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*Executive Summary of*

# Turning around North Carolina's Lowest Achieving Schools

2006-2010

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## **TURNING AROUND NORTH CAROLINA'S LOWEST ACHIEVING SCHOOLS**

### **Executive Summary**

From 2010 through 2014, a portion of North Carolina's \$400 million Race to the Top grant will enable the NC Department of Public Instruction to intervene in an effort to improve performance in the lowest-achieving five percent of North Carolina's schools – some 118 elementary, middle, and high schools. With modifications to accommodate federal guidelines, the interventions supported by Race to the Top funds will build upon experience gained from the NCDPI Turnaround Schools program's work in similar schools between 2006 and 2010. The study reported here was designed to help distill that experience into knowledge which the District and School Transformation Division can use to strengthen its work during the Race to the Top era.

During the 2006-2010 period, the NCDPI and its partner organizations worked with 66 low achieving high schools, 37 middle schools, and 25 elementary schools. These schools were targeted for intervention primarily because their Performance Composites fell below 60% for two or more years. A school's performance composite is a percentage reflecting the number of End-of-Grade or End-of-Course examinations its students passed, out of the total number of examinations taken. Across the elementary, middle, and high school levels, local educators pointed to similar factors contributing to low performance:

- Challenging economic and demographic conditions, whether newly developed or chronic
- Serious and widespread discipline problems
- Low academic demands and expectations among teachers and low aspirations among students
- High principal and teacher turnover
- A negative school identity in the minds of teachers, students, and the surrounding community
- Ineffective school leadership, ranging from harsh top-down leadership to leaders that are too eager to please and fail to enforce discipline or follow through on decisions
- Alienated teachers marking time in survival mode, isolated within their own classrooms

When intervention by NCDPI, the New Schools Project, and other partners was matched by energetic school leadership and district support, teachers took responsibility for student learning, overcame the challenges, and raised student performance, sometimes to striking degrees. The Turnaround Schools program of intervention included (1) a requirement that the schools submit plans consistent with a Framework for Action designed to focus the schools on changing practices thought to affect student achievement, (2) a series of professional development sessions designed to build the schools' capacity to carry out the plans, and (3) follow-up coaching and school-specific professional development, which continued for as long as the school's performance composite remained below 60%. A subset of 13 high schools were also divided into separate, smaller academies in order to strengthen teacher-student relationships and facilitate other reforms.

In the "stuck schools" we studied—those that had made little or no progress despite strong pressure from Judge Manning and assistance from the NCDPI, the New Schools Project, and

other organizations enlisted by the NCDPI and local districts—attempts at reform were undermined by stop-and-start reform initiatives with no sustained follow-through, continued principal and teacher turnover, principals who were unable to mobilize teachers behind efforts to enforce discipline and step up demands for academic achievement, and breakdowns in basic policies and procedures at both the district and school levels. Without sustained, competent, and authoritative leadership at both the district and school levels, these schools were simply unable to break out of the doldrums of despair.

This report is the first in a series related to the evaluation of North Carolina's Race to the Top initiative. As indicated earlier, the interventions to be implemented as a major component of the Race to the Top initiative will build upon experience gained by the Turnaround Schools program between 2006 and 2010. The study reported here was designed to draw lessons from that experience in order to inform the NCDPI's Race to the Top-funded work. In this executive summary, we outline the key findings from the study.

### ***Impact of the Turnaround Schools Program***

To assess the impact of the Turnaround Schools program at the high school level, we conducted an analysis of student achievement data and graduation rates comparing change in the turnaround high schools with change in a set of high schools that performed only slightly better in the years before the Turnaround Schools intervention began. The student test score analysis used value-added models that controlled for differences in student characteristics such as prior achievement, family economic background, and ethnicity as well as characteristics of the schools themselves, including average daily membership. This enabled us to isolate the effects of the Turnaround Schools program from many other variables that affect student test scores. The results revealed that the Turnaround Schools intervention made a significant contribution to improved student test scores in the high schools it served. The contribution was modest but grew progressively larger over the period of treatment. We also compared high school graduation rates in Turnaround schools and similar schools from 2006-07 through 2009-10. Graduation rates in the Turnaround high schools appeared to increase by two percentage points. but the difference between the Turnaround high schools and comparison schools was not statistically significant. At the middle school level, where intervention began a year after intervention began in the first set of 35 high schools, the impact on test scores was not large enough to be statistically significant. Because of an interruption in the flow of resources to support intervention in the elementary schools, the program at that level was not sustained enough in a single set of schools to warrant impact assessment. An important implication of our

