EFFECTIVE STEPS TOWARD SCHOOL ENHANCEMENT

TURNING AROUND HIGH NEEDS SCHOOLS

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Effective Steps Toward School Enhancement: Turning Around High Needs Schools

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Information Age Publishing, Inc.
Charlotte, North Carolina • www.infoagepub.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

CIP data for this book can be found on the Library of Congress website:
http://www.loc.gov/index.html

Paperback: 979-8-88730-865-4
Hardcover: 979-8-88730-866-1
E-Book: 979-8-88730-867-8

Printed in the United States of America.

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PREFACE

Understanding Context: Moving From School Turnaround to School Enhancement

Principals and leadership teams across the nation are struggling to fill teacher vacancies, principals are feeling the stress of supporting school communities, students are showing academic and attendance lapses, test results show diminished achievement for those students most at risk, and challenges with students' socioemotional learning and mental health abound (e.g., National Forum on Education Statistics, 2019; Upadyaya et al., 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). We advocate that working with school leaders to turn around this situation is critically important to the education of students, particularly those who have been impacted the most by learning challenges that exist because of deep structural inequities in our pre-K–12 school design. These inequities were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Etchells et al., 2021).

Quality schools serve as the bedrock of our society, and today's principals and teachers deserve support. Papa and English (2011) explained well why school quality is critical. First and foremost, public pre-K–12 education was designed for the public good as a tool to promote equity and opportunity. Second, schools are critical places where tomorrow's citizens are prepared for participation in democracy. Third, schools should be accountable to their communities, their parents, and the children they serve. Accountability is not the enemy of high-quality schooling. Accountability can be used so that it helps produce more opportunity. Fourth,

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social justice is a major goal of public pre-K–12 schooling. School leaders should support teachers to expand and differentiate quality instruction to match students' needs, encouraging high expectations and high-quality instruction for all students. When opportunities for advancement are open regardless of zip code and schools facilitate every student to grow, we have been successful as a society (Papa & English, 2011, p. 6).

The School of Education and Human Development at Texas A&M University (TAMU) took on the challenge of supporting schools beginning in 2016. The land-grant mission of the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862 calls on universities such as TAMU to impact their local communities. This book details our collective commitment to that work. We partnered with various districts (both rural and urban) in an elegant opportunity to randomly assign several struggling elementary schools in each district to participate with us while holding random control schools for future deployment. The randomized control trial design (e.g., Hariton & Locascio, 2018) allowed us to make causal assumptions about the effectiveness of the intervention framework we delivered in partnership with the district and school leaders. From this unique work, we were able to create a robust multidimensional framework of school enhancement.

School leaders should support teachers to expand and differentiate quality instruction so that it matches the needs of the students, encouraging high quality instruction for all students.

In this book, we explain our school enhancement framework and unique context so readers may judge for themselves the direct application of our work to their context. At TAMU, we tend not to do things on a small scale; this is Texas, after all. The major ideas in our framework grew out of our first school enhancement project (SEHD Communications, 2019) and have blossomed into a full robust framework that guides our continued school enhancement work. As a result, we have taken the work detailed in this book and expanded to more school leaders and districts across the state in both urban and rural settings. To enhance the usefulness of this book, we highlight important ideas throughout each chapter and close each chapter with best practices for school leaders we have learned throughout our work.

TURNAROUND SCHOOLS OR SCHOOL ENHANCEMENT?

The definition of *turnaround schools* typically refers to general reform efforts for low-performing schools designed to significantly improve student learning outcomes with actions conducted in a short amount of time with dra-

matic changes and significant consequences for failure (Leithwood et al., 2010). The popularization of the term began during President Obama's administration (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009), which mandated that states explicitly (and with haste) address low performing schools (Wallace Foundation, 2010). As illustrated in Table 1, the Secretary of Education (2009–2015), Arne Duncan, through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, laid out four turnaround strategies that were mandated if states wanted access to approximately $14 billion in federal funding dedicated to *Race to the Top* (RTT) and school improvement grants.

Many state legislatures (and/or state education agencies) completed policy reforms to align teacher evaluation guidelines with requirements for the RTT/school improvement funding, including legislation linking teacher performance pay to student achievement learning outcomes (e.g., California, Indiana, Rhode Island, and Tennessee). Additionally, many state education agencies were granted authority by their legislatures to intervene and/or takeover struggling schools (Wallace Foundation, 2010).

Table 1

Turnaround School Strategy Summary

Type of Turnaround Strategy	*Description of Turnaround Strategy*
• Turnarounds	Replace the principal and rehire no more than 50% of the school's staff; adopt a new governance structure; provide job-embedded professional development; offer staff financial and career-advancement incentives; implement a research-based, aligned instructional program; extend learning and teacher planning time; create a community-orientation; and provide operating flexibility.
• Transfers	Transfer control of, or close and reopen, a school under a school operator that has been selected through a rigorous review process. A restart model must enroll, within the grades it serves, any former student who wishes to attend.
• Restarts	Replace the principal (no requirement for staff replacement); provide job-embedded professional development; implement a rigorous teacher-evaluation and reward system; offer financial and career advancement incentives; implement comprehensive instructional reform; extend learning- and teacher-planning time; create a community-orientation; and provide operating flexibility and sustained support.
• Closure	Close the school and enroll students in other, higher achieving schools.

Source: Adapted from The Wallace Foundation (2010, pp. 4–5).

Some have argued that President Obama's administration (2009–2017) restricted school turnaround to four prescribed turnaround strategies before adequate research was available to back up this policy mandate (e.g., Dragoset et al., 2017). Backstrom (2019), 10 years after RTT and school improvement grants were incentivized, noted that implementing the required turnaround models resulted in little empirical evidence of success in turning around low-performing, high-poverty schools across the nation. Backstrom (2019) proposed that efforts failed because they lacked three critical features: (a) flexibility to meet challenges at the individual school level, (b) strong school leaders who are given the freedom to act by their district and communities, and (c) a steady commitment to bold changes.

Previous reform efforts have failed because they lacked three critical features: (a) flexibility to meet challenges at the individual school level; (b) strong school leaders who are given the freedom to act by their district and communities; and (c) a steady commitment to bold changes.

In other words, if school enhancement/turnaround is to work, a fundamental component is strong school leaders. Teachers are, of course, critical to student learning, and yet, principals *affect all students* in their schools (Branch et al., 2013); but it is not *just* the principal. Even though the principal's role is to be a strong instructional leader (Lynch, 2012), we have found that it is difficult for the principal to be in every classroom every day; therefore, *the entire leadership team* (principal, assistant principal, and teacher support specialists sometimes called teacher coaches, instructional specialists, or instructional skills specialists) becomes important for building instructional capacity in our Texas A&M University School Enhancement Framework (TAMU SEF).

According to Irby et al. (2023), convening a think tank of global school enhancement/turnaround expert researchers, the key to school enhancement is an effective leader. Effective leaders "make everything else happen" because effective leaders "start affecting [the school] culture" (Dr. Geovanny Ponce, a participant in the think tank). It was also mentioned that when a school has an effective leader, "a lot of these other things are going to be taken care of at a pretty high level because you have good people in the schools" (Dr. Coby Meyers, a participant in the think tank). Finally, as Dr. Kenneth Leithwood (a think tank participant) summarized, "A leader needs to identify the critically important [areas] to change to enhance the school." In other words, once effective leadership is put into place, and an understanding has been gathered as to the unique school challenges, school enhancement can begin in earnest.

THE TAMU SCHOOL ENHANCEMENT FRAMEWORK

As we began our work with local schools, we realized we needed to move beyond the Obama Administration's framing of four different models of school turnaround (see Table 1). We considered the following five factors most influential in the overall design of our new framework.

- First, teacher shortages are rampant in Texas, especially in high needs areas (Texas Education Agency, 2021b). Any model that focused on dismissing teachers rather than directly working with them to grow their instructional capabilities was simply untenable for most of our district partners. Schools were willing to terminate incompetent teachers, but the required scale of dismissal in the turnaround model proposed in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act simply was too much for most of our partners to support.
- Second, there is little research evidence of any positive effects related to full-scale teacher replacement on student learning gains (Rice & Malen, 2003), and when faculty are replaced in large numbers, research indicates they tend to be replaced with far less experienced teachers and often less effective teachers (de la Torre et al., 2012) creating another challenge to improving student learning.
- Third, there is a growing population of non-English speaking children in elementary schools in Texas, meaning that teachers are consistently working to support a large population struggling to meet state learning standards as non-native speakers (Texas Senate Bill 560, 2023). Any enhancement/turnaround plan had to address this component effectively.
- Fourth, as a school of education and human development at a land-grant university, we felt a strong commitment to creating a framework that would sustain achievement gains long after we moved to support other schools. So, any model wherein the university *took over* a school was a non sequitur. We focused on ensuring that districts were well versed and well prepared to continue to be learning organizations and sustain any achievement gains that occurred during our partnership.
- Fifth, we wanted to move away from the top-down model of school turnaround where districts determine principals for schools and mandate teacher firing. We wanted to focus, instead, on a model of enhancement where growing a strong school leader who becomes the critical linchpin for school enhancement is supported by a district that gives them flexibility and needed resources. We were con-

vinced, and still are, that great leaders can be grown and supported to thrive in a school enhancement situation.

What might this look like? Our initial premises included a school leader with a clear vision and a commitment to get everyone on board with that vision. This school leader must have the savvy to direct human, physical, and fiscal resources where they are needed most and modify the school climate so that everyone can grow and feel valued. This means that leaders, students, staff, and teachers all believe that students can learn and that improved instruction is possible. Student support makes an immense and irreversible difference in young children's lives. We did not want our framework to represent the university as a *shining knight on a white horse coming to save the day*. Our primary goal was to support the school leader and his/her leadership team to grow in their ability to increase instructional capacity among their teachers. We also wanted our framework to have space for the district to be flexible and to take some responsibility for how struggling individual schools performed. Finally, our framework supports the school leaders to create a climate where everyone is committed to continuous improvement even after the university has served its school enhancement mission and left the school. Table 2 illustrates our move from school turnaround to school enhancement.

Our TAMU SEF is a *collaborative* framework using existing staffing while providing tools and support with a focus on growing leaders in their ability to increase teacher instructional capacity. As will be shown in this book, many of the components in the table below have been researched independently, but our contribution is unique by combining them into an overall framework for school enhancement. The TAMU SEF intervention framework has been developed and supported by research in three multi-million-dollar grants (one TAMU funded, two U.S. Department of Education funded) and includes the following components illustrated in Figure 1. The reader will find chapters exploring each component more fully in this book.

THE TEXAS CONTEXT

The State of Texas has worked diligently to identify schools in need of support through the creation of the Texas Effective School Framework (Texas Education Agency, 2021d). This framework (www.texasesf.org) focuses on strong school leadership and planning, strategic staffing with the strongest teachers in high needs schools, a positive culture that involves families and aligns mission, vision, and behavioral expectations,

Table 2

A Comparison of Race to the Top Obama-Era Turnaround Components and TAMU School Enhancement Framework Components

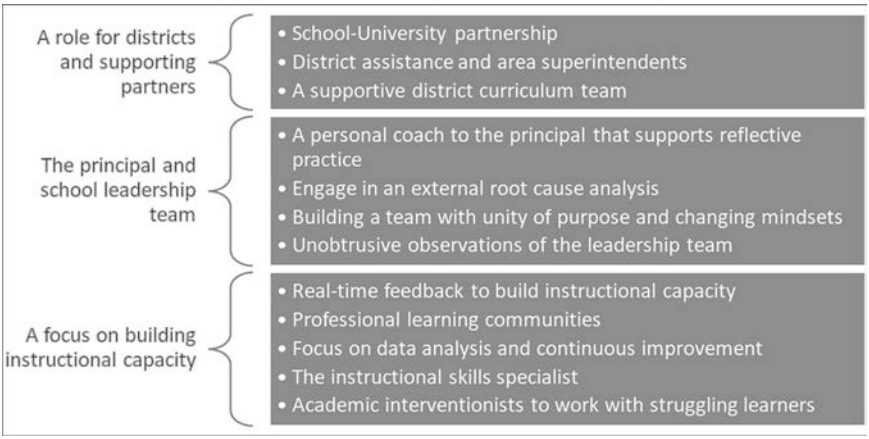
RTT Turnaround Components	*TAMU SEF Components*
• Replace principal	We do not make recommendations to the administration to replace principals
• Rehire 50% of staff	We do not believe that firing teachers is effective for the community; we work to support leaders to build their teachers' instructional capacity. Moving highly effective teachers to support struggling learners is common in our framework.
• New governance structure	This is not part of our framework
• Job embedded professional development	Our framework includes job embedded professional development and mentoring/ coaching for campus leadership team members that supports them as they work to increase instructional capacity in teachers.
• Staff financial and career enhancement incentives	These were not available in our early iterations, but some districts have implemented these incentives in our later iterations. These incentives are not required to be implemented in our framework.
• Implement research aligned with instructional program	This is core to our framework. We promote a continuous research–focused via our leader–led teacher professional learning communities.
• Extend learning time	We do not mandate this, but the leadership team with coaching may deem it necessary
• Extend teacher planning time	We highly recommend this, but do not require extending planning time in our support program but the leadership team with coaching may deem it necessary.
• Create community orientation in the school	We work with the principals on a campus improvement plan that requires teacher and community engagement.
• Provide operating flexibility	This is part of the campus improvement plan, and many of our successful schools were flexible in how they defined time for planning, teacher–student pairings, and time allocation for learning.

and/or support services with student needs. The state framework also supports teacher training and building instructional capacity through observation and feedback. The framework rests heavily on data driven instructional decisions.

Texas expects schools (and districts) to *meet expectations* in three main performance areas: student achievement, school progress, and closing gaps (Texas Education Agency, 2021a). Students individually receive a rat-

Figure 1

Twelve Critical Components of the TAMU SEF



ing of *did not meet grade level expectations*, *approaches grade level*, *meets grade level*, or *masters grade level* in language arts, mathematics, science (in fifth grade) and (for high school), college or career readiness. Schools receive feedback on the number of students that fall behind at least 1 year academically, and an accounting of how well the school does comparing its achievement growth scores to those of a district or campus with similar demographics and percentages of students experiencing economic challenges. Thus, campuses can be rated as *did not meet growth expectations*, *limited expected growth*, *met expected growth*, or *accelerated or exceeded growth*. Finally, the Texas Education Agency examines the achievement gap between Whites and other racial/ethnic groups, as well as different levels of socioeconomic status, and recognizes schools that make progress on closing those achievement gaps.

Texas uses the data above to assign each school and each district a letter grade in its A–F accountability system. If a school receives an F overall, they must engage in an intervention requirement with a campus intervention team who conducts a needs assessment and develops and oversees the implementation of a targeted campus improvement plan. If a school receives a D overall or a D in any domain, similar consequences ensue, though much of the process remains in the hands of district leadership rather than being more state directed.

This project began with a grant for $1.6 million from (then) Texas A&M University President Michael K. Young and Provost Karan Watson on the promise that we, the faculty in the college of education and

human development, could make a difference in a large number of students' lives by affecting the quality of leadership in their schools. Additional funding came from internal funds at the college. Eventually, this project caught the eye of the Department of Education and has been supported over the last 7 years as part of two large grants to scale the impact of our work.

After we received our initial funding for this project, House Bill 3 (Texas Education Agency, 2021c) was passed by the Texas legislature and signed into law by Governor Abbott. The bill provides additional financial support per pupil for students struggling with English language learning and for special education students. Although this happened after our initial work with districts (and at the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic), it provides some context that illustrates the state of Texas' ongoing commitment to taking pre-K–12 student learning and school support seriously.

House Bill 3, passed in 2021, illustrates the State of Texas' ongoing commitment to taking pre-K–12 student learning and school support seriously.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Public pre-K–12 schools play an important and critical role in a democratic society. Beyond this, public pre-K–12 compulsory education promises everyone, regardless of means, an education that allows them to participate in both economic and democratic ways in society. The United States has struggled to consistently deliver on this promise for every child, regardless of zip code. In the Race to the Top program initiated by President Barack Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan, changes were made at the federal level that leveraged certain views of how schools should be accountable for student achievement. We argue that many of the assumptions of the RTT program are simply untenable for schools today. We can no longer think of school turnaround as a model where large numbers of teachers are fired; instead, we need to focus on a sustainable, long-term school enhancement model. For us, that model begins with leadership empowerment, facilitating a leader's ability to increase instructional capacity in their teachers, and consequently student achievement. This book details our Texas A&M school enhancement framework (TAMU SEF) and the infrastructure and support requirements necessary to truly change struggling schools to successful schools.

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PART I

A ROLE FOR DISTRICTS AND SUPPORTING PARTNERS

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CHAPTER 1

SCHOOL–UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS

School–university partnerships represent varied collaborative efforts between universities and primary and secondary schools designed to ultimately benefit both groups in a two-way manner (Cress et al., 2020; Marsh, 2019; Sahlin, 2019). Schools benefit through the integration of state-of-the-art research and teaching innovations provided by university-based education faculty. Conversely, these partnerships enable universities to address gaps between theory and practice by evaluating the effectiveness and practicality of their teacher preparation programs and conducting research on new models of public pre-K–12 support in real-world settings (Loughran & Hamilton, 2016; Zeichner, 2010). These partnerships leverage the expertise of all participants to enhance the quality of research, teaching, and practice across universities and schools (Elton-Chalcraft et al., 2020; Heinz & Fleming, 2019; Lemon et al., 2018; Mtika et al., 2014; Rowan et al., 2017; Wang & Wong, 2019).

School–university partnerships emerged in the 1980s but did not receive much attention in academic circles until the 1990s (Burstein et al., 1999; Catelli, 1995; Field et al., 1999). Interest in these collaborations has continued to grow (Tracz et al., 2018) and while many effective school-university partnerships ultimately result in schools changing, modifying, and revising their student support practices (Cress et al., 2020; Marsh, 2019; Teitel, 1992), researchers also have demonstrated that school–

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university partnerships present logistical challenges and opportunities for potential ideological differences between schools and universities to arise (Bartholomew & Sandholtz, 2009).

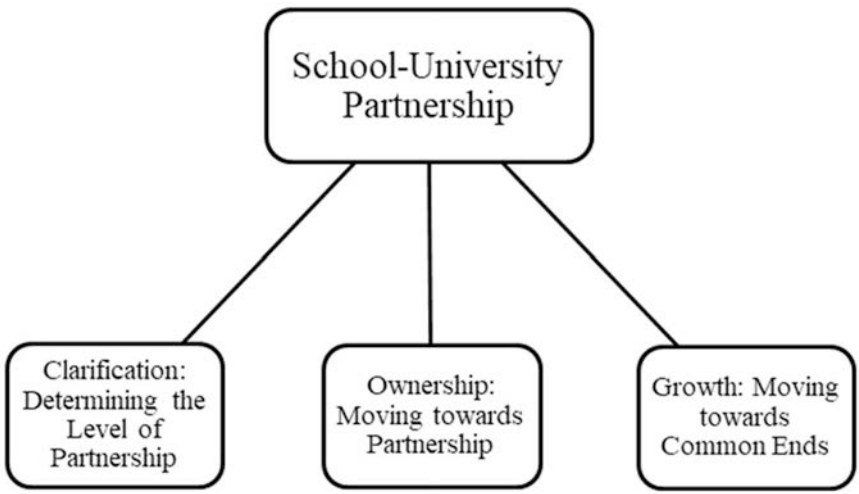
COMPONENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL-UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIP

Successful partnerships are built on identifying a mutually beneficial outcome (Burns et al., 2016; Gore & Gitlin, 2004; Lefever-Davis et al., 2007). Wasburn-Moses and Noltemeyer (2018) argued that successful school-university partnerships do need built-in benefits for both types of participants—along with intentionality, shared purpose, and active engagement—in their list of core components. One of the crucial factors for a successful partnership is whether it addresses an issue that is considered critical by both the university and the school or district partner (Lefever-Davis et al., 2007).

To meet this goal, the primary responsibility of a school-university partnership leadership team is to define the goals of the partnership in a clear and detailed plan and make sure that the benefits to all participants are clear. Sockett (1998) suggested that discussions center on (a) clarification of type and goals, (b) ownership (or loss thereof) of different initiatives, and (c) growth of both partners (see Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1

Components of School–University Partnership Based on Sockett (1998)



Clarification

Clarification refers to the act of clarifying the level of the partnership being formed, of which there are four possible levels:

- service relationships, where an individual or unit volunteers support for a school-related function;
- exchange relationships, where the parties exchange resources for their mutual benefit;
- cooperative relationships, where the parties plan together and share responsibilities;
- systemic and transformative relationships, where the parties share responsibility for planning, decision making, funding, operations, and evaluation of activities, and where each institution is transformed through the relationship (Sockett, 1998, p. 76).

Ownership

Ownership "requires institutions to realize in advance the implications of their loss of ownership and control … [and the fact that] … partnerships [by definition] impinge on ownership" (Sockett, 1998, p. 79). In other words, collaboration and co-ownership are key to successful school-university partnerships. Given the perceived power differential between universities and potential public pre-K–12 school or district partners, and the fact that university faculty often perceive themselves as having high levels of independence in academia, it is especially important that university leaders open up ownership conversations and be prepared to have some aspects of their suggested plan change. Thus, leaders in both public pre-K–12 schools/districts and at the university level should avoid trying to control decision-making when creating partnerships and be open to a mutually agreeable solution.

As an important caveat, schools are sometimes overwhelmed trying to meet achievement goals and have trouble thinking through what a true partnership might mean for them. Teachers have been given the message that they are responsible for student learning, and letting go or sharing that responsibility can be challenging at times, particularly if they teach in a state where their annual performance review (and subsequent raise or retention decision) is based on student learning outcomes. In these schools, research for research's sake will not be accepted if the struggling school anticipates a potential loss of instructional time and/or control (Foorman et al., 2016). Careful consideration of both the principal's and

teachers' priorities (including ideas about ways to decrease their worries about time and control loss) is critical to continuing to have a productive university/school relationship. Embedding changes or training into the normal flow of how changes occur in the school, perhaps into professional development already scheduled, is critical to ease teachers' fears and ensure the continuation of proposed changes after the university partner relationships/research has ended (Foorman & Moats, 2004).

Growth

Sockett (1998) noted that there is always some inherent level of growth in a partnership when both sides actively work toward a common goal. The parameters, activities, or level of the partnership may shift or evolve as the work continues. This continued growth and expansion should be a consideration when school and university leaders outline a partnership.

Ample communication between school and university partners is necessary … to build trust and understanding, especially because partnerships happen in a changing, dynamic, political, and human environment.

Regardless of the type or length of partnership, Sockett (1998) argued that ample communication is necessary not only to determine the nature of the partnership but also to build trust and understanding, especially because partnerships happen in a changing, dynamic, political, and human environment. Any one of these factors can cause changes in the activities and the goals of the project, and individuals in leadership positions on both sides need to have honest conversations about the issues and how to address concerns and move forward (Cress et al., 2020; Elton-Chalcraft et al., 2020; Firestone & Fisler, 2002; Heinz & Fleming, 2019).

BEGINNING A SCHOOL-UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIP

One of the most important elements of the framework that we were looking for in our partnership schools was a collective belief that the leadership and faculty could make a difference or, what researchers have termed, collective efficacy (Donohoo et al., 2018). Researchers have illustrated that when schools have high levels of collective efficacy, teachers are more likely to participate in and portray a positive attitude toward professional development, have more focus on student academic learning outcomes, and are interested in learning and using more evidence-based instructional strategies (Goddard et al., 2000). The positivity is infectious,

as students also show positive beliefs about their ability to learn at school and meet achievement expectations (Donohoo et al., 2018). On the other hand, past school failure is a significant predictor of low levels of collective efficacy, an even stronger predictor than school-level measures tracking the proportion of minority students or those who qualify for free or reduced lunch (Goddard, 2001). Thus, teachers in schools that have experienced past failures are likely to be challenged when we ask them to believe that their actions and changes in those actions could have positive effects on student learning.

To mitigate these challenges, we focused our work on the schools that had yet to *fail* and qualify for full *turn around* status in the state. Our thinking was that this group of schools was not supporting students' learning as evidenced by overall campus ratings of C or D for multiple years, or were schools where failure in 1 year was followed by just enough progress in a second year to stay ahead of the most punitive state accountability system components. These schools seemed prime targets for a strong intervention.

We also wanted to begin with C or D schools to prevent the jolts that sometimes happen when a school has a history of declining performance and finally is able to move to stabilization (Leithwood et al., 2010). When in the throes of declining performance, schools tend to have more directive, top-down leadership (Leithwood et al., 2010). As schools move through the transition from low-performing to higher performing, leadership typically has to move from a leader-focused, directive style to a more broad-based, shared, collaborative leadership model. Our early district partners espoused a collaborative leadership philosophy and were open to teachers taking personal responsibility for their growth through high quality, consistent professional development linked to their highest instructional capacity needs. We were keen to partner before we saw the inevitable shift in leadership style from collaborative to top-down models, which would have created difficult to overcome challenges. While all our partnerships differed somewhat, we review how the components of partnerships were instantiated in our work.

Level of Partnership

We began each partnership opportunity by meeting with superintendents and/or district leadership teams. Achieving leadership buy-in into the idea of a partnership was critical to its eventual success. We anticipated that the struggling campus' school improvement plans would contain suggested changes and reprioritizations that needed central district leadership approval and resources. Once district leaders were on board,

we discussed our ideas with principals (and then eventually with principals and teachers together). It was important, particularly when talking with teachers that we demonstrated that we intended to *do no harm*.

We had worked with these schools before; we had placed teacher interns and leader interns in the district. And, we were known in the geographic area for the quality of our teacher and leader preparation programs. These positive previous interactions allowed us to begin our partnership conversations with a baseline level of mutual trust and admiration. Careful listening revealed additional needs from our district partners that we had not initially anticipated. This opened the door for us to demonstrate our commitment to be good partners, and responsive to the needs raised by the district. For example, we had not anticipated offering direct support to students who were academically struggling, as our framework focuses on leadership development and working with the leader to build teacher instructional capacity. While leadership support was enthusiastically welcomed by our district partners, there was also a sense of urgency in the district, with a real focus on serving academically challenged students immediately. We were able to be responsive and rolled out a plan to work directly with the most struggling children and teachers. This was a partnership leadership-led decision. Thus, we were as responsive to their requests as they were to ours, and our understanding of our mutual goals developed the longer we partnered.

Ownership

Ownership is tricky because both partners have to co-own possible solutions to problems, but also own and fully understand the granularity and depths of the problems themselves. We committed to our public pre-K–12 school partners that we would engage an external consultant to do a root cause analysis to uncover the hidden causes of challenges at each of the schools with which we worked. We found that this external process took some of the shame and blame away from the public pre-K–12 partners and took the *expert* label away from the university faculty. The external root cause analysis was a dispassionate outside look at the strengths and weaknesses of each involved campus. We completed external root cause analyses for both our initial treatment partners and those that waited for full program implementation, serving as our controls. Partner entities were able to use the additional data from the root cause analyses to inform the next steps in their campus improvement plans and internal planning in both groups of schools. University faculty were careful in how this analysis was used and worked through the report with the public pre-K–12 partner leadership, allowing them to find ways to make it as useful