

The **Research Alliance** for  
New York City Schools

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# Learning from “Turnaround” Middle Schools: Strategies for Success



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The middle grades mark a critical transition for students. Recent research provides compelling evidence that students' attendance, test scores, and grades during the middle school years can strongly predict whether or not they graduate from high school.<sup>i</sup> Unfortunately, many young people are faltering in the middle grades. In fact, less than 40 percent of 8<sup>th</sup> graders are currently at or above proficient on standardized reading and math tests.<sup>ii</sup> As in other parts of the country, middle grade students in New York City are underperforming. In 2011, after New York State raised its performance standards, just 35 percent of the City's 8<sup>th</sup> graders were proficient in English Language Arts (ELA), and 52 percent were proficient in math.<sup>iii</sup>

In light of this reality, middle schools have become a priority for the New York City Department of Education (DOE). In September 2011, Chancellor Dennis Walcott, addressed what he called "lagging achievement among middle school students," proposing four policy strategies to improve middle school education in the city.<sup>iv</sup> This study seeks to inform the DOE's efforts to improve middle schools by learning more about schools that have turned around or "beat the odds" after years of low performance.

In New York City and around the nation, there is intense interest in the question of what it takes to turn around a struggling school. The turnaround strategies that predominate in federal policy include school closure, conversion to a charter school, dismissal of the principal and a substantial proportion of teachers, and the reassignment of students to other schools. In contrast, the turnaround schools in this study substantially improved student performance without the infusion of extra resources or the wholesale reassignment of students, teachers and administrators. Rather, these schools have made improvements by drawing on existing resources and developing internal capacity to educate students effectively. Although this kind of transformation may not be possible for all low-performing schools, the experiences chronicled in this report suggest important lessons for educators and policymakers, both here in New York and around the country.<sup>v</sup>

## The Study

The study focuses on two groups of initially low-performing schools with similar demographics. The first group—which we refer to as turnaround schools—exhibited significant growth in academic performance between 2006 and 2010. During those same years, academic performance in the second group of low-performing schools saw minimal growth or remained stagnant.

To gain an understanding of how the turnaround schools had improved, we conducted in-depth interviews with principals and focus groups of 3 to 10 teachers in both sets of schools. These conversations elicited rich data about the specific practices that had contributed to turnaround and how these practices were implemented at the school level. The report focuses on topics, themes and perspectives that arose consistently in response to the open-ended questions we posed about the school’s recent efforts to improve student performance.

*“I would find it useful if there was some data analysis ... at the citywide level of the qualitative best practices that unify schools that get A’s on their report cards, so that, for instance, when I’m looking at where we stand in terms of our peer schools, I might have some sense of the practices in place in those schools rather than just the quantitative differences...I don’t have enough qualitative information about what’s going on in schools that are achieving those A’s.”*

- Teacher

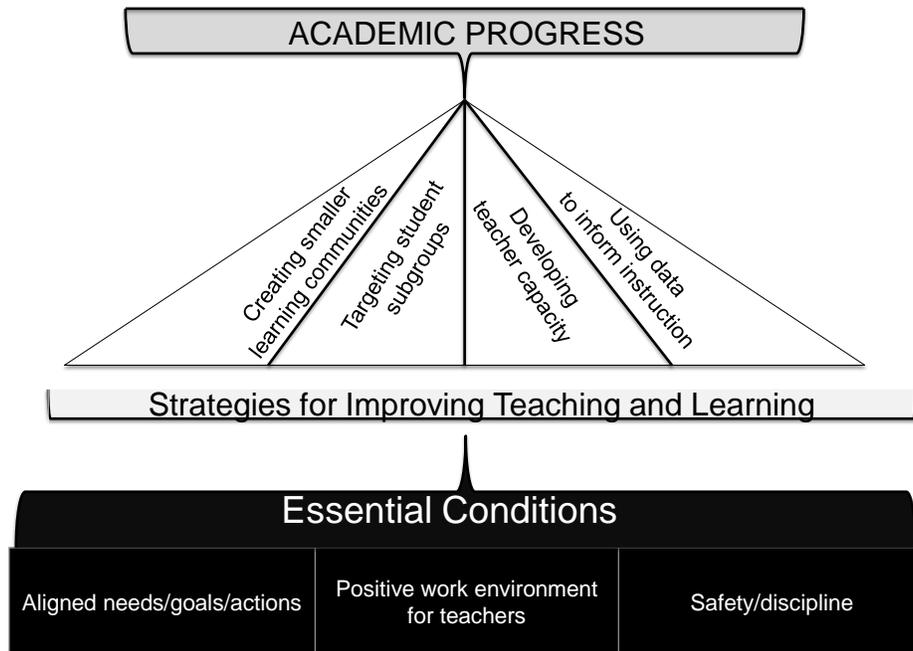
## Key Findings

Turnaround schools shared three conditions that principals and teachers reported were essential to their capacity to improve student achievement: 1) aligning needs with goals, 2) creating a positive work environment, and 3) addressing student discipline and safety. Principals and teachers also attributed their school’s success to the implementation of specific strategies aimed at improving teaching and learning: 1) developing teachers internally, 2) creating small learning communities, 3) targeting student sub-populations, and 4) using data to inform instruction.

As illustrated in Figure ES 1, the essential conditions were the foundation upon which strategies for improving teaching and learning could be implemented. Fundamentally, the alignment of needs, goals, and actions in the schools drove the selection and use of appropriate strategies to improve teaching and learning. The positive work environment helped ensure the success of these strategies, while addressing safety and discipline issues made it possible for

teachers to focus more energy on teaching and learning. These three conditions were leader driven, though they required the cooperation of other staff members to be successful. It was the multi-pronged effort of these schools that ultimately led to academic improvement.

**Figure ES 1:**  
***Essential Conditions and Key Strategies for School Turnaround***



### **Essential Conditions for Success**

- 1. Aligning needs, goals, and actions:** The principals of the turnaround schools each assumed leadership when their schools were struggling academically, and recalled a desire to make large, schoolwide changes that would improve performance. But rather than talk about “school improvement” as a general concept, these leaders focused on the particular needs or challenges of their own schools, setting specific goals and taking targeted actions to meet those goals. The principals shared an ability to communicate their vision to school staff. And while the specific goals differed from school to school (e.g., improving instruction for a certain subgroup of students or in a particular subject area), the principals displayed a

similarly strategic placement of resources and energy toward the areas most in need of improvement.

**2. Creating a positive work environment for teachers:**

Interviewees reported that a positive principal-teacher relationship helped ensure alignment between schoolwide goals and teacher work and played a key role in sustaining instructional changes over time. Principals helped create strong relationships with their teachers by providing professional and personal support as well as ample opportunities for teachers to make decisions about curriculum and instruction. At the same time, these leaders struck a balance between building rapport and trust with their staff and dealing very directly with any resistance that emerged.