#### **Impact**

The Turnaround Schools intervention made a significant contribution to improved performance in the high schools it served. The contribution was modest – about ¼ point on average on End-of-Course tests – but grew progressively larger over the period of treatment. . . . An important implication of our findings at the high school and middle school levels is that improvement in the state's lowest-achieving schools is seldom immediate, but requires sustained support over three or more years. findings at the high school and middle school levels is that improvement in test scores in the state's lowest-achieving schools did not occur immediately, but in the high schools required three to four years before significant improvement registered.

In addition to the analyses comparing the improvement in student learning in Turnaround high schools with improvement in student learning in the comparison schools, we also compared improvement in the performance composites of the two sets of schools. Performance composites represent the percentage of students in a school who have achieved proficiency in tested subjects. The graphs on the next pages show that improvement in performance composites varied widely across the high schools served by the Turnaround Schools program, but on average, the Turnaround schools' performance composites improved more than those of the comparison schools. In the first cohort of high schools, where intervention began in 2006-07, by the end of 2009-10 performance composites in the Turnaround Schools had improved by an average of about 12 percentage points, compared with an improvement of about three percentage points in the comparison schools. In the second cohort of high schools, where intervention began in 2007-08, by 2009-10 average performance composites had improved by about 10 points, compared with the 3-point improvement in comparison schools. Note also that the degree of improvement varied widely across Turnaround schools in both cohorts. It was to understand this variation in improvement that we undertook the closer study of selected schools summarized in the next section.

Figure 1: Percentage Point Change in Turnaround Schools' Performance Composites Compared with Change in Comparison Schools' Performance Composites, 2005-06 through 2009-2010

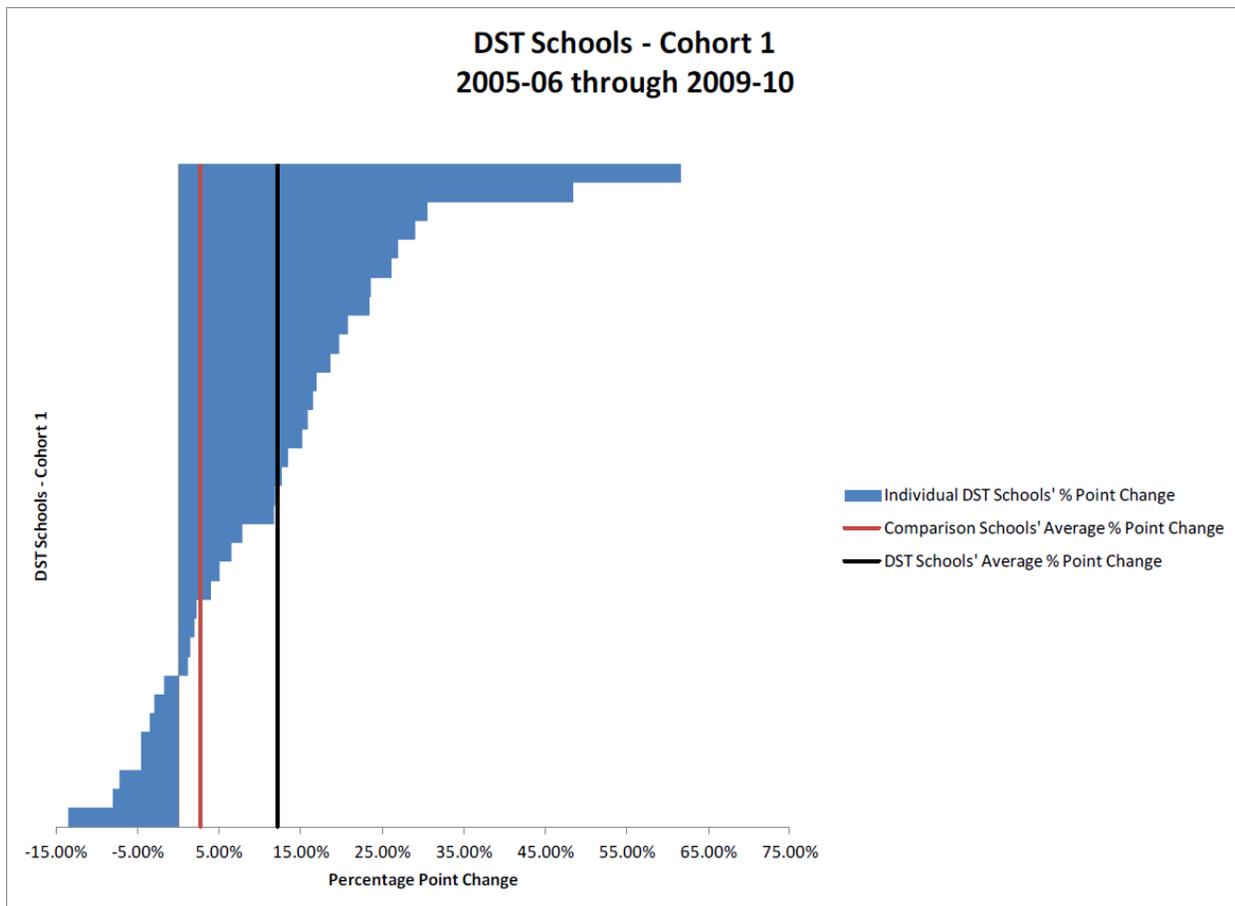
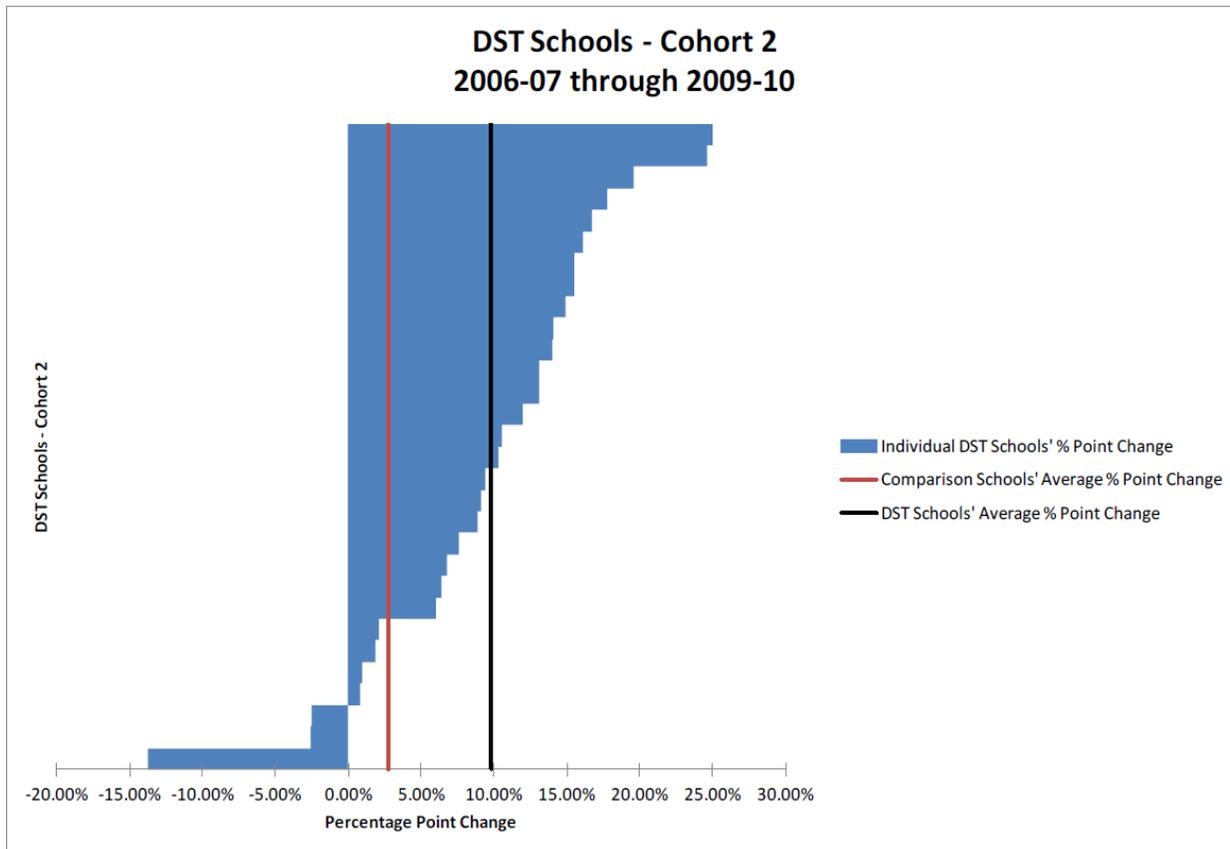


