitment and retention plan to support transformation, 4) staff capacity and skills, and 5) clear and strong systems and structures to support transformative practices. Specifically, we found the following set of common attributes that our schools believe will sustain transformation shown in Table 4 below.

So far, the list in Table 4 is based on turnaround efforts in three schools. As PSI expands its reach to include more middle schools, we will need to continually test our assumptions and validate our findings with increasing numbers of middle schools from different parts of the country.
Common Attributes from Sample Schools that are Potential Requirements for Sustainability of Turnaround Efforts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potential Requirements for Sustainability:</th>
<th>Specific examples:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Mindsets                              | • Internalized, ongoing ROCI  
                              • Teachers need ownership over structures and systems, they can’t just lie with the principal  
                              • Continuous learning orientation among staff and leaders |
| 2. Relationships                         | • Strong relationships between teachers - camaraderie, not competition – that encourage mutual accountability  
                              • Strong relationships between teachers and students that support high expectations |
| 3. Recruitment and Retention Plan        | • Ensure school values are reflected in hiring practices  
                              • Retention of successful teachers and leaders  
                              • Build a pipeline of leaders  
                              • Realistic expectations for school staff - avoid burnout |
| 4. Capacity/Skills                       | • Data analysis capacity and the ability to link findings to instruction  
                              • Practices must permeate a critical mass of teachers to live through turnover |
| 5. Systems and Structures                | • Ongoing coaching or peer mentoring for principal  
                              • Systems and structures with clear purposes that will outlive people, all of which are linked to continuous improvement  
                              • System to monitor instruction and clear roles and responsibilities to do so  
                              • Systems and structures to support ROCI - analyze and use data, regularly monitor data and practices, encourage accountability  
                              • Solid structures for collaboration - purpose, space, time in schedule, agreements, agenda template  
                              • Clear roles and responsibilities for leadership |
References

Association for Middle Level Education. (2010). *This we believe: Keys to educating young adolescents*. Westerville, OH: Author.


*American Educator* 2 (2), 8-23 & 42-44.


*Phi Delta Kappan*, 88(1), 57-66.


