



Ten Principles for Changing a High School's Trajectory

Not much that state boards of education will undertake is harder than transforming low-performing high schools. Yet what they do is pivotal. First, they will adopt policies on graduation requirements, how funding is distributed, how schools are rated, and how low-performing schools themselves are identified and supported. But second, they are uniquely positioned to ensure that schools are tapping into research-based, comprehensive frameworks to improve academic and social outcomes for their students.¹

It is critical that state boards do this work. While graduation rates are on the rise—reaching 84 percent in 2016—significant gaps in academic achievement and graduation persist for diverse and low-income students. The dropout rate for Hispanic students was 10.6 percent in 2016, 7.4 percent for black students, and 5.2 percent for white students.² The measures of high school completion that state education agencies

most widely use—the average freshman graduation rate and adjusted cohort graduation rate—mask these subgroup differences and cannot signify whether schools are providing their students an excellent education.

State board members should keep 10 key principles in mind when they are working to transform low-performing high schools.

1. The school is the unit of change.

Turning around low-performing, underperforming, chronically failing high schools requires strong systems and relationships within the school, its feeder schools, and the school community. Reform efforts that address only one or two areas of dysfunction within a school will fail. Only a comprehensive approach that seeks to change the school's whole culture has a chance. And schools that change their culture become places in which all students have access to an excellent, equitable education.

State boards play a key supporting role in turning struggling schools into high-achieving ones.

**by Stephanie Wood-Garnett
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2. Leadership matters most. There are very few instances in which a school has improved without a strong leader. In 2010, a Wallace Foundation study confirmed that leadership ranks just behind classroom instruction as having the greatest school-based impact on student achievement.³ The school principal, as the keeper of the instructional vision, must guide staff in identifying and implementing the instructional priorities that will lead to desired student outcomes. This means that the principal is not only managing school operations, but taking on the responsibility of maintaining the instructional focus.

3. Strong leadership teams are essential.

Strong leaders burn out without strong teams. Leadership must be distributed so that all members of the school community take ownership of the school's mission and pursue it urgently. Teacher and administrative leaders must together build a healthy, college-going and career-ready school culture and develop a cadre of effective teachers. Leadership teams facilitate change that is more rapid and sustained than the most dynamic leader could do alone, providing continuity when the top leader changes and raising future school leaders organically.⁴

4. Effective high schools offer the coursework and experiences to prepare students for their futures.

As high schools work to improve outcomes for underserved and underprepared students, a shared vision and agreed upon indicators for student progress must be identified and implemented. Access to a college-preparatory and career-readiness instructional program is at the foundation of this work. Such a program provides all students with rigorous, inquiry-based curriculum and instruction aligned with the state's learning standards. In addition, students who are underperforming need more time to acquire and master content. This additional time could give students more opportunities for enrichment or remediation or both. More time can be programmed as extended day, extended year, and collaborative partnerships with postsecondary institutions or intern/externships with corporate or business entities.

5. Effective schools set ambitious goals for underserved and underprepared students.

Effective high schools use data to monitor program implementation and student

performance outcomes and to support continuous organizational improvement.

These are some of the measures that help high schools meaningfully improve:

- grade promotion rates;
- credit accumulation;
- high school dropout rates;
- attendance rates;
- enrollment and persistence in college; and
- enrollment and persistence in work and careers.

6. Faculty in effective schools that serve large numbers of low-income and diverse students are well prepared and supported.

In high schools that serve large numbers of underprepared and economically disadvantaged students, it is imperative that the faculty are carefully assigned and well supported. Continuous professional development is essential for establishing a collaborative learning community, where teachers and school leaders participate in individual and team coaching. Good professional development is structured around problems of practice linked to student needs that teachers and school leaders have identified.

7. Effective schools create a safety net for students within their walls.

In high-performing schools, counselors and faculty take responsibility for students' academic, social, and emotional development and work to build trusting and caring relationships with students that can be leveraged to increase achievement. Dedicated teachers and counselors together can provide a consistent support network and safety net throughout students' four years of high school. This system of Distributed Counseling™ is implemented most effectively when grade-level teams of teachers who teach the same cohort of students meet regularly to problem solve for students with issues, review student work and teacher assignments together for evidence of readiness for college-ready work and careers, and share effective pedagogical and behavior management strategies.

High-performing schools also distribute the responsibility for addressing students' academic, social, and emotional development equally across the school to ensure that no student falls through the cracks. Counselors support teachers in applying appropriate strategies to create a

Box 1. A Principal's Story

In 2010, “Dr. Jones” became principal at School Improvement Grant recipient Key High School, its third principal in five years. Of its 400 students, 85 percent qualified for free and reduced-price lunches, 98 percent came from culturally diverse communities, and 35 percent were not yet proficient in English. During her recruitment for the turnaround role, Jones expressed excitement for the opportunity. Yet what she found was a school so “broken” that no one person could meet the needs of the staff, students, and the community in which the school was situated. The constant struggle to gain traction on student achievement had left the school and its community feeling demoralized and hopeless.

However, Jones was able to turn around the performance and culture of Key High School. Specifically, she invested in a leadership coach to help her develop a leadership team. She was then able to distribute and share many of the tasks essential to whole-school reform. She also invested in content coaches to support her teachers in adopting rigorous curriculum, pedagogy that nurtured higher order thinking skills, and strategies to make a college preparatory program accessible to all their students. To ensure that her students' affective needs were also addressed, she brought in experts to help her staff develop structures and strategies to ensure that every child had an adult advocate who knew that student well.

community where students feel they belong and to meet students' affective needs. Counselors also offer individual and group counseling to selected students and develop external relationships (for example, with community-based organizations) to provide additional supports and resources to students and families.

8. Effective high schools embrace a culture of continuous improvement. To effect meaningful, lasting change, schools must create a culture that values the use of multiple sources of data to continually assess progress toward collaboratively articulated goals, captured in annual action plans. The sources should include statistical data such as test scores and attendance but also teacher assignments and student work samples. In addition to their own self-assessments, these schools invite organized teams of colleagues from other high-performing, like-minded schools to participate in external assessments of their school's work and use the feedback to improve their own program implementation. These networked schools learn from their own and each other's mistakes and failures as well as from successes.

9. Improving high schools join networks of schools. Professional development networks

have been highlighted in several recent articles as a promising approach for states to consider for turning around low-performing high schools. A recent report published by the National Association of State Boards of Education suggests that states can help incubate such networks:

State boards can convene those with knowledge of the social, political, legal, and policy geographies in the state to lead, organize, and operate these networks. Leadership at the state level is critical early on for building a sustainable organizational structure. Networks may be loosely or tightly managed enterprises, they may share a platform, voluntarily associate support services, or share common principles that guide how the members conduct their efforts.⁵

The Every Student Succeeds Act provides state boards with the opportunity to form school networks that are working with a proven provider to address problems of practice and to focus on continuous improvement, says Robert Slavin, director of the Center for Research and Reform in Education at Johns Hopkins University School of Education. “The network would have regular meetings among principals,

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teachers of similar grades, and other job-alike staff members to provide mutual help, share ideas, and interact cost-effectively with representatives of program providers.” Similarly, Allan Golston, president of U.S. Programs at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, promotes the power of school networks working together on problems of practice.

10. Students are actively, authentically involved in schools’ efforts to improve.

Schools must establish systems in which students are consistently engaged and consulted in the design of the school and the learning environment. This not only makes for better school redesign and increased student buy-in, solving real world problems also provides students with the opportunity to develop intellectually and to acquire strong higher order thinking skills, habits of work, and mastery of critical skills. In addition, high schools should ensure that there are strong, meaningful connections between students and their teachers and counselor, as well as opportunities for students to experience enrichment and advancement opportunities. The strong relationships generated by this type of school environment work collectively to support students’ success.

State boards of education can make a difference for underserved and underachieving high school students by continual work and collaboration with stakeholders to improve the quality of education through policymaking, standards adoption, and accreditation. We recommend that state boards in their ongoing work with local education agencies highlight the importance of grounding school transformational work in a research-based context.

Local education agencies can ask the following questions when they are looking to foster changes in a high school’s trajectory:

- What is the mission/vision of the school?
- Is the transformation plan informed by a sound research base?
- How is the high school’s transformation plan aligned with the school district’s strategic plan?
- Are all the community stakeholders represented in the turnaround process?

- Are high-performing personnel (teachers, leaders, student services faculty, etc.) distributed equally across each school in the district, including the low-performing schools?
- What is the pattern of placement for involuntary personnel transfers? What evidence is there that it is equitable?
- What percentage of the courses in lower-performing high schools are considered college preparatory? Career-focused?
- Are students who may be underprepared and undercredited offered extra time to learn and master content and successfully move on to the next course? What quality controls are in place to ensure the consistency of course quality of any replacement or supplemental classes?
- Are students offered the opportunity to acquire work-based learning experiences while in high school?
- Are school and community-sponsored events and ongoing mentoring provided to students in lower performing high schools related to college experiences, credentialing programs, and career exploration? What types are offered and with what frequency?
- Are administrators, teachers, and parents given professional learning opportunities that are focused on increasing rigor and relevance in instruction? ■

¹The U.S. Department of Education’s What Works Clearinghouse is a great resource for evidence-based transforming school practices and instruction. In addition, Bob Slavin talks more about sources of evidence-based approaches in his article in this issue.
²National Center for Education Statistics, 2015–16; 2017.
³Karen Seashore Louis et al., *Learning from Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning* (St. Paul, MN: University of Minnesota, Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, 2010), p. 9.
⁴U.S. Department of Education *What Works Clearinghouse: Standards Handbook*, version 4.0 (2017), https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/referenceresources/wwc_standards_handbook_v4.pdf.
⁵Gary Colletti, “State Role in Incubating School Improvement Networks,” *Policy Update* 24, no. 12 (Alexandria, VA: NASBE, 2017).
⁶Robert Slavin, “How Networks of Proven Programs Could Help State-Level Reform,” *HuffPost* (October 12, 2017).
⁷Allan Golston, “What’s Working: The Power of Networks,” *HuffPost* (January 22, 2018).