Figure 2: Percentage Point Change in Turnaround Schools' Performance Composites Compared with Change in Comparison Schools' Performance Composites, 2006-07 through 2009-2010



### ***How Turnaround Worked: Scaffolded Craftsmanship***

To learn how change took place in the schools that did improve and what frustrated change in those that continued to perform poorly, we selected 12 high schools, 9 middle schools, and 9 elementary schools to study via onsite interviews and examination of plans, reports, and other documents generated during the turnaround process. At each level of schooling, we chose one third whose Performance Composites had improved sharply (by 20 percentage points or more), one third that had improved moderately (about 12–15 points), and one third that had made little or no progress.

#### **Relationships and Assertive Accountability**

The principal of a small rural high school whose performance composite had soared 28 points in only two years began a sentence with a deadpan poker face, —I don't want to brag, but ...—and here he could not resist breaking suddenly into a brilliant smile—... my teachers love me. Our interviews with teachers bore him out. His teachers did love him. Teachers could not contain their own smiles when they talked about the principal: how hard he worked, how well he knew the students, how often he was in their classrooms, how well he listened and responded to their problems and needs, how he had handled a certain problem with a parent, and on and on.

Yet on the white board behind the principal, we could see teachers' End-of-Course examination passing rates and average scores displayed, together with the goals for the number of students in each class who would pass the exam this year. He explained that early in a semester, he sat down with each teacher of an EOC course to review her students' prior scores and the Education Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS) prediction for the student's likely score in the course. They would then discuss what the teacher would have to do to help the student make a passing score and set a goal for the number of students the teacher should be able to get over the bar. Periodically, they would meet to review benchmark and formative assessment results in order to adjust the program of extra support required to meet the goals. Because the goals are displayed on this public whiteboard, each teacher could compare her students' performance relative to the goals with those of other teachers in the same and other EOC courses. This spurred competition among teachers, but it also prompted teachers to seek help from colleagues with better success rates.

By contrasting the developments in the most improved, moderately improved, and “stuck” schools, we were able to reveal both the dynamics of improvement and the main obstacles to change.

We found that in the improved schools, the turnaround process began in virtually every case with the appointment of a new principal who replaced a substantial number of teachers and sparked a series of changes focused on key areas of school operation, including (1) the commitment, climate, and culture affecting student learning; (2) the knowledge and skills that school leaders, teachers, and other staff bring to their jobs; (3) the structures and processes that support instruction within the school; and (4) the strength of linkages between the school and both the district central office and the community served by the school. We coined the term *scaffolded craftsmanship* to characterize this change

process. The scaffolding consisted of the Framework for Action, professional development, and coaching provided by the NCDPI and its partner organizations. With these supports, school leaders and staff gradually learned how to improve performance by crafting improvements in the

four key areas just mentioned. At the high school level, some schools incorporated selected components of comprehensive school reform models, but the heart of the improvement process was guided reconstruction of key functions rather than implementation of externally designed models.

### ***Commitment, Climate, and Culture***

In the area of commitment, climate, and culture, successful school leaders simultaneously asserted strong accountability pressures as they also cultivated relationships of trust and engaged the teaching staff more actively in planning, making policy, and solving problems within the school. In improved schools, it appears to have been this paradoxical combination of strengthened accountability pressures and strengthened professional ties that mobilized teachers and other staff behind the leadership's new goals, standards, and policies. This new commitment led teachers to challenge students with more demanding lessons and assignments. When, – often to teachers' surprise, – students responded with substantially better performance, teachers concluded, also with surprise, "We can do this!" And the initial successes led to still higher expectations for student learning.

Piecing together the evidence from our interviews across schools into a pattern, we concluded that this is how a culture of high expectations was made.

Accountability pressures within the context of strong relationships and engagement of teachers in planning and problem solving generated commitment to new goals and standards for student behavior and learning. Similarly, strong and consistently enforced discipline policies together with energetic efforts to cultivate caring relationships with students combined to help schools create safer and more orderly environments. But while the initial mobilization of commitment seems to have been crucial, it does not seem to have been sufficient to consummate the culture-building

### **More Orderly Environment**

The clearest illustration of how a more orderly and caring environment was created comes from a small rural high school that was plagued for more than 20 years by conflict between students from two communities consolidated into this county-wide facility. There were small-scale scuffles almost daily, and periodically, large group fights and near riots would erupt. The atmosphere of conflict and disorder permeated halls and classrooms and contributed to rapid turnover of principals as well as teachers.

Leadership came from an unexpected quarter. A man who had grown up in the county, left to pursue a military career, and returned to join the local police force took note of the problems in the high school. Believing that his military and police experience gave him a special perspective on the issue, he approached the chairman of the school board with his ideas for addressing it. The school board chair asked him to lay out a more specific plan and hired him to implement it.

The plan had two sides. First, the new chief of security added two more officers to the two already in place, deployed all four to walk the halls, and instituted a zero tolerance policy against fights. Offenders would not simply be disciplined by the school, but arrested, jailed, and prosecuted. At the same time, however, the security officers were instructed to chat with students, get to know them personally, eat lunch with them, attend sports events they played in, and ask the students to come to security officers, teachers, or the principal with information about developing conflicts or planned fights. Teachers were also asked to show a greater presence in the halls and to listen for signs of trouble in their classrooms. The combination of a get-tough policy and relationship building worked. After an arrest or two, students began to approach the staff to talk through the conflicts that would previously have sparked fights.

process. By *culture*, we mean beliefs, expectations, and norms that have a force of their own in shaping teachers' and students' ongoing behavior. When teachers told themselves, —Wow, this is possible! So we can go higher!!—a development that was recognized and reported across the improved schools—a new culture had started to take shape. By then, teachers had newly recruited colleagues, had learned new skills, and had begun to take action in the new ways we outline in this report. In the improved schools we studied, culture-building and improved performance were part of a spiraling process. Assertive accountability, strengthened relationships, shared decision-making, and an infusion of new colleagues begot commitment to new goals and standards. Commitment begot a more orderly environment and initial steps toward improved teaching and learning. Together, these begot some improvement in student learning and performance, and improved performance inspired the —Wow!! that energized still higher expectations.

In the successful turnaround schools, a parallel combination of tough assertion and strengthened relationships between the leaders and staff on the one hand and students on the other appears to have produced an environment that was substantially more orderly and conducive to learning.

### *Improved Knowledge and Skills*

School leaders' and teachers' knowledge and skills—the —human capital available to the school—were improved through three main approaches: selectively replacing administrators and teachers, focusing professional development on the school's most pressing problems, and providing sustained follow-through with coaching at both the leadership and instructional levels. The installation of a new principal was generally followed by replacement of a substantial number of teachers—the entire teaching staff in one case, half of the teachers in another, and seldom fewer than a third of the staff. New teachers brought new energy and commitment as well as new talents to the school, but in the short term, personnel replacement sometimes exacerbated mistrust between administrators and staff as well as among teachers themselves. Successful principals devoted substantial time and care to mending these frayed bonds. Especially when teachers who were new to the school were also new to teaching, professional development to strengthen their classroom management skills and knowledge of the North Carolina Standard Course of Study was also necessary to transform the new potential into improved performance. Without this follow-through, personnel replacement is simply another form of turnover.

#### **The Turnaround Principal**

The common image of a —turnaround principal is of an energetic, expansive dynamo who shapes up a lagging school by force of personality. But in only one case did a principal conform closely to this image—the principal who swept into the school, tore up the existing Framework for Action, wrote his own, persuaded the School Improvement Team to endorse it, and set about getting it into practice. In general, the principals of improved high schools seemed quieter people, distinguished more by their ability to develop rapport with teachers and students, by their knowledge of instruction, and by an unshowy determination to improve academic performance rather than by an outgoing, expressive personality.

In most of the improved high schools, replacement of a substantial number of teachers came at the same time or soon after a new principal was installed. In a comprehensive urban high school that was divided into a series of smaller schools on the same campus, an entirely new faculty was

hired for the most improved of these smaller schools. At one rural high school, half of the faculty was replaced by Teach for America teachers in a single year. In the remainder of the improved schools, the first wave of teacher replacements was not the result of a deliberate policy decision, but a side effect of serious discipline and morale problems, sometimes exacerbated by principals trying to get control of the school and raise scores through stern unilateral action alone.

**Stick with the Plan**

Another function served by leadership facilitators was to support follow-through on the schools' Framework for Action plans. As one NCDPI manager put it, —You need to see what is really going on and remind them of the plan. \_ We agreed that we would do these three things, and you're getting away from the plan.' You need to remind them on a regular basis... to keep people on track in really low-capacity schools.¶ From the written reports the leadership facilitators filed and the recollections of our interviewees, however, it appears that the facilitators virtually never tried to dictate actions to either principals or others.

**“These Teachers Are Killing Your Scores”**

In contrast, once they had discussed a problem several times with a principal, NCDPI managers sometimes urged certain actions in a very pointed way, an example being the portfolio manager who told a principal point-blank, “You need to get rid of these teachers. They are killing your scores.”

Coaching from leadership and instructional facilitators complemented personnel replacement as a strategy for building human capital. Leadership facilitators—successful former principals, many with experience in turning around schools themselves—visited the schools weekly. A typical visit involved a brief orienting conversation with the principal, several classroom observations, and participation in a School Improvement Team meeting or a meeting with a small group of teachers and an assistant principal working on some identified problem, such as difficulties in the in-school suspension program or how to improve tutoring arrangements for struggling students. At the end of a day in a school, leadership facilitators usually met again with principals to discuss what they had learned during the day. Leadership facilitators sometimes served as neutral discussion leaders during leadership team and School Improvement Team meetings as well as planning retreats. In addition, they took the initiative to organize special meetings to address problems they had identified. Facilitators' written reports also show them providing tools such as classroom observation protocols and common lesson planning formats to principals and teachers, modeling the use of the tools in joint instructional monitoring and feedback sessions, then following up by observing and coaching principals and teachers as they used the tools.

Instructional facilitators provided assistance to individual teachers and groups of teachers in their assigned subject areas. Paralleling the experience-based qualifications of leadership facilitators, instructional facilitators were selected for recent experience as successful teachers. Many were National Board

Certified. Because resource constraints limited the number of instructional facilitators on staff, instructional facilitators were unable to visit schools as frequently as leadership facilitators—once or twice a month at most, rather than weekly. Reports filed by instructional facilitators also reflect more variation in the frequency of visits across facilitators, schools, and time.

Particularly when working with new teachers, instructional facilitators often focused on the NC Standard Course of Study, breaking it down goal by goal and objective by objective to clarify exactly what teachers should be focusing on. Instructional facilitators taught demonstration lessons, observed as teachers tried the new techniques or materials, and provided a combination of encouragement and corrective feedback. The demonstration lessons and the fact that the instructional facilitators were themselves practicing teachers recently out of the classroom gave them credibility and leverage. Most teachers' comments about instructional facilitators were positive, if general in nature. For example, —They were incredibly helpful on our Framework for Action plan.¶ The main complaints we heard from teachers about instructional facilitators—more at the middle and elementary school levels than the high school level—were about seeing them too seldom. One NCDPI manager conceded that resources were too limited to provide the depth and frequency of instructional facilitation that she thought necessary in the lowest capacity schools.

### **Not Forms but Functions**

The director of NCDPI's District and School Transformation division emphasized that what was essential to improved performance was not whether a specific model or organizational form is implemented, but that the functions featured in the Framework for Action be implemented. Thus, the Framework for Action called not for a Freshman Academy, but for a "Plan for Ninth Grade Transition." What we learned from our school interviews bore out the wisdom of emphasizing essential functions rather than specific organizational forms.

### **Supporting Instruction**

Having constructed curricular pathways designed for students of varying skill levels and having —hand-scheduled¶ individual students through them so that they would encounter the most effective teachers available to teach each course, the improved schools in our sample did not then leave teachers on their own to teach as best they could. They took a number of additional steps to ensure that the Standard Course of Study for each course was actually taught, was taught well, and was taught again when necessary. With the support of leadership and instructional facilitators, principals structured and supervised instruction closely, organized teachers into collaborative groups (professional learning communities), and promoted the use of benchmark and formative assessment to check students' learning regularly, to guide assistance for struggling students, and to shore up weak spots in teaching.

### *Structures and Support for Instruction*

As important as increased commitment, order, and demands for performance as well as new knowledge and skills were, carefully crafted structures and support for instruction were required to make effective use of the new commitment and skills. Instruction had not been strategically organized or managed in turnaround schools. The improved schools in our sample used a variety of strategies to shepherd individual students through curricular paths matched to their evolving skills and to ensure that students encountered solid teaching and re-teaching along the path to proficiency. Improvements included more systematic attention to (1) coordinating curriculum and assigning students and teachers strategically, (2) supervising instruction, building professional community, and using multiple forms of assessment to guide revision of curriculum and teaching as well as to pinpoint the objectives that individual students are having trouble with, and (3) organizing extra assistance for struggling students. One key to improvement was to break down the curriculum into course-sized chunks leading up to as well as through the objectives in the NC Standard Course of Study, then route individual students through the right courses in the right order. The right

courses in the right order were those that a given student could handle at each point along the way, provided that s/he gave a solid effort.

### ***External Support***

Finally, improved schools also featured stronger links with district central office administrators and with the broader communities served by the schools. For example, districts sometimes took the initiative to replace poor-performing teachers, responded to requests for new funds to staff the extra assistance for students who had been falling behind, and helped principals and teachers create more effective formative assessment programs and interpret data from a variety of sources. School leaders hosted meetings and offered building tours to school boards and county commissioners, involved parents in major school clean-up efforts, organized mentorship programs in partnership with local businesses, spoke at churches and civic clubs, and used a variety of other devices to improve the school's relationships with the surrounding community.

### ***Conclusion***

Partly because our study was retrospective and partly because NCDPI's leadership and instructional facilitators approached their work in a facilitative rather than a directive manner, we found it impossible to determine just how much to credit the facilitators for the progress in improved schools and how much to credit the administrators and staff themselves. In their accounts of the change process, school people naturally featured the actions they themselves had taken—appropriately so, in the sense that it was their actions that directly affected student learning and test performance. Yet principals and teachers did credit the NCDPI and its partner organizations with important contributions as well. Principals reported that the leadership facilitators helped them stay focused on implementing their Framework for Action plans and provided useful guidance on rebuilding many essential systems. Instructional facilitators' recent classroom experience, competent delivery of demonstration lessons, and concrete advice and feedback gave them credibility with most teachers. But because instructional facilitators visited less frequently than leadership facilitators (once every month or six weeks rather than weekly), they appear to have found it more difficult to develop trusting relationships with some teachers. A few teachers in low-progress schools complained that the instructional facilitators knew too little about them and their schools to advise them appropriately. In general, however, most administrators and teachers offered positive assessments of the leadership and instructional facilitators' assistance, and when they did offer critical feedback, it was mainly to call for more frequent visits from instructional facilitators. For a review of the contrasts between the schools that made substantial progress and those that made little or no progress, see Table 1 at the end of this Executive Summary.

#### **Summing Up**

All in all, the NCDPI's Turnaround Schools program appears to have succeeded in providing high-quality assistance to most of the low-achieving schools targeted by the program. When this external assistance was matched by energetic and sustained local leadership, schools succeeded in breaking out of the doldrums of low performance and made significant, measurable progress over a three- or four-year period.

Since the period covered by this report (2006-2010), the District and School Transformation Division has taken several steps to strengthen their interventions. With assistance from the Boston Consulting Group and Cambridge Education, LLC, an international firm with special expertise in the area, DST has moved to systematize the comprehensive needs assessment

process. To ensure better use of the needs assessments, DST has also tightened the links between the needs assessment unit and the school and district facilitators. In addition, school facilitators are now employed directly by NCDPI rather than through a contract with the Leadership Group for the Carolinas. Further, the facilitators now provide professional development as well as coaching. The consolidation of professional development with coaching along with direct employment of the facilitators helps lower costs, but it also poses the challenge of training and managing a number of people who are new to the job. DST has also increased its focus on the district level. District transformation coaches will assist the 16 districts where the majority of low-achieving schools are located. (Funding for 12 districts will be provided by Race to the Top funds. Assistance to the other 4 will come from state funds.) With these changes and some adjustments in the frequency of visits by instructional facilitators, DST seems poised to make a significant contribution to the ambitious improvements sought by the Race to the Top effort. We would caution against expectations for instant improvement, but DST has shown that with persistence and thoughtful adjustments throughout a four-year process, low-achieving schools can indeed turn around.

Table 1. Summary of contrasts between high-progress and low-progress or “stuck” schools

School attribute	Improved schools	“Stuck” schools
Focus and continuity	Sustained focus on improving key functions	Profusion of stop-and-start initiatives without continuity or follow-through
Principal replacement and district support	District installation of new instructionally oriented principal committed to reform, with continued district support for assertive accountability	Without strong district support for principal and assertive accountability, continued principal turnover
Teacher replacement	Replacement of ineffective teachers with energetic new teachers committed to turnaround agenda, with district support	Without improved discipline and accountability for student achievement, continued uncontrolled teacher turnover
Accountability and teacher-principal relationships	Principal actively holds teachers accountable for improving student achievement AND builds positive relationships with teachers.	Ineffective leadership, ranging from unilateral demands for improved achievement without relationship building, to nurturing relationships without accountability
Discipline and order	Tough, well-enforced discipline policy combined with strengthened adult-student relationships produce orderly environment for learning.	Without an assertive principal with strong district support, teachers lack incentives and confidence to enforce discipline.
Professional development (PD) and coaching	PD with sustained coaching follow-up at school and classroom levels strengthens principal and teacher skills and knowledge.	Continued turnover undermines the effects of PD and coaching; spottier classroom level coaching
Curriculum coordination and assignment	Strategic, individualized assignment of students to curriculum pathways matching their developing skills and of strongest teachers to End-of-Course curricula	Curricular pathways less carefully constructed, both student and teacher assignment less strategic
Instructional supervision	Frequent classroom observation and feedback from school leaders	Less regular classroom observation, less feedback
Professional community	Time, training, and support for teacher-led collaboration on pacing guides, lesson plans, mutual observation, and use of formative assessment	Less structure and support for a professional learning community (PLC), resulting in less robust implementation of PLCs
Assistance for struggling students	Well-developed tutoring focused with formative assessment results—during, before, and after school	Assistance less organized, not clearly focused with use of formative assessment

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