*“I didn’t want ... the teachers or the students or the parents to see me as just a principal, so they saw me everywhere, doing everything and helping them. .... They have to see you as a real person, not someone that will demand things of them that they’re not doing themselves.”*

- *Principal*

- 3. Addressing safety and discipline:** Principals and teachers also cited the importance of establishing order in their school buildings as essential for improvement. Though not directly related to instruction, effectively addressing safety and discipline allowed schools to focus more time, energy, and resources on teaching and learning. Among the methods described as most successful were significantly increasing principal and teacher presence in areas where students congregate and building strong personal relationships with students.

**Strategies for Improving Teaching and Learning**

- 1. Developing teacher capacity internally:** Teachers in the turnaround schools received professional development from their peers in a way that was closely tied to their daily work. Turnaround schools employed specific structures, such as Lead Teacher, peer mentoring and intervisitation programs (in which teachers and principals visit classrooms to learn about successful instruction). The approach to professional development was collaborative in nature and thus dependent on a strong culture of sharing and professional growth.
- 2. Creating smaller learning communities:** Principals in the turnaround schools took specific measures to create smaller learning communities, including establishing learning academies that focus on specific themes and looping across grades (which allows students to remain

with teachers for several consecutive years). This was intended to expand opportunities for individualized learning and help teachers develop stronger relationships with students. According to teachers, it also improved instruction and increased collaboration among staff.

*“My class has been together for quite a long time, so they are very comfortable with each other. They’re friends, like a little family.”*

- Teacher

- 3. Targeting student sub-populations:** Interviewees spoke of the importance of targeting student subgroups for improvement, especially special education students and English Language Learners. Specific measures to help serve these students included hiring new staff, assigning staff to particular classes, and offering specialized programs to address academic and non-academic needs.
- 4. Using data to inform instruction:** Teachers in turnaround schools reported using performance data to group students and tailor instruction to meet their specific needs. They also had structures for sharing data with their students, which helped the students better understand academic expectations, set goals, and become more engaged in the learning process.

### **Ongoing Challenges**

Some of the practices identified in past research as important for school turnaround remain ongoing challenges for the schools in our study. These challenges include communicating with and engaging parents and providing services and programs that support students’ social and emotional well being. Though the schools offered various kinds of extra support for students, administrators and teachers cited difficulty in acquiring and maintaining resources to meet their students’ many needs, particularly in the context of recent budget cuts. Despite these ongoing challenges, the turnaround schools demonstrated significant improvement in student performance.

### **Recommendations for More Effective Middle Schools**

The national conversation about school turnaround has largely focused on drastic approaches to reform. In New York City, the underperformance of middle grade schools in particular has become an area of concern for the DOE. This study was motivated by a desire to learn more about how to improve and support middle grade schools—without the aid of dramatic

reform strategies that cannot be as readily applied across an entire system. We hope the findings can inform the work of school-level educators by providing rich descriptions of the practices that played a role in the improvement of these schools. We also believe that the study suggests ways that city and state administrators can support middle grade schools, and how further research may extend what we know about school improvement. As such, we recommend the following:

- **Cultivate strong leaders for struggling schools.** The importance of the school leader in the turnaround of these schools suggests that strategic principal placement is critical for supporting the improvement of middle grade schools. School districts might consider offering incentives to successful principals to take positions in persistently low-performing middle grade schools. Another more limited measure would be to provide a sustained mentorship between these successful principals and principals in low-performing schools through intervisitation and principal learning groups.
- **Train leaders in strategic goal setting.** District and school support networks should help build principal capacity to identify *specific* areas where their school is struggling and create measureable goals (and benchmarks) that address those needs (as the Comprehensive Educational Plans that are required of all New York City schools). After establishing goals and measures, principals should select key teacher leaders who can help ensure that the goals are driving teachers' work. It also may be useful to develop a tool in ARIS—the city's comprehensive student data management system—to help principals track their progress.
- **Train principals to head off potential disciplinary issues by offering socio-emotional support for students.** Concerns over safety and discipline are a common complaint among middle grade principals and teachers. We found that the principals of the turnaround schools made establishing order in their buildings a significant priority. Providing leaders with targeted training in this area may be an important first step in improving outcomes. Schools with high suspension rates and a large number of incident reports may particularly benefit from such training.
- **Develop structures to support increased teacher mentorship.** One of the most important strategies shared by these turnaround schools was providing regular and ongoing opportunities to develop teacher capacity within the building. Setting up specific structures to support mentorship and the use of effective practices among the entire staff seems critical not

only for enhancing teachers' capacity, but also for supporting their morale and confidence. One option in New York City would be a targeted forum on ARIS communities around mentorship.

The findings and themes that emerged from this study also raise challenging questions for ongoing research being undertaken by the Research Alliance and others. For example, how can these conditions and strategies be sustained? Under what circumstances can we expect the conditions and strategies exhibited here to take hold and develop across the spectrum of low-performing middle schools in New York City and other urban school districts? Are these conditions and strategies more or less likely to occur under the threat or implementation of dramatic externally imposed turnaround models? Exploring these questions and studying other middle school reform efforts as they unfold would help us better understand the success of these schools and provide further guidance on how to turn around other persistently low-performing middle grade schools in New York City and around the country.

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## Executive Summary Notes

<sup>i</sup> See Balfanz, 2009; Keiffer, Marinell et al., 2011; Kurlaender, Reardon, et al., 2008. For complete citation, see full report.

<sup>ii</sup> National Assessment of Educational Progress. See <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>.

<sup>iii</sup> See <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/data/TestResults/ELAandMathTestResults>.

<sup>iv</sup> See <http://schools.nyc.gov/Offices/mediarelations/NewsandSpeeches/2011-2012/msspeechatnyu92011.htm>.

<sup>v</sup> For this study, *turnaround* is defined as an end state or consequence of successful actions, and a *turnaround school* is one that has shown great improvement (Murphy, 2008). This differs from common usage in federal, state, and local policy, when “turnaround” frequently means school closure, restart, or replacing the principal and a large percentage of the staff.

# I. INTRODUCTION

The middle grades mark a critical point of transition for students on their educational pathways. Recent research has shown that students' attendance, test scores, and grades during the middle school years can strongly predict performance in high school and whether or not they go on to graduate (Balfanz, 2009; Keifer, Marinell, et al., 2010; Kurlaender, Reardon, et. al, 2008). Unfortunately, many young people are faltering in the middle grades. In fact, less than 40 percent of the nation's 8<sup>th</sup> graders are currently at or above proficient on standardized reading and math tests.<sup>1</sup>

As in other parts of the country, middle grade students in New York City are underperforming. In 2011, after New York State raised its performance standards, just 35 percent of the city's 8<sup>th</sup> graders were proficient in English Language Arts (ELA), and 52 percent were proficient in math. While test scores among 8<sup>th</sup> graders have been improving since 2006, the rate of growth has lagged behind that of the city's elementary students, particularly in ELA.<sup>2</sup> Given these realities, middle schools have become a priority for the New York City Department of Education (DOE). In September 2011, Chancellor Dennis Walcott addressed what he called "lagging achievement among middle school students," proposing four policy strategies to improve middle school education in the city.<sup>3</sup> This study seeks to inform the DOE's efforts to improve middle grade schools by learning more about schools that have turned around<sup>4</sup> or "beat the odds" after years of low performance.

In New York City and around the nation, there is intense interest in the question of what it takes to turn around a struggling school. The turnaround strategies that predominate in federal policy include school closure, conversion to a charter school, dismissal of the principal and a substantial proportion of teachers, and the reassignment of students to other schools. In contrast, the turnaround schools in this study have substantially improved student performance without the infusion of extra resources or the wholesale reassignment of students, teachers, and

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://schools.nyc.gov/Offices/mediarelations/NewsandSpeeches/2011-2012/msspeechatnyu92011.htm>.

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administrators. Rather, these schools have made improvements by drawing on existing resources and personnel and by developing internal capacity to educate students effectively. Although this kind of transformation may not be possible for all low-performing schools, the experiences chronicled in this report suggest important lessons for educators and policymakers, both here in New York and around the country.

Current research on middle school improvement and “turnaround” schools in general documents a number of strategies—from improving the use of data to inform instructional and administrative decisions to creating a more nurturing environment—that can promote success for a school and its students. However, few of these studies provide rich descriptions of *how* educators implement these strategies at the school level, and even fewer are focused on New York City schools. This study presents a rich picture of the turnaround strategies used in four NYC middle schools, informed by interviews with principals and teacher focus groups.

To understand more about the differences between successful and struggling middle grade schools, we identified two groups of schools: one that was initially low performing but had made steep improvements relative to the citywide average, and one that was persistently low performing. Our first goal was to identify successful turnaround strategies used in this sample of NYC middle schools. Our second and most important goal was to explore how principals and teachers implemented these strategies in their schools.

We found that turnaround schools shared three conditions that were essential to their capacity to improve student achievement. These were aligning needs with goals, creating a positive work environment, and addressing student discipline and safety. These essential conditions set the stage and made possible the implementation of four specific strategies to improve teaching and learning: developing teachers internally, creating small learning communities, targeting student sub-populations, and using data to inform instruction. It is important to note that both the essential conditions and the strategies to improve teaching and learning were built on a foundation of strong, purposeful leadership and collaborative strategies for improving teacher capacity. Finally, we found that schools in both groups faced similar ongoing challenges around increasing parent engagement and providing support services to students.

This report begins with a brief review of the literature related to school turnaround and how it guided our approach. Next, we explain our research design, data collection, and analysis. The bulk of the report is a discussion of our findings, which include descriptions of key turnaround strategies and ongoing challenges for all schools. Finally, we describe how this research might inform practitioners and policymakers at the school and district level, and its implications for further research.

## **II. WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT MIDDLE SCHOOL TURNAROUND?**

In this chapter, we review the literature on school turnaround, highlighting findings from studies of middle grade schools. While many key findings emerge from past research, we have chosen to organize them by four major topic areas: 1) leadership, 2) professional capacity, 3) student engagement and support, and 4) engagement of parents, communities, and partners. This review also outlines how the current study addresses the limitations of previous research on school turnaround.

### **Leadership**

The turnaround literature predominantly focuses on the characteristics and actions of school leaders. Studies have found that effective turnaround leaders are intentional and strategic in setting schoolwide goals, which can inspire a common vision among teachers (Herman et al., 2008; Leithwood & Strauss, 2008, 2009; Murphy, 2008, 2009; Public Impact, 2008; Rhim et al., 2007). These leaders manage their schools effectively by implementing schoolwide practices that are targeted toward raising student achievement (Almazan, 2005; Leithwood & Strauss, 2009; Murphy, 2008, 2009; Rhim et al., 2007). Good management also hinges on empowering teachers to make key decisions and getting them to communicate regularly with the administration (Day, 2009; Kannapel, Clements, Taylor, & Hibpshman, 2005; Lontos, 1992; Picucci et al., 2002; Salmonowicz, 2009). Strong leaders help teachers become more effective by building morale and commitment, giving them ownership over their professional development, and prioritizing their well-being (Boyle, 2007; Day, 2009; Leithwood & Strauss, 2008, 2009; J. Murphy & Meyers, 2009). Finally, the literature emphasizes the importance of instructional leadership, which includes having a consistent focus on improving instruction, setting high standards for instruction, and leading by example (Mintrop & MacLellan, 2002; Picucci et al., 2002; Salmonowicz, 2009).

### **Professional Capacity**

The literature on school turnaround points to a number of strategies that schools can use to help teachers become more effective, including teacher development, collaboration and shared decision making, use of data, and morale and confidence building. Effective professional development occurs regularly, focuses on teaching and learning, and aligns with student and

instructional needs (Bryk et al., 2009; Corallo & McDonald, 2001; Day, 2009; Herman et al., 2008; Kannapel et al., 2005; Lontos, 1992; Mintrop & MacLellan, 2002). Teachers in turnaround schools tend to engage in collaboration with other teachers, which can involve writing curriculum together, discussing effective teaching strategies, and visiting other classrooms (Bryk et al., 2010; Herman et al., 2008; Picucci et al., 2002). These practices help teachers build a consensus about what good instruction is and facilitate a sense of shared staff responsibility for improving student achievement (Calkins et al., 2007; Orr et al., 2008). Studies have also found that teachers' access to—and capacity to use—data are critical to their success. Turnaround schools assess students frequently, use data to monitor student progress closely, and analyze achievement data to identify critical needs (Corallo & McDonald, 2001; Day, 2009; Joseph Murphy, 2009; Orr et al., 2008). Finally, increasing teacher morale, buy-in, and sense of being effective are central to effective professional development. Successful turnaround leaders build teachers' confidence to improve the school from within, acknowledge people's emotions, and foster an environment of commitment and experimentation (Boyle, 2007; Day, 2009; Leithwood & Strauss, 2009; Lontos, 1992).

### **Student Engagement and Support**

To a lesser degree, the turnaround literature also describes ways that schools develop support systems for students. Some of the literature suggests that increasing connections from one grade to another (vertical alignment) and across subject matter (horizontal alignment) can contribute to turnaround (Corallo & McDonald, 2001). Instructional strategies that are tailored to students' current skills and needs also emerge as important (Calkins et al., 2007). Several studies have highlighted the value of offering extra support to students who are experiencing academic difficulties or who enter with poor literacy or math skills—through, for example, advisories, mentoring, transition programs, and extended learning time (Picucci et al., 2002; Fleischman & Heppen, 2009; Lontos, 1992).

The turnaround literature also notes the importance of the nonacademic environment, or the general school climate, for contributing to turnaround success. According to the literature, turnaround schools have orderly, friendly, and positive environments, where a discipline policy is enforced and classroom routines are in place (Day, 2009; Fleischman & Heppen, 2009; Lontos, 1992). The adults in turnaround schools have high expectations and caring relationships

with students (Calkins et al., 2007; Corallo & McDonald, 2001; Picucci et al., 2002; Werkema & Case, 2005). Turnaround schools often attempt to increase the personal connection between teachers and students and implement programs, such as student advisory groups, to prevent students from “falling through the cracks” (Housman & Martinez, 2001; Picucci et al., 2002). Lastly, successful schools offer a variety of services and programs that address students’ needs outside the classroom. These may include extracurricular activities, conflict resolution programs, and opportunities to meet with guidance counselors.

### **Engagement of Parents, Communities, and External Partners**

Educators and researchers have noted the importance of making classroom activities and student progress transparent to parents, notifying parents of the school’s need for improvement, and engaging them in supporting student progress and school turnaround (Bryk et al., 2009; Housman & Martinez, 2001; J. Kowal et al., 2009). Research also suggests that schools should redefine their relationships with districts and community partners in order to coordinate resources effectively (Day, 2009; Orr et al., 2008; Picucci et al., 2002). Although the engagement of communities and external partners does not feature as prominently as other factors in the research, it was a critical component of some turnaround schools.

### **Using the Literature as a Lens**

The existing literature provided an important foundation for our understanding of the characteristics that are associated with successful school turnaround. While the research documents extensive lists of school features that promote success—for the school and its students—fewer studies describe *concrete* practices that contribute to these features (Boyle, 2007; Corallo & McDonald, 2001; Fleischman & Heppen, 2009; Kannapel et al., 2005). This study addresses these limitations by exploring specific practices that can support the turnaround of low-performing middle grade schools. It also provides a picture of middle grade turnaround in New York City, where there is now a conscious push to improve middle grade schools.

We used the findings from school turnaround literature to frame our inquiry. Our data collection captured information about school leadership, professional capacity, student engagement and support, and parent and community engagement. An expanded framework with specific indicators for each of the four areas is provided below (see Table 1).

**Table 1:**  
**Key Topic Areas in Turnaround Literature, with Corresponding Subtopics**

<b>Topic Area</b>	<b>Subtopics</b>
<b>Leadership</b>	
Vision and Goal Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schoolwide vision or plan for student achievement</li> <li>• Alignment of goals with school practice</li> <li>• Academic coherence</li> </ul>
Management/Relationship with Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role of teachers in decision making and school improvement</li> <li>• Teacher morale and confidence</li> </ul>
<b>Professional Capacity</b>	
Professional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frequency, type, and quality of professional development</li> <li>• Teacher evaluation</li> </ul>
Professional Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher collaboration</li> <li>• Teacher use of data</li> </ul>
<b>Student Engagement and Support</b>	
Academic Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High expectations and rigorous academic opportunities</li> <li>• Strategies for increasing student engagement</li> <li>• Academic support/intervention for high-need students</li> </ul>
Socio-Emotional Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supports and services designed to address physical, social, and emotional development</li> <li>• Enrichment programs</li> </ul>
<b>Parent and Community Engagement</b>	
Parent Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parent involvement in classrooms and school</li> <li>• Relationship and communication between leaders/teachers and parents</li> </ul>
Community and External Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community resources</li> <li>• External partnerships</li> </ul>

### III. RESEARCH DESIGN AND ANALYSIS

This chapter presents information about how we selected schools for the study and our strategies for collecting and analyzing data. It also highlights the advantages and limitations of our research design.

#### School Selection

The goal of school selection was to identify and recruit two types of initially low-performing middle grade schools. The first group of low-performing schools exhibited significant growth in academic performance between 2006 and 2010. The second group of low-performing schools remained close to stagnant in academic performance between 2006 and 2010. We performed statistical analyses of NYC DOE school-level data to identify schools that fit these categories. The following section outlines how we performed these analyses.

First, we restricted the data to middle grade schools (schools that served 8<sup>th</sup> graders in NYC for all school years between 2003 and 2010) that initially were low-performing.<sup>5</sup> We defined low-performing as being in the lowest third of the citywide test score distribution prior to 2006. Next, our goal was to identify the two types of schools specified above: those that significantly increased in academic performance and those that remained stagnant during the study period. We defined academic performance as the average math and reading scores<sup>6</sup> of 8<sup>th</sup> graders in each school. To identify schools' growth rates, we conducted an analysis using differentiated test scores trends<sup>7</sup> before and after 2006 and accounted for differences across schools in students' prior performance. Based on this analysis, we identified a set of 13 schools with significantly higher growth rates between 2006 and 2010 (these were our turnaround schools) and 4 schools with no significant change in growth rates between 2006 and 2010 (referred to throughout this report as persistently low-performing schools).<sup>8</sup> Figure 1 shows the

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<sup>5</sup> In our sample, we included all schools that served 8<sup>th</sup> graders in NYC between 2003 and 2010 that had sufficient data to estimate the growth rates for the study period. More specifically, we limited the sample to schools that had at least 20 valid student test scores for each year. We also excluded charter schools and magnet schools. There were 208 schools in this sample that were identified as low performing.

<sup>6</sup> Math and reading scores were averaged together to provide one composite achievement score.

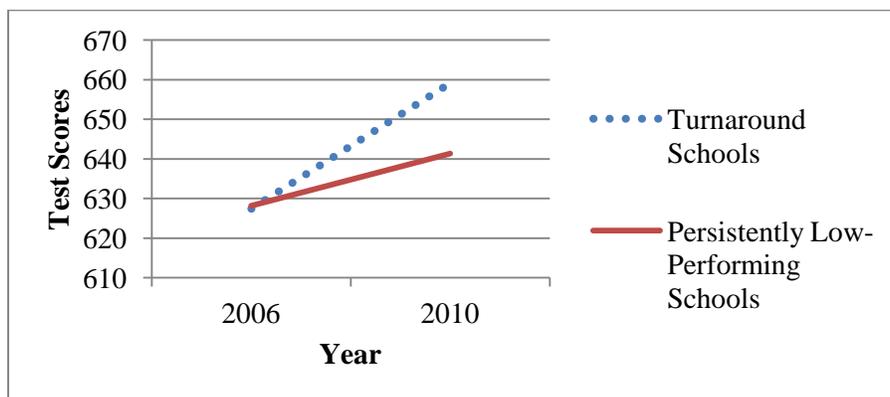
<sup>7</sup> Test scores were re-scaled such that test scores before and after 2006 were not comparable. Also, schools were given more flexibility and autonomy in 2006 through the DOE's new Children First policies, which gave schools more control over management, hiring, budgets, and curriculum. With this added freedom, principals were held accountable for student achievement.

<sup>8</sup> We also ensured that the identified schools had high free and reduced-priced lunch rates. We did this because we were interested in schools that have made the most progress from a point of greater need.

average growth rates in academic performance of turnaround schools and persistently low-performing schools between 2006 and 2010.

From this pool, we sought the help of an administrator at the DOE to recruit schools for this study. She reached out to the network leaders<sup>9</sup> of the 17 schools we identified, who in turn contacted principals to explain the study and share our recruitment letter. We initially set out to obtain the participation of three turnaround schools and three persistently low-performing schools for a total of six schools. The first three turnaround schools that agreed to participate were selected for the study; two of the four persistently low-performing schools also agreed to participate, and two schools never responded to the invitation. To keep the proposed sample size, we decided to add one more turnaround school for a total of six schools.

**Figure 1:**  
***Rates of Improvement: Turnaround vs. Persistently Low-Performing Schools***



### **Why a Qualitative Approach?**

The quantitative site selection process revealed variation in test score growth among initially low-performing schools, but told us nothing about how and why these variations existed, and more specifically how some schools achieved turnaround. To gain deeper insight into how some of these schools improved, we applied qualitative methods—interviews with educators in those schools—to learn about specific practices that had contributed to their success and how the

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<sup>9</sup> Each NYC school belongs to a network of approximately 20 schools. The job of the network team is to “support schools in meeting all of their instructional and operational needs while ensuring that schools can reach their accountability targets.” See <http://schools.nyc.gov/Offices/Empowerment/SchSupStruc/default.htm>.

principals and teachers in these schools implemented these practices. One of the teachers in the non-turnaround schools articulated the need for this type of qualitative data:

*I would find it useful if there was some data analysis ... at the citywide level of the qualitative best practices that unify schools that get A's on their report cards<sup>10</sup>, so that, for instance, when I'm looking at where we stand in terms of our peer schools, I might have some sense of the practices in place in those schools rather than just the quantitative differences...I don't have enough qualitative information about what's going on in schools that are achieving those A's.*

These types of rich descriptions are relevant for educators who seek to develop and deploy effective turnaround strategies in their own schools.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The research team conducted two rounds of data collection at each school. During Round I, in March of 2011, the research team conducted a 60-minute school leader interview (see Appendix A) and a 45-minute teacher focus group of teachers (see Appendix B). Principals were asked to choose teachers who had been at the school for at least three years to participate in the focus group. During Round II, in June and July of 2011, the research team conducted a 45-minute school leader interview that followed up on data collected in Round I and provided the opportunity for principals to speak about the school year as a whole. Round II interviews (see Appendix C) were also intended to provide clarification, expand on points of interest, and fill in gaps in our data. In total, we conducted 12 principal interviews and 6 teacher focus groups (most with three to five teachers and one with approximately ten teachers) for a total of 25 teachers.

Each interview was transcribed. When we refer to the data, we refer to these transcribed interviews of both principals and teachers. We then engaged in a two-person review of the Round I data in order to develop codes (see Appendix D) that characterized these data.<sup>11</sup> We used the four topic areas identified in the literature (leadership, professional capacity, student engagement and support, and parent and community engagement) and associated subtopics within each to guide the initial code development. Using Atlas.ti (qualitative analysis software),

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<sup>10</sup> NYC public schools receive grades A to F on Progress Reports based on student performance, progress, and school environment.

<sup>11</sup> By codes, we mean “tags or labels for assigning meaning” to data (Miles & Huberman, p.56).

we coded Round I and Round II transcripts, revising codes where needed. After we completed the coding process, we analyzed the data linked to these codes in order to draw broader summaries of how each code related to school turnaround. Throughout this process, we extracted quotes that captured the relationships between salient codes and school turnaround. By using this analytic process, we 1) described important themes within each code for turnaround and persistently low-performing schools, 2) made broader statements that summarized how salient codes related to school turnaround, and 3) extracted quotes that captured themes within the data. Using the broader statements, certain themes emerged more prominently than others within each category. These are the themes we report on in the paper. (For more thorough discussion, see Appendix E.)

## **Limitations**

A few limitations of our research methodology are worth noting. First, our criteria for choosing a turnaround school were solely based on test scores. We inferred that changes in test scores were an indication of changes in the school environment or of whole school improvement. This gave us a sample of schools with rapidly improving test scores without *initial* evidence that they had rapidly improving school environments. We used test scores to identify schools because they are a good proxy for high school graduation rates, but we acknowledge that test scores are not the only measure for success. For example, student engagement, school climate, or graduation rates could also be used to define school turnaround. We also acknowledge that schools can raise test scores by means other than whole school improvement (e.g., focusing on test prep to the exclusion of other curricula). This concern is somewhat mitigated by the fact that these turnaround schools implemented a variety of improvement strategies other than test preparation. Still, valid questions remain about the use of test scores as the sole predictor of success or failure.

Second, principals selected teachers to attend the teacher focus groups and few teachers (three to five) were selected from each school. Thus, we may not have captured a representative account of teacher perspectives. Teachers who did participate had at least three years of experience and represented different subject areas in each school. Our findings, then, seem to reflect the thoughts of experienced teachers in diverse subject areas. They represent the perspectives of those who had been exposed to and were knowledgeable of the turnaround

process within the school, but we may not have captured other teacher perspectives that existed within these schools.

Third, our data are comprised primarily of descriptions of current school conditions and secondarily of retrospective accounts of school turnaround. These after-the-fact self-reports do not capture the day-to-day practices of schools *while* they were turning around. While we cannot report on the real-time turnaround process, we are able to richly describe the outcomes of turnaround and how teachers and principals perceived and experienced changes in their school environment.

Finally, the neighborhood contexts and student populations for all schools were not entirely comparable. For example, some schools were in neighborhoods with higher crime rates, and one school drew a sizeable amount of their student population from shelters. Still, demographics were roughly similar across the turnaround and non-turnaround schools—both groups include schools with high poverty rates and large percentages of English Language Learners (ELL) and special education students (see Table 2). Further, student populations have remained consistent during the turnaround period, so we can be more confident that improvement was not achieved through changes to the student composition.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Student composition is measured by changes in aggregated demographics, including poverty rate, percentage of ELL students, and percentage of special education students.

**Table 2:  
Schools in this Study<sup>13</sup>**

<b>School</b>	<b>Grades</b>	<b>School Size<sup>14</sup></b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Poverty Rate</b>	<b>ELL Students</b>	<b>Special Ed Students</b>
<b><i>Turnaround Schools</i></b>						
Richard Clemmons Public School	Pre-K – 8	Small	South Bronx	85%	10%	30%
Alexander Adaire Junior High School	5-8	Small	South Bronx	90%	20%	25%
Jackson Barry Middle School	6-8	Medium	Brooklyn	60%	5%	20%
Mayfair School	6-8	Medium	Brooklyn	90%	45%	15%
<b><i>Persistently Low-Performing Schools</i></b>						
Ralph Charles Junior High School	6-8	Medium	Brooklyn	80%	20%	15%
Edward Washington Middle School	Pre-K – 8	Small	Brooklyn	90%	5%	20%

*Note: We have created pseudonyms for the schools to protect their identities.<sup>15</sup>*

<sup>13</sup> ELL, special education, and enrollment statistics are from the 2010-2011 school year CEP Accountability Report. All percentages were rounded to the nearest multiple of 5 in order to protect the identities of participating schools.

<sup>14</sup> Small schools are defined as having fewer than 500 enrolled students, while medium-sized schools have 600-1000 enrolled students.

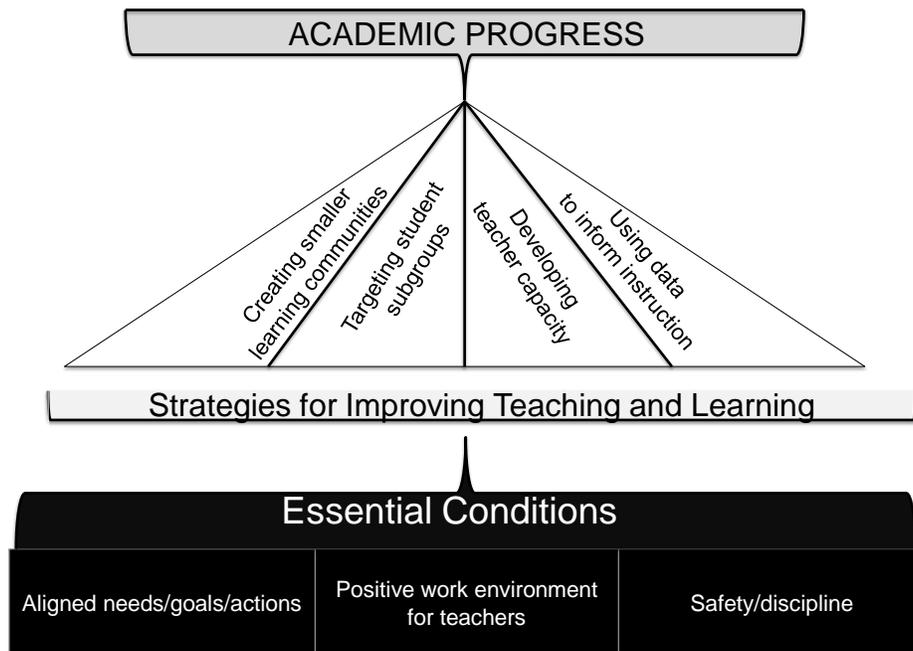
<sup>15</sup> We chose to protect anonymity to increase the likelihood of participation among the persistently low performing schools, as well as to ensure more candid responses from all of the principals and teachers interviewed.

## IV. WHAT DID WE LEARN?

Our analysis suggested two broad categories for understanding the experiences of turnaround schools: 1) *essential conditions* for success and 2) *strategies for improving teaching and learning* (see Figure 2). We also identified several *ongoing challenges* that apply to all the schools in our study (both turnaround and persistently low-performing schools).

The figure below shows the relationship between the essential conditions and the strategies for improving teaching and learning in these schools. As illustrated, the essential conditions were the foundation upon which strategies for improving teaching and learning could be implemented. Fundamentally the alignment of needs, goals, and actions in the schools drove the selection and use of strategies to improve teaching and learning. The positive work environment helped ensure the success of these strategies, while addressing safety and discipline well made it possible for teachers to focus more energy on teaching and learning. It was the multi-pronged effort of these schools that ultimately led to academic improvement.

**Figure 2:**  
***Essential Conditions and Key Strategies for School Turnaround***



This chapter also draws on what we learned from schools that did not improve. We included these schools in our study to learn if there were differences between the strategies educators reported in the turnaround schools and those reported in the persistently low-performing schools.<sup>16</sup> Each school is unique in many ways, and the descriptions we offer are not meant to be prescriptive. Rather, they are meant to provide an on-the-ground account of how regular city middle schools enacted changes while serving high-need students.

### ***Which Strategies Emerged as Important for School Turnaround?***

In this study, we set out to examine which features described in the school turnaround literature were most prevalent in our sample of turnaround schools. At the same time, we wanted to identify which of these features did not exist or were underdeveloped in the persistently low-performing schools. If the same strategies were present in both types of schools, we would be less certain of the relative importance of the features reported as responsible for school turnaround.

To a large extent, the data that underscored the importance of the first two broad topic areas identified in the literature: leadership and professional capacity. Within leadership, we found a heavy emphasis on goal setting from both principal and teacher respondents. Notably, this area was underdeveloped in the persistently low-performing schools. We found much less emphasis on instructional leadership, another important feature in the literature. Teachers identified their principal as an instructional leader in only one school, and even within that school, many other characteristics of her leadership emerged as more directly related to turnaround.

Within professional capacity, we found that both principals and teachers in the turnaround schools emphasized the importance of teacher development and teacher morale (often supported by principal-teacher relationships). In contrast, interviewees in the persistently low-performing schools did not report the same level of professional development, and in one school, they described low teacher morale. The use of data also emerged as important for school

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<sup>16</sup> Since the primary focus of this report was to learn more about what contributes to school turnaround, we center our analysis on what we learned from the turnaround schools. Consequently, we will only include the persistently low-performing schools in our discussion when there are key differences that help illustrate the importance of particular features to school turnaround. In other sections, the persistently low-performing schools are not featured.

turnaround in both the literature and the turnaround schools in this study. But while the literature highlights teacher decision making as important, teacher decision making in our turnaround schools was limited to curriculum.

Related to student engagement and support, principals (and to a lesser degree, teachers) described the importance of establishing order and discipline in their buildings. In the persistently low-performing schools, discipline continued to be a struggle. Both sets of schools provided students with extra academic supports, but the services in the persistently low-performing were not as targeted or consistent.

Finally, the literature also touches on engaging parents, community, and outside partners. In our study, parent involvement emerged as a challenge for both the turnaround and persistently low-performing schools.

### ***How Were These Strategies Implemented at the School Level?***

#### **Essential Conditions for School Turnaround**

Principals at turnaround schools spoke of three particular conditions as essential to implementing the changes that ultimately contributed to their schools' improvement over the three-year study period. These three conditions were leader driven, though they required the cooperation of other staff members to be successful.

##### **Condition #1: Aligning Needs, Goals, and Actions.**

According to principals, one of the key conditions for improving their schools was an alignment among school needs, schoolwide goals, and principal or teacher actions. Notably, the principals of the turnaround schools each assumed leadership of their schools when the schools were struggling academically. The New York State Department of Education had placed these schools on lists indicating continual low performance, including the Title I Schools In Need of Improvement<sup>17</sup> (SINI) list and the Schools Under Registration Review<sup>18</sup> (SURR) list. In

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<sup>17</sup> According to NCLB standards, schools on the SINI list have not made “Adequate Yearly Progress” (AYP)—i.e., they have not reached student achievement targets set for every school. See <http://schools.nyc.gov/RulesPolicies/NCLB/Overview/default.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> SURR schools are those farthest from meeting state standards; they face the possibility of closure if they do not make improvements required by the Commissioner. See [http://208.106.213.194/detail/news.cfm?news\\_id=2&pubsubid=13](http://208.106.213.194/detail/news.cfm?news_id=2&pubsubid=13).

response, principals recalled a desire to make large, schoolwide changes that would improve their schools' performance. Rather than talk about "school improvement" as a general concept, these school leaders focused on the specific needs or challenges of their schools and addressed these challenges by setting specific goals and taking targeted actions to meet those goals.

The first step in creating change was to identify particular areas in need of improvement, which included looking at school trends from the last few years or diagnostic assessments conducted by teachers at the beginning of the year. Rather than focusing on an overall increase of test scores, the turnaround principals used data to set more specific goals. These included improving instruction for a certain subgroup (such as ELL students at Mayfair School) or in a particular area (literacy and vocabulary at Richard Clemmons Public School) or a combination of both (the math performance of special education students at Alexander Adaire Junior High). Illustrating their focus, the principals spoke in great detail about how these students were performing and their progress over the last few years in specific subjects.

After identifying specific goals, the leaders of the turnaround schools directed the school's resources—in terms of budget, staff, and time—toward meeting those goals. The principal of Jackson Barry Middle provided a particularly strong model of goal setting. She established a different schoolwide goal every year based on performance data as well as her own assessment of the school's unique needs.

*It's not a one size fits all—that's important. Obviously, there are textbook responses on how to deal with certain situations and what you need to do. It's very important for schools to look at their schools holistically and see what their population is asking for.*

She argued that it is the responsibility of the leader to set goals that reflect a school's particular needs and to ensure the work teachers are doing lines up with those goals.

Other principals also talked about the importance of communicating their goals to staff, particularly to two or three members of the leadership team, such as an assistant principal, teacher mentor, data specialist, or subject specialist. Collaborating with a few point people in the building helped with the spread of information and the adoption of strategies that aligned with key goals. The principal of Mayfair School spoke about the importance of setting interim goals, evaluating progress, and communicating with staff.

*You have to be transparent. Everyone needs to know what's going on in your building, and then you have to constantly find ways to communicate what's going on and how you gauge what went on and how you evaluate the progress along the way. That's vital.*

Tellingly, the teachers of these schools identified these actions—particularly the principal's ability to communicate his or her vision to staff and allocate resources accordingly—as crucial to their schools' success. They reported “drastic changes” in response to “strong leadership.” When speaking of the success their schools had achieved, teachers regularly said it was the leader's ability to set specific goals and take related action that had enabled the improvements.

We did not see the same focus on meeting specific goals based on school needs in the persistently low-performing schools. Leaders of those schools (and their staff) did not articulate schoolwide goals beyond general improvement of test scores. Further, while turnaround leaders set goals that drove the focus of their staff and students, the actions principals took to improve test scores in persistently low-performing schools were more diffuse. For example, after receiving extra funding through a city initiative, Ralph Charles Junior High increased its arts programming and bought a new literature series. Both of these actions might have been beneficial to the school, but there was a lack of articulation about how they were aligned with specific school goals or areas of need. In separate interviews, teachers at Ralph Charles expressed uncertainty about what decisions had been successful in the past. One teacher described a sense of “volatility” in the introduction of new programs throughout the years. He expressed a need for consistency in implementing new programs as well as training in how to deliver those programs most effectively, saying “... a challenge to me is maintaining continuity and the support in doing what would be useful.” Another teacher, who claimed that there had been some progress over time, said it was difficult for him to pinpoint what had been effective: “I mean, it could be curriculum. It could be personnel. So it's kind of a mix. You couldn't say that one thing didn't work or hasn't worked.”

In the case of the other persistently low-performing school, Edward Washington Middle School, an overall absence of leadership resulted in a lack of attention to setting and meeting goals for improvement. Edward Washington Middle School was designated as a phase-out

school<sup>19</sup> in the fall of 2010, but the principal had been out of the building since February of the previous school year. After her abrupt departure, the school was under the leadership of the two assistant principals, whom teachers reported lacked the capacity to lead. One teacher said, “So it becomes you’re part of a sinking ship, and then you add two assistant principals who were floundering.” An interim principal was not brought in until the following year. Even before this difficult transition, though, teachers reported that there was no real system of support from the school’s leadership. According to the teachers, the former principal (who had been at the school for at least a decade) would provide materials or resources when asked, but did not serve as an instructional guide or hold teachers accountable for their work. Though the new principal voiced a commitment to stay in this position and focus on the remaining students, the school is still struggling from years of inadequate leadership at both the principal and assistant principal levels.

**Condition #2: Creating a Positive Work Environment for Teachers.**

The principals of the turnaround schools considered creating a positive work environment for their staff a necessary condition for achieving turnaround in their buildings. Though they took different measures to support their staff and build strong working relationships, they viewed a positive work environment as a key part of attaining teacher “buy-in” to implement schoolwide changes. Strategies for creating a positive environment included providing teachers with professional and personal support and encouraging them to make decisions about curriculum and instruction. At the same time, these leaders struck a balance between building rapport and trust with their staff and dealing very directly with any resistance that emerged.

The turnaround leaders described the importance of supporting their teachers’ work and professional growth. Professional support came in the form of material resources, training, and professional development. Teachers in these schools said they could depend on their principals for the support they needed to do their work effectively. Knowing that previous relationships between the teachers and former principal had been strained, for example, the principal of Mayfair turned his attention to providing teachers with resources they had lacked under his predecessor—from basic supplies to Smart Boards and tablets for their students. Providing them with these tools and complementary training at the outset of his administration “helped win over

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<sup>19</sup> The DOE identifies schools that “do not have the capacity to significantly improve” for phase-out, a school closure process by which the school stops enrolling new students but continues to advance current students toward graduation. See <http://schools.nyc.gov/community/planning/Support+and+Intervention.htm>.

staff” and showed them that he was interested in meeting their professional needs. Similarly, the principal of Alexander Adaire Junior High bought laptops for each of his staff and provided training on how to use online student data systems, such as ARIS<sup>20</sup> (Achievement Reporting and Innovation System). His teachers reported a strong feeling of support from the administration. One said the principal had been “100 percent supportive.” She added: “Since I’ve been in this building, I haven’t lacked anything as far as whatever it is that helps the students, or as teachers...doing our best.”

It should be noted that purchasing new technology is certainly not a magic bullet. In fact, teachers at one of the persistently low-performing schools, Edward Washington, also received new computers, but they did not receive support to learn to how to use them or how to incorporate them into their daily work. According to one of the school’s teachers:

*Say, for example, you bring in computers, right, or other forms of technology—you can bring them in physically, but if the teachers are not trained or sold into it to use it, it can sit and collect dust. So if they don’t go out to train, to bring the information in to turnkey it [train others], what’s the point?*

Providing teachers with essential material, resources, and training to achieve specific goals not only improved teachers’ work environment, but it contributed to an underlying sense of trust in and alliance with the leader.

Beyond providing professional support, the turnaround principals maintained strong personal rapport with their staff. Principals considered creating those personal connections with the teachers an important part of inspiring them to engage in the difficult work of school turnaround. Jackson Barry’s principal said, “You have to know the people that you work with .... Knowing that these people are human and they have concerns that are going on with them. Try to fix their concerns, and then they will definitely work for you.” Because of this belief, she and the other principals practiced open-door policies designed to encourage communication with their staff and increase accessibility. One way Jackson’s principal was able to increase communication with her staff was by “taking off the title” of principal and taking on roles and responsibilities

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<sup>20</sup> ARIS allows principals, teachers, and parents to view student information, explore instructional resources, and collaborate with other NYC educators. See <http://schools.nyc.gov/Teachers/QuickLinks/arisresources.htm>.

not usually performed by administrators. She doesn't have a school secretary, is very involved with individual students, and teaches a class herself. She said:

*I didn't want ... the teachers or the students or the parents to see me as just a principal, so they saw me everywhere, doing everything and helping them. .... They have to see you as a real person, not someone that will demand things of them that they're not doing themselves.*

Fittingly, her staff described her as “approachable” and as “somebody you could talk to.” They believed this openness strengthened the school environment, not just for teachers but for students as well.

Another key strategy for building a positive work environment was to include teachers in decisions about curriculum and instruction. Teachers led teams that designed curriculum in each subject, selected textbooks each year, and introduced new instructional strategies in their common planning meetings. Teachers also felt that they were “trusted” as experts—that their principals were open to hearing and considering their input on schoolwide decisions. In the turnaround schools, there were also some teacher leaders—often data specialists or department heads—who functioned as liaisons between the staff and the principal. These individuals played critical roles in ensuring alignment between the principal's goals and teachers' work.

Teachers in turnaround schools reported a significant level of autonomy in their classrooms. Ultimately, though, these were not examples of “distributed” or “democratic” leadership, which the turnaround literature describes as teachers sharing leadership with their principals. Although these teachers provided valued input and were encouraged to take initiative when it came to starting programs and clubs for students, they did not make schoolwide decisions. They knew that any recommendations they made had to align with the principal's vision. They described the principal as having the “ultimate say” and reported a high level of direct accountability to their principals.

It is important to note that these principals inherited most of their staff. Because they were not able to hire a staff committed to the vision from the outset, their capacity to build these relationships and gain teacher support was even more crucial. Equally important, principals needed to overcome teacher resistance, especially when trying to implement schoolwide changes. Two of the turnaround leaders provided examples of how they were able to address

teacher resistance without compromising their schoolwide vision. At Jackson Barry Middle, the leader-teacher relationship was rife with conflict in the beginning of the principals' tenure. She noted that during her first year teacher attendance was extremely low. In addition, a small but vocal percentage of her teachers opposed some of the changes she wanted to implement, including keeping school open longer and on Saturdays. While she knew that building positive relationships was important, she decided she must first address what she viewed as an inflexible teaching staff. In response, she terminated four teachers and gave 14 teachers unsatisfactory ratings (including three union chapter leaders) during her first year as principal. While the principal accepted that her actions during the first year would decrease morale, she thought it was a necessary tradeoff for longer-term success. In response to the decreased morale, she made "Building Community" the schoolwide goal her second year, providing several opportunities to rebuild trust and relationships with her teaching staff.

The principal of Richard Clemmons Public School also faced significant teacher resistance to schoolwide changes. The first year that she implemented homogenously grouped classrooms (described below), the teachers balked at having to design lesson plans for new grade levels. Three years after implementing the change, the principal of Richard Clemmons still faced resistance from some teachers, though some also reported benefits from the practice. Though homogenous grouping frustrated some teachers, Clemmons' principal moved forward unapologetically, confident that her decision was the best one for students. When asked how she addressed the resistance, she said:

*We tried to get them to see the big picture, and it was difficult at first, but also they were supported in terms of the planning. ....I think what happens is that when something is unknown and now you're being forced to do something, of course you're always going to have a little bit of resistance, but I think the fact that the teachers were supported, we were talking about it, they felt more comfortable.*

In both cases, the principals saw resistance as an inevitable response to large-scale changes. At the same time, they continued to focus on supporting their teachers through difficult transitions.

### **Condition #3: Addressing Safety and Discipline.**

Principals and (to a lesser extent) teachers identified the importance of establishing order in their school buildings as an essential condition for improvement. When the principal began at

Jackson Barry Middle, for example, the school had been designated an Impact School<sup>21</sup> for having consistent incidents of crime or criminal activity. Richard Clemmons Public School had a high suspension rate. At Alexander Adaire Junