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# **Turning Around Schools:**

## **A Review of What Works from the Research and Reality**

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## Executive Summary

Over the past decade as accountability demands increased for schools and districts, there has been a corresponding movement to discover what works for improving school performance. The purpose of this research is to review the literature regarding the empirical research on school improvement practices and to identify the practices that have been most effective in improving schools within Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS). The findings from the literature review reveal no “magic bullet” or single approach to turning around schools. But rather, successful strategies encompass a broad range of categories, including: governance, environmental factors, leadership factors and organizational factors.

JCPS school leaders in 5 elementary, 3 middle and 2 high schools report that the most important factors that led to their school success fell into the categories of data/achievement and relationships/culture. More specifically, the factors that school leaders listed as the most important include: (a) alignment of curriculum, instruction and assessment, (b) staff accountability and enthusiasm for student achievement, (c) leadership’s flexibility and inventiveness, (d) leaders staying in touch with the classroom and building, (e) students feeling safe and secure, (f) students’ relationships with staff, and (g) teacher’s knowledge base in content and instruction. The analysis of open-ended responses from school leaders as to the top three most effective strategies that schools used to leverage improvement revealed the importance of building a professional teaching culture with job embedded professional development opportunities and the regular collection and analysis of school and student performance data that informs instruction and interventions. The common barriers that were

reported by school leaders as obstacles that they overcame in their turnaround efforts were lack of parent involvement, negative school climate and school organizational issues.

Finally, the coaching and HSE programs appear to show improvement in schools' accountability scores from the prior school year. However, the degree of improvement varies across level and school year and does not appear to show consistent differences when compared to schools that did not receive assistance. In conclusion, the body of research that has been conducted over the last few years has yielded a number of strategies that have proven successful for JCPS schools in their improvement efforts, particularly around building a positive culture among staff where they are accountable and enthusiastic leaders in the regular collection and analysis of school and student performance data that informs instruction and interventions. Further exploration is needed to examine whether less successful schools that fully implement the school improvement strategies found in the research literature still succumb to the obstacles that have been overcome in the more successful schools.

With the increasing pressures of accountability placed on schools since the inception of No Child Left Behind, there has been a corresponding movement to discover what works for improving school performance. In fact, several of the NCLB sanctions for schools, such as corrective action or restructuring, are designed as school improvement efforts. These school choices under NCLB in addition to other turn-around practices have led to an abundance of practices whose effectiveness can be investigated and possibly modeled as best practices. The purpose of this paper is twofold; to review the literature regarding the empirical research on school improvement practices and to identify the practices that have been most effective in improving schools within Jefferson County Public Schools.

### **NCLB School Improvement Strategies**

No Child Left Behind was passed into legislation in January 2001 to increase academic accountability in the nation's public schools. Under the revised accountability systems, students are tested in grades 3-8 in the subject areas of mathematics and reading. Student assessment results are examined by ethnicity, race, disability, limited English proficiency, and poverty and annual measurable objectives are established for each subgroup population (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

In Jefferson County, 41 of the 85 Title I schools failed to make adequate yearly progress during the 2007-2008 academic year and were subject to sanctions under NCLB. Yet many schools in the district have made consistent gains in core content scores over the past several years and this year alone, four schools met all of their goals for two years and had NCLB sanctions removed (KDE data, 2008). Schools that do not make adequate yearly progress must adhere to the following sanctions (DiBiase, 2005):

Table 1: NCLB Tiers and Consequences

Status	Consequences
Tier 1 (2 years of not making AYP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Notification to parents</li> <li>• Option to transfer to other schools</li> <li>• Revise school improvement plan</li> <li>• 10% for PD from school’s Title I allocation</li> </ul>
Tier 2 (3 years of not making AYP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All of the above</li> <li>• Supplemental Educational Services</li> </ul>
Tier 3 (4 years of not making AYP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All of the above</li> <li>• Corrective Action - Significant intervention by the district</li> </ul>
Tier 4 (5 years of not making AYP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All of the above</li> <li>• Develop restructuring plan</li> </ul>
Tier 5 (6+ years of not making AYP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All of the above</li> <li>• Implement restructuring plan</li> </ul>

The two most significant components under the NCLB sanctions for school improvement fall into the categories of corrective action and restructuring. Schools have different options available for corrective action including: (a) replace school staff relevant to improvement, (b) institute and implement new curriculum, (c) decrease management authority, (d) appoint an outside adviser, (e) extend school day or year, or (f) restructure internal organization. In Jefferson County, schools have implemented new literacy and math curriculums as their corrective action as well as appointed a district level coach that serves as an outside advisor to the schools’ principals and leadership team. The JCPS coaching model and its effectiveness will be described in more detail later in the paper under the JCPS improvement strategies section. Research on corrective actions at the national level has shown that almost all (96%) of Title I schools in corrective action have implemented improvement efforts that fall into the

intervention categories defined by NCLB legislation. According to a study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education Policy and Program Studies (2007), the most common interventions involved curriculum changes (89%) or outside advisors (59%). However, many fewer schools report implementing a reduction in management authority (27%) or replacing staff (7%). With regards to curriculum improvements, most schools focused on aligning curriculum and instruction with standards. The challenges that arose around this effort were a lack of sufficient instructional materials (33%) or materials that were not aligned with state standards (18%), according to teachers in those schools. Schools were also likely to report increasing instructional time as an improvement strategy, with 30% of elementary schools reporting increased time in reading by more than 30 minutes and 55% of high schools reporting increased time in reading for struggling students.

Other researchers have explored the implementation of corrective action in low-performing school districts and conclude that further research is necessary to judge the effectiveness of these actions on improving student and school performance (Rudo, 2001). Rudo cites the U.S. Department of Education's, *Turning Around Low Performing Schools: A Guide for State and Local Leaders* (1998), in explaining that consideration should be given to the following when implementing corrective action: (a) strong leadership at the school site is essential; (b) successful rebuilding appears to require a very clear break with past practices; (c) high expectations and collective responsibility for student learning must be of central importance in the rebuilding effort; (d) professional development and capacity-building are the keys to success; and (e) the role of the district and state leadership is pivotal in determining the success of reconstituted schools.

The other significant school improvement action under NCLB, which occurs after 5 years of not making adequate yearly progress, is the development and implementation of a restructuring plan. The No Child Left Behind legislation allows for the following plans of restructuring: (a) reopening the school as a charter school, (b) replacing all or most school staff, (c) entering into a contract with a private management company to operate the school, (d) turning the operation of the school over to the state, (e) or any other restructuring of school's governance that makes fundamental reforms (DiBiase, 2005). In Jefferson County, the schools' implemented a Leadership Support Team Model as their restructuring action. The leadership support team consisted of a principal coach, school council coach, as well as district and state support. The leadership support model will be described in more detail later in the paper under the JCPS improvement strategies section.

Research on the impact of NCLB restructuring plans at the national level is limited. A report from the U.S. Department of Education Policy and Program Studies (2007) found that only 2% of schools re-opened as a public charter school, contracted with a private entity to manage the school, or replaced all the school staff, while a slightly higher percentage (9%) reported a state take-over of the school. In the reported cases of state takeover, the state assumed control of a small number of schools and not the entire district. Twenty three states have enacted legislation that would allow a state to seize control of a school's operation; to date only five states have exercised this option. The largest percentage (20%) of schools reported appointing a new principal, which falls under the category of "other restructuring of school's governance." There are several documented cases of school turnarounds with new leaders and staff which occurred before the introduction of No Child Left Behind legislation.

The findings reveal mixed results and the efforts often resulted in conflict between district and staff unions that led to litigation (DiBiase, 2005; Kowal & Hassel, 2005).

### **Research Based Improvement Strategies**

Kowal and Hassel (2005) completed a thorough literature review of the effectiveness of turnarounds with new leaders and staff. While complete school restaffing has yielded mixed results, the paper provides several strategies that can be used within any low-performing school (Kowal & Hassel, 2005; DiBiase, 2005). The authors determined four categories of factors that influence the success or failure of a school turnaround: governance, environmental factors, leadership factors and organizational factors. Among the governance factors are: a supportive governing body that provides assistance, setting a timeframe for improvement, and freedom from regulations regarding scheduling, transportation, discipline, and curriculum. Effective turnaround occurs within an environment receptive to change. In order to achieve this, efforts should be made to engage the community and publicize the turnaround campaign.

Perhaps the largest body of research exists on the importance of strong leadership, a common trait in all of the reviewed literature. Among the desirable traits of a strong turnaround leader are: the ability to gather data, analyze problems, and set a course of action, a firm understanding of research about effective schools, confidence that goals can be met, the ability to influence others to foster immediate action, solicitation and implementation of others input, measures and reports progress regularly and publicly, and acts in relentless pursuit of goals rather than touting progress as ultimate success (Kowal & Hassel, 2005). Of the important organizational factors were: the ability to selectively rid itself of weak staff, and an improved culture made through additional training and improved communication.

Other research initiatives aimed at determining effective strategies for school improvement have also highlighted the importance of having the flexibility to act within the governance, environmental, leadership and organizational structures. Mass Insight (2007) reviewed research on the effective strategies of high performing, high poverty schools and revealed a three component approach of: readiness to learn, readiness to teach, and readiness to act. The authors argue that the most effective change occurs when school and district leadership is provided the flexibility to work outside or around traditional structures. Schools working to implement change initiatives for improvement should have “more authority over hiring, placement, compensation, and work rules, more scheduling authority, more budget flexibility, and more flexibility to shape program to students’ needs (Mass Insight, 2007).”

The flexibility in leadership and staffing are key elements supported by other studies. The findings of Mazzeo and Berman (2003) suggest that districts should strengthen the recruitment of quality teachers and principals for low-performing schools. This study cites exceptional teachers and principals as crucial factors in the successful turnarounds of low-performing schools. Efforts to improve the quality of instruction in low-performing schools have been difficult because of the high staff turnover, estimated at between 15-25 percent for a single school year. Mazzeo and Berman recommend that states offer well-trained and highly-qualified teachers and principals targeted incentives, including financial or professional, to stay at low-performing schools.

More qualitative approaches to examining contributing factors to effectively turning around school can be seen in the work of the Wallace Foundation (2008) which completed focus groups and one-on-one interviews with principals and superintendents in districts working in high-

needs schools/districts. Among the noted observations was the benefit of “walking the halls” as a principal to gain insight into the problems effecting academic achievement and to build morale amongst the teachers and students. The findings noted the importance of reviewing, analyzing, and sharing data on student learning as a way to set goals, allocate resources, and analyze problems. Parent involvement, particularly with struggling parents with low-income and low-education, was another factor mentioned by many of the interviewed educators. Other observations included: the importance of high-quality teachers, availability of mentors for educators, and a supportive district which allows school leaders to make appropriate decisions.

States and districts are beginning to use the findings from the research on school improvement to initiate conversations about how best to incorporate these best practices from research into the operations of the schools. In Kentucky, a blue ribbon panel of educators has recently convened to recommend intervention strategies for improving low-performing schools (KDE, 2008). The charge of the committee was to determine the best possible strategies for intervention; make recommendations for how KDE may provide assistance differently to improve student achievement in the lowest performing schools and districts; and make recommendations that would shape the legislative agenda for how to work with the lowest performing schools and districts. The panel met on several occasions and drafted a plan of action based on the Mass Insight’s (2007) High Performing, High Poverty Readiness Model in alignment with Kentucky’s Standards and Indicators for School Improvement.

Other institutions have targeted their work towards incorporating research-based practices in school improvement efforts. Chicago’s Academy for Urban School Leadership

(AUSL), Chicago's first turnaround organization, provides school educators and leaders with intensive training for work in high poverty, low-performing schools (2008). The scope of their work includes developing curricula, assessments, curricular enhancement programs for elementary and high schools in the district and connecting district schools to groups and leaders in the community. The academy provides the following five core elements as a model for schools with a healthy culture and high achievement:

- Teachers have the preparation and the support needed to succeed and stay in a high-poverty, urban school environment (1-4 year training with a master teacher).
- School leaders are effective, proactive leaders with extensive formal training and a commitment to AUSL's core school elements.
- A positive school culture prevails throughout, including embedded support for student social and emotional learning.
- Content, instruction, and assessment are aligned; teaching practices are adjustable and differentiated, and a broad set of academic interventions are readily available to close achievement gaps.
- Extended learning opportunities are standard, not the exception.

In sum, research studies have identified effective strategies for turning around low-performing schools and provide some insight about how to incorporate them at the state, district or school level. The strategies for school improvement encompass a broad spectrum including: school environment, organization, culture, leadership, and community. The next section will describe a few of the initiatives that have been implemented in Jefferson County

Public Schools, with a particular focus on the leadership components that have been used to address NCLB and state accountability requirements.

### **JCPS Improvement Strategies**

One of the primary mechanisms that has been utilized in the district to assist schools in their improvement efforts has been the coaching model. Schools in NCLB tier status and other low performing schools have had outside advisors in the form of district level coaches. The primary responsibilities of the coach have been to provide support and feedback to the school principals and instructional leadership teams in the areas of organizational structure and support for instruction, improving instructional practice, improving systems to track results and establishing effective school climate.

A more formal system that involves a school leadership support team has been put in place for schools which must engage in developing and implementing restructuring plans under NCLB. The leadership support team consists of a principal coach, school council coach as well as district and state support. The primary responsibilities of the principal coach are to provide job performance feedback about the principal to supervisors and to monitor the implementation of all school activities aimed at improving student achievement. For instance, the coach analyzes the work of the school's instructional leadership team and coordinates the various resources flowing into the school to make sure all resources work in a systematic way to support student achievement. The mentor for the schools' governing body, the council, offers individual training based on need, and provides feedback on policy and meeting operations. Central Office support is provided to schools based on individual school needs and may consist

of providing content coaches, funds for targeted professional development resources and resources that allow teachers to visit other school teams that exhibit best practices.

Lastly, an intervention for school improvement devised from the state accountability system involves placing a “Highly Skilled Educator” (HSE) in schools which do not meet their goals. Data collected by the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) shows that over the last three biennia, 191 of the 203 schools which received assistance from an HSE improved their accountability scores. A study by the Partnership for Kentucky Schools found that teachers reported that the HSE program impacted four areas: curriculum and instruction, professional development, leadership, organization and morale and test scores.

### **Research Questions**

The goal of this report is to explore the connections between the body of literature on effective strategies for turning around low-performing schools and the schools within the Jefferson County Public School district that have exhibited similar patterns of improvement in the area of academic achievement. A second objective is to examine the impact of some of the interventions initiated under NCLB and state sanctions, namely the coaching and HSE model, on school improvement. More specifically, the research questions include:

1. What strategies do schools perceive as the most important in turning around their performance?
2. What are the common strategies that schools are using in their school improvement efforts?
3. Do role groups differ in their attributions for what led to improvement at their school?
4. What are the top barriers that schools overcame to improve their schools?

5. Are their differences in stakeholder's perceptions of school operations and culture in schools that have shown dramatic gains in student performance when compared to the district?
6. What is the impact of external expertise (i.e. HSEs and district coaches) on school's academic performance?

## **Methodology**

Based on a thorough review of the literature, the strategies for improving academic achievement in low-performing schools were classified in one of the following six categories: (a) legal/policy, (b) school environment/organization, (c) data/achievement, (d) relationships/culture, (e) leadership, and (f) community. These six categories represent the broad spectrum of effective strategies found in the body of literature. A survey instrument was developed with consideration of the empirically-supported strategies found in the research review and administered to school leaders in schools that had made dramatic changes in school performance over the last few years. It is the aim of this report to provide exploratory results of the opinions of school leaders in the effective strategies employed under their guidance for school turnaround.

## **Participants**

To address the research questions regarding the empirically based school improvement strategies used within Jefferson County Public Schools, schools were selected that had demonstrated marked improvement over the last three years on the state accountability testing system. Participating schools were selected by clearly defined statistical criteria based on data from the 2005-2008 Kentucky Core Content Test (KCCT) accountability, reading and mathematics index scores. Three year gains were computed for each school and based upon

the average yearly gains of all of the district schools and the mean and standard deviation were computed at each academic level: elementary, middle, and high school. Schools that were invited to participate were those that had average yearly gains greater than or equal to one standard deviation above the mean in mathematics, reading, and accountability index scores or who had demonstrated gains consistently across several years in those areas. The schools include five elementary, three middle and two high schools: Breckinridge-Franklin, Chancey, Coral Ridge, Hawthorne, Okolona, Farnsley, Meyzeek, Noe, Atherton and Doss. Principals and school leadership teams (counselors, resource teachers, and teachers) were encouraged to complete the survey.

To address the research question regarding the impact of some of the interventions initiated under NCLB and state sanctions, namely using an outside advisor, on school improvement, schools that had received assistance from a district coach or HSE were included in the analyses. Table 2 below presents the schools that received assistance:

Table 2: JCPS Schools with HSE and District Coach from 2004-05 to 2006-07

Year	Intervention	Schools
2004-2005	Coach	Atkinson, Bates, Blake, Byck, Camp Taylor, Eisenhower, Gilmore Lane, Hawthorne, Maupin, Minors Lane, Okolona, Price, Sanders, Semple, Slaughter, Watterson, Wheatley, Young, Carrithers, Conway, Iroquois, Lassiter, Moore, Robert Frost, Southern, Stuart, T. J., Westport, Central, Shawnee
	HSE	Atkinson, Semple, Iroquois, Lassiter, Frost, Southern, T.J., Central
2005-2006	Coach	Atkinson, Blake, Blue Lick, Breck/Frank, Camp Taylor, Chancey, Cochran, Cochrane, Crums Lane, Dixie, Eisenhower, Gilmore Lane, Goldsmith Lane, Gutermuth, Hazelwood, Indian Trail, Jacob, Johnstontown Road, Kenwood, Kerrick, King, Lincoln, Maupin, Minors Lane, Okolona, Portland, Roosevelt-Perry, Rutherford, Semple, Slaughter, Stonestreet, Watson Lane, Young, Wilt, Highland, Iroquois, JCTMS, Lassiter, Myers, Newburg, Southern, Stuart, T.J., Western, Westport, Central, Doss, Fairdale, Iroquois, Moore, PRP, Seneca, Shawnee, Southern, Valley, Waggener, Western
	HSE	Atkinson, Semple, Iroquois, Lassiter, Frost, Southern, T.J., Central
2006-2007	Coach	Atkinson, Blue Lick, Breck/Frank, Camp Taylor, Cochran, Cochrane, Crums Lane, Gilmore Lane, Goldsmith Lane, Gutermuth, Hartstern, Hazelwood, Indian Trail, Jacob, Johnstontown Road, Kenwood, Kerrick, King, Lincoln, Maupin, Mill Creek, Minors Lane, Okolona, Portland, Rangeland, Rutherford, Semple, Shelby, Slaughter, Wheatley, Barret, Conway, Iroquois, JCTMS, Knight, Lassiter, Myers, Robert Frost, Southern, Stuart, T.J., Western, Westport, Atherton, Doss, Fairdale, Iroquois, J-town, Moore, PRP, Seneca, Shawnee, Southern, Valley, Waggener, Western
	HSE	Atkinson, Minors Lane, Semple, Iroquois, Robert Frost, Southern, Westport, Valley

Instrument

A survey was created, based on empirically supported literature, to assess the participant’s perception of the effectiveness of various strategies to increase achievement gains in low-performing schools. The instrument consisted of three sections: demographic items such as role group and years of experience, a Likert-type scale for indicating the perceived

importance of various strategies implemented by the participant, and an open-ended response section asking the participant to further explain the turnaround/achievement gain experience.

### Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the survey results. The results were also disaggregated by the demographic factors included in the survey. In addition, dependent sample t-tests were used to analyze the impact of coaches and HSEs on school performance results.

### Findings

The majority of respondents were elementary school leaders (58%), followed by high (23%) and middle school (19%) leaders. Most respondents (65%) had 10 or more years of experience; however many of them (45%) reported having less than 5 years experience at that particular school. The largest role group who completed the survey were teachers (48%) followed by principals (23%). A more detailed description of the demographic categories of the participants can be found in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Participant Demographics (N=31)

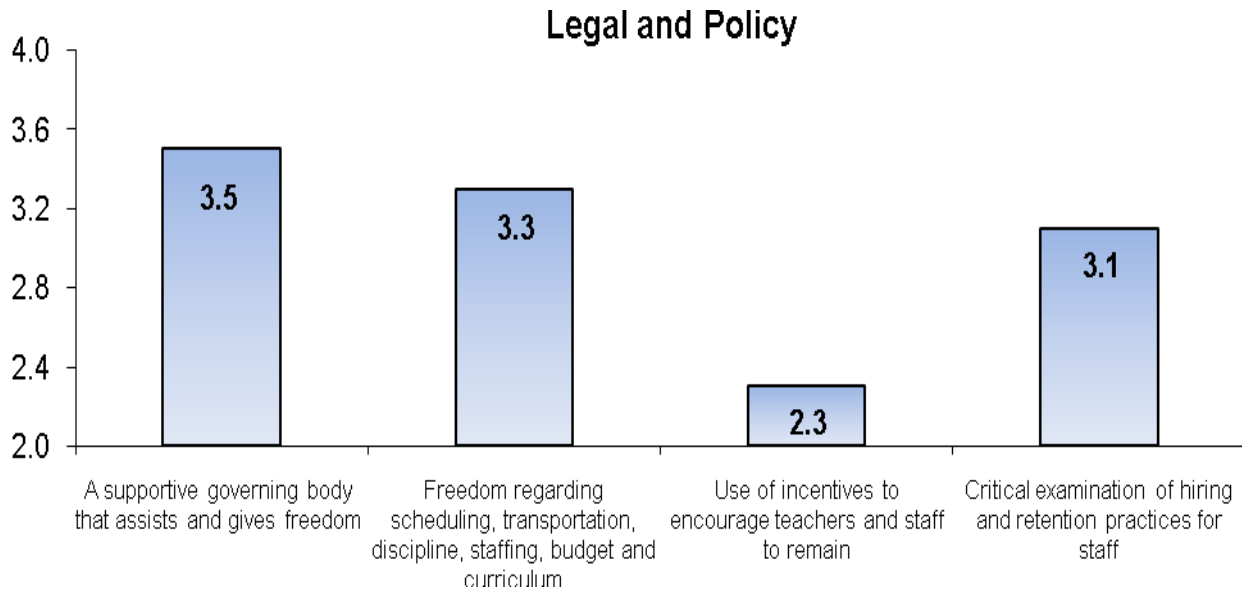
Variable	N	%
School Level		
Elementary	18	58%
Middle	6	19%
High	7	23%
Years Experience		
0-5 years	6	19%
6-10 years	5	16%
> 10 years	20	65%
Years at School		
0-5 years	14	45%
6-10 years	11	36%
> 10 years	6	19%
Role Group		
Principal	7	23%
Counselor	2	7%
Instructional Coach	4	13%
Teacher	15	48%
Other	3	10%

### **Relationship between Research Based Strategies and JCPS Reports**

Overall, the legal and policy characteristics found in the literature review were not rated by JCPS school leaders as highly important in their school improvement efforts. The most important rating was given to the item regarding a supportive governing body that allows for freedom to make the necessary changes for improvement. The lowest rating was using incentives for teachers to remain at the school. This rating may have received a low rating due to school leaders perception of their ability to offer incentives versus the district’s ability. In addition, there were no major differences among the demographic characteristics in the ranking of items, with two exceptions. Teachers were less likely than principals to view the critical examination of hiring and retention practices as highly important. Finally, middle school

staff reported hiring and retention practices as more important than elementary and high school leaders.

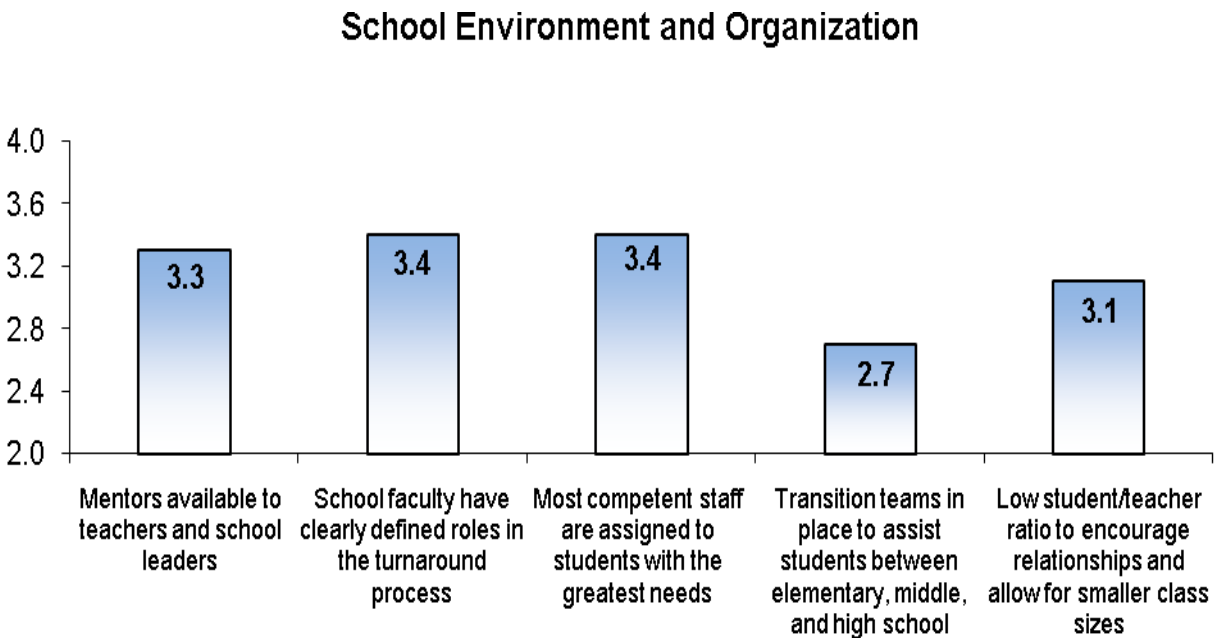
Figure 1: Legal and Policy Characteristics



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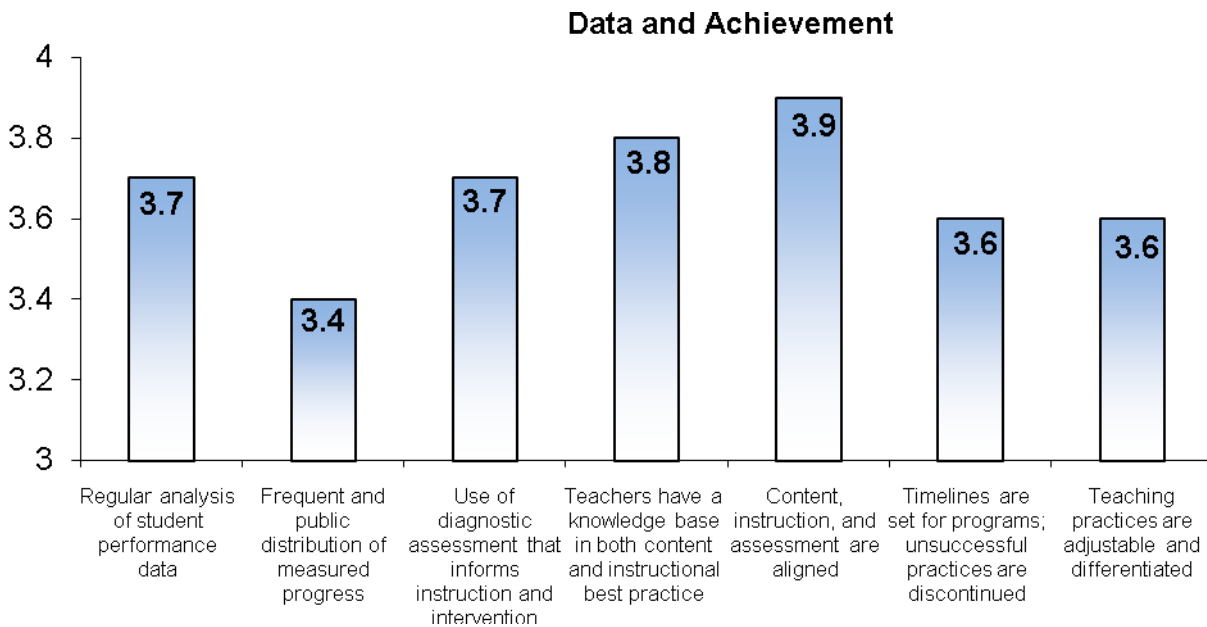
In regard to school environment and organization, school leaders rated all items as important to very important to school improvement with the exception of transition teams to help between elementary, middle and high. The highest ratings were reported for assigning staff clearly defined roles in the turnaround process and assigning the most competent staff to the most struggling students. In addition, participants did not differ by demographic characteristics in their ratings of how important organizational structures were for change.

Figure 2: School Environment and Organization



In regard to data and achievement, school leaders rated all items as important to very important to school improvement with no items falling below an average of 3.4. In fact, when compared to the other categories that emerged from the research literature, JCPS school leaders rated data and achievement as the most important category for turning around their school. The highest rating was given to aligning content, instruction and assessment and the lowest rating was given to frequent and public distribution of progress. Middle school leaders were least likely to rate frequent distribution of progress as important when compared to elementary and high school leaders. Similarly, principals had lower ratings for distributing progress than did teachers

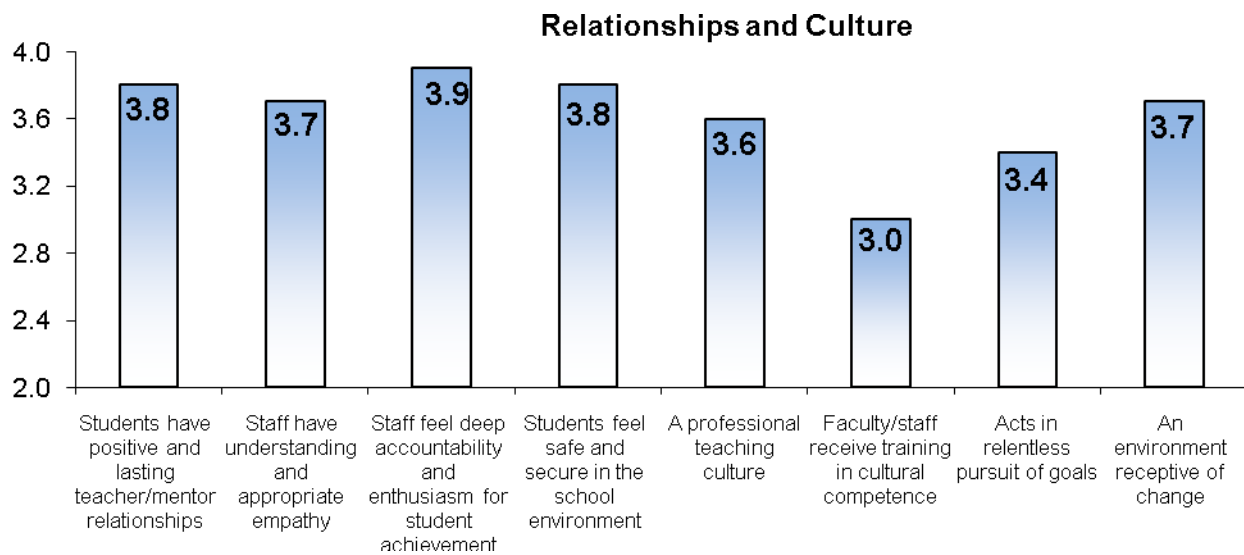
Figure 3: Data and Achievement Characteristics



Overall, school leaders gave the second highest ratings of relationships and culture.

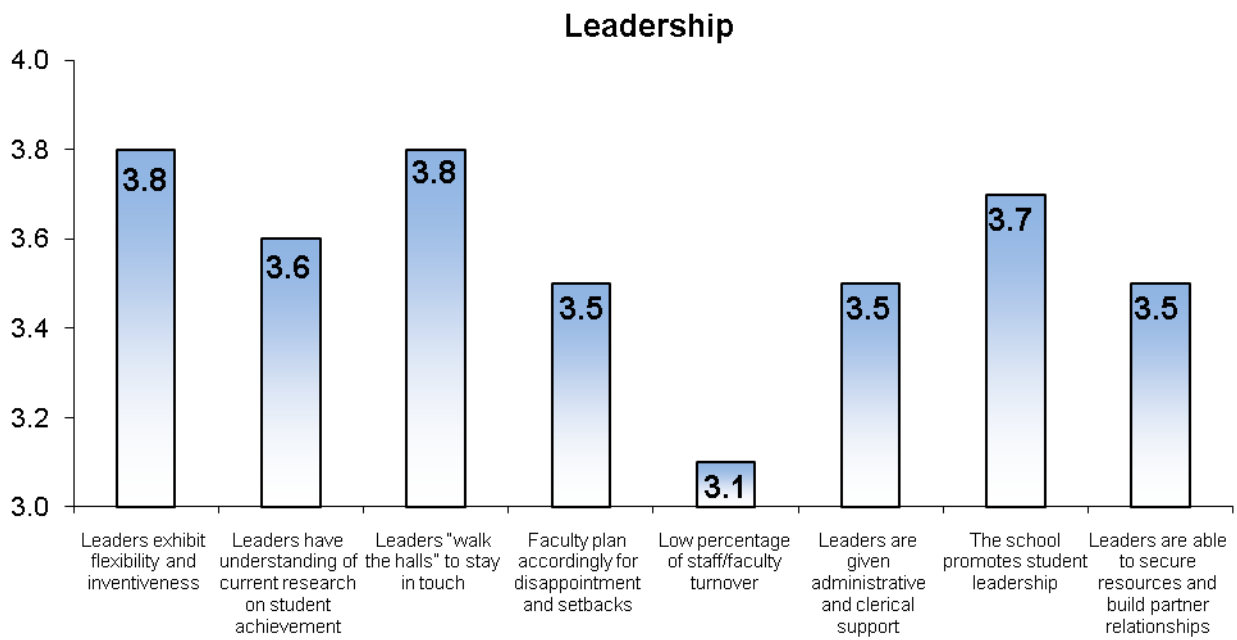
Among the items, the highest rating regarded staff feeling accountable and enthusiastic about student achievement, while the lowest rating was given to receiving training in cultural competence. Specifically, school leaders at the high school level and leaders with less than 5 years of experience had lower ratings of the importance for cultural competence training than their counterparts. Still, other items received high ratings including student feeling safe and secure and having relationships with staff.

Figure 4: Relationships and Culture Characteristics



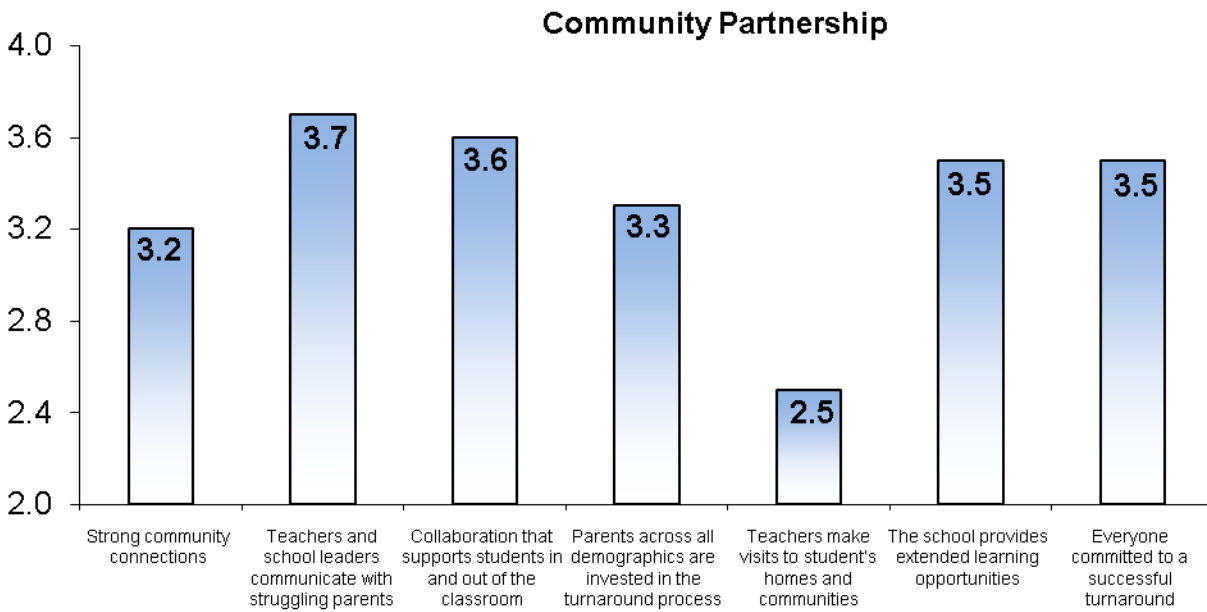
With regard to leadership characteristics, participants reported that leaders having the flexibility to institute change and staying “in tune” to what is happening in the classrooms and building as being the most important factors in their school improvement efforts. The lowest rating was given to a low percentage of staff turnover. However, this rating may be related to the perception that staff turnover is difficult to enforce given transfer options available under the teacher’s contract. In particular, high school leaders and staff with 5 years of experience or less rated the importance of staff turnover lower than their counterparts. In general, staff with less experience rated leadership items as lower importance than staff with more years of experience.

Figure 5: Leadership Characteristics



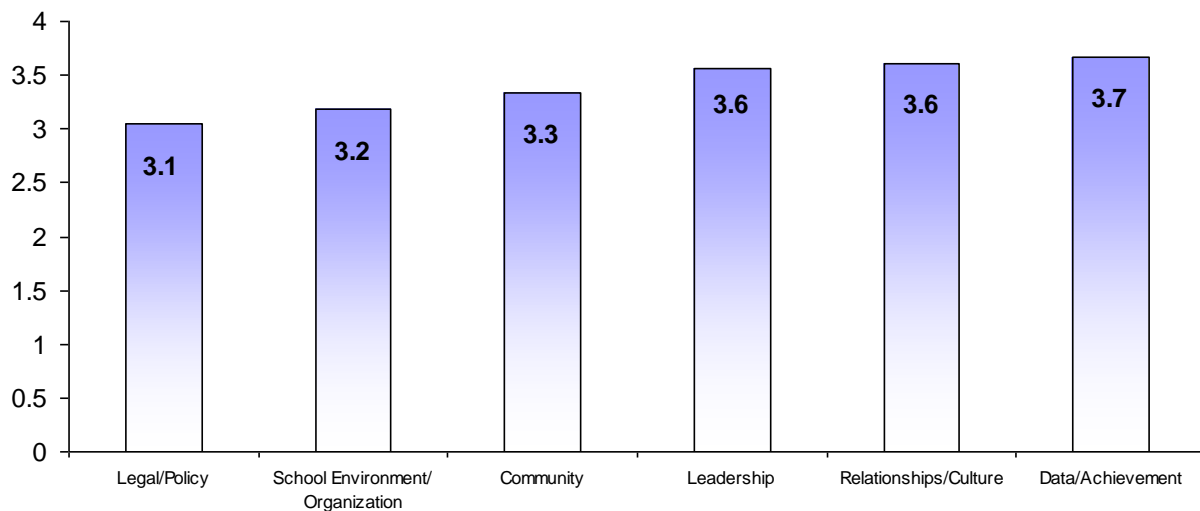
In regards to community partnerships, participants reported that communicating with struggling parents was the most important characteristic for school improvement. However, the lowest rating was given to staff visiting the homes and communities of students. Thus, it appears that the communication with parents and the larger community may occur at the school or through written communication. Also, school leaders with less than 5 years of experience rate the importance of community partnership as less important than do their more experienced counterparts. In particular, the less experienced staff gave their lowest ratings to community connections, home visits and parent investment in the change process. It is possible that with time, staff come to recognize the importance of having all stakeholders commit to the improvement efforts.

Figure 6: Community Partnership Characteristics



Overall, school leaders' ratings of importance of various characteristics associated with school improvement efforts correspond with the empirical findings from the research literature. In general, school leaders attributed the most importance to the use of data, while placing the least importance for legal and policy characteristics. This finding is not necessarily surprising given that school leaders are more likely to see a more direct impact on school reform efforts through the regular analysis and use of student performance data than by implementing legal policies. While there were not substantial differences in the findings when the ratings were disaggregated by demographic characteristics, there was a trend for the more experienced leaders to recognize the importance of various factors as having an influence, particularly with community partnerships.

Figure 7: Ratings of Importance by Category



Given that school leaders agree that there are several factors that make a difference in turning around a school, it is important to explore the top reasons that school leaders attribute to their success. The factors that school leaders listed as the most important factors include:

- Alignment of curriculum, instruction and assessment
- Staff accountability and enthusiasm for student achievement
- Leadership’s flexibility and inventiveness
- Leaders staying in touch with the classroom and building
- Students feeling safe and secure
- Students’ relationships with staff
- Teacher’s knowledge base in content and instruction

The analysis of open-ended responses from school leaders as to the top three most effective strategies fall into the category of data/achievement (44%) and relationships and culture (25%). In particular, the most common strategies included building a professional

teaching culture with job embedded professional development opportunities and the regular collection and analysis of school and student performance data that inform instruction and interventions.

### **Barriers Toward School Improvement**

Some commonalities appear when exploring the barriers that school leaders reported having to overcome to turn around their schools. For instance, the most common barriers reported were lack of parent involvement, negative school climate and school organizational issues. However, parent involvement was not listed as one of the most important factors for leveraging change in the school. The findings indicate that if schools can explore ways in which to foster parent involvement, larger changes in school improvement may result. Still, schools have much control over the two barriers (climate and organization) listed and it offers a clue as to the impediments that should be focused on by some schools that have not been as successful. In addition, it is encouraging that funding and resources were not viewed by school leaders as one of the top barriers.

*Table 4: Barriers Toward School Improvement Efforts*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Parent involvement	21
Teacher buy-in, expectations, general culture	18
Organization (scheduling, time, differentiation, class size)	10
Home environment	9
Review of data	8
Lack of student skills	6
Student attitudes and behaviors	5
Funding and resources	5
Staff turnover or experience of staff	3
Relationships between student, teacher and parent	3
Curriculum alignment	2

## **Perceptions of School Operations and Culture in Turn Around Schools**

In order to evaluate differences in the perceptions of school operations and culture in schools between stakeholders in schools that have shown dramatic gains in student performance and the district-wide population, comprehensive School Survey data were analyzed. The instrument is distributed annually to students, parents, and school staff district-wide to assess respondent perceptions in the following areas: students, school operation, employee, parent/guardian, personal development, and home community. Of specific interest to this research were the items related to school operations in those schools that were identified in the study as schools that had been successful in turning around their performance.

Results from the student and parent survey yielded few responses that were consistently above the district average and in consistent agreement with staff responses and data provided by the school leaders in this study. There was one notable instance of agreement between parent and elementary school staff responses in which both respondent groups scored above the district average in the area of improvement of teacher instruction. These findings are consistent with the literature and similar in content to the school leader response to open-ended item about best strategies for school turnaround: “teacher’s knowledge base in content and instruction”.

Analysis of the school-based certified staff survey responses provided further coherence with the school leader’s assessment of the best strategies for school turnaround.

Elementary staff in the schools participating in this study scored above the district average

in the following items relevant to the literature and respondent data on effective strategies for school turnaround:

- my principal provides effective leadership
- my school is effectively implementing a plan to close the achievement gap
- my school provides teachers with opportunities to collaborate on lesson planning, analysis of work, and instructional improvement
- my colleagues and I work together effectively to advance student learning
- teachers effectively align their lessons with common district assessments each grading period
- my school implements an effective system of regularly analyzing student work
- I feel like I am part of a school community
- I feel safe and secure at my school

### **Effectiveness of JCPS Interventions**

The second objective of this research was to explore the impact of JCPS intervention strategies, namely the use of outside advisors, on school improvement efforts. Descriptive statistics of school's accountability indices can be found in Table 5. Please note that the schools receiving district coaches varied across years as seen in Table 2 and the data below represents pre-post scores. Overall, the district appears to be placing the coaches in the schools with the greatest need. Schools that received assistance from a coach had lower accountability scores than schools who did not receive a coach by 10 points or more in the year before they received the intervention. However, the findings on the effectiveness of the coach varies across the years and levels (elementary, middle and high). In general, the coaching schools improved their accountability scores from the previous year, but it wasn't consistently different from schools

that did not receive coaching services, with the exception of elementary schools during the 2006-2007 school year, middle schools in 2005-2006, and high schools in the 2004-2005 school year.

*Table 5: Impact of District Coach on School Accountability Index Scores*

	Elementary		Middle		High	
	Coach	No Coach	Coach	No Coach	Coach	No Coach
N	18	72	10	14	2	19
2003-04	69.6	79.0	57.1	73.8	56.7	73.4
2004-05	70.2	79.3	59.3	75.7	60.7	74.4
<b>Difference</b>	<b>0.6</b>	<b>0.3</b>	<b>2.3</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>4.1</b>	<b>1.0</b>
N	34	56	11	13	12	9
2004-05	68.6	83.0	63.6	73.4	63.5	85.9
2005-06	71.6	87.0	66.0	74.9	63.4	87.6
<b>Difference</b>	<b>2.9</b>	<b>4.0</b>	<b>2.4</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>-0.1</b>	<b>1.7</b>
N	30	60	13	11	13	8
2005-06	69.7	86.9	65.1	77.6	64.3	89.2
2006-07	74.1	88.2	68.3	80.9	67.1	91.5
<b>Difference</b>	<b>4.4</b>	<b>1.3</b>	<b>3.2</b>	<b>3.2</b>	<b>2.8</b>	<b>2.4</b>

Note: index scores for 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 vary because of changes in the schools who received coaches

With regard to the impact of the HSE program on school improvement efforts, the findings are mixed. Similar to the coaching findings and consistent with the design of the program, schools that received assistance from a HSE had lower accountability scores than schools who did not receive a HSE by 15 points or more in the year before they received the intervention. Again, the impact of the HSE program varies across the years and levels (see Table 6). With the exception of one year at the elementary level, the schools that received an HSE improved their accountability scores from the previous year. In particular, the program demonstrated strong results in the 2004-05 school year but the effectiveness has diminished in recent years when compared to schools that did not receive HSE services.

Table6: Impact of HSE on School Accountability Index Scores

	Elementary		Middle		High	
	HSE	No HSE	HSE	No HSE	HSE	No HSE
N	2	88	5	19	2	19
2003-04	54.0	77.6	52.8	70.5	56.7	73.4
2004-05	60.6	77.9	55.7	72.4	60.7	74.4
<b>Difference</b>	<b>6.6</b>	<b>0.2</b>	<b>2.9</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>4.1</b>	<b>1.0</b>
N	2	88	5	19	2	19
2004-05	60.6	77.9	55.7	72.4	60.7	74.4
2005-06	56.3	81.6	58.0	74.2	61.5	75.1
<b>Difference</b>	<b>-4.3</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>2.3</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>0.6</b>
N	3	87	4	20	1	20
2005-06	60.6	81.8	56.7	73.7	58.2	74.6
2006-07	62.3	84.1	58.5	77.2	62.8	77.1
<b>Difference</b>	<b>1.7</b>	<b>2.4</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>4.6</b>	<b>2.5</b>

Note: index scores for 2005-2006 vary because of changes in the schools with HSEs; which are assigned each biennium

In sum, the coaching and HSE program appears to show improvement in schools' accountability scores from the prior school year. However, the degree of improvement varies across level and school years and doesn't appear to show consistently meaningful differences when compared to schools that did not receive assistance. Still, it is important to note that schools that did not receive assistance differ from schools that received a coach and HSE with regard to student need, in particular the aggregate social capital of a school population.

In conclusion, the body of research that has been conducted over the last few years has yielded a number of strategies that have proven successful for JCPS schools in their improvement efforts, particularly around building a positive culture among staff where they are accountable and enthusiastic leaders in the regular collection and analysis of school and student performance data that informs instruction and interventions. Further exploration is needed to examine whether schools that haven't been as successful are fully implementing the

school improvement strategies found in the research literature and still succumb to the obstacles that have been overcome in the more successful schools.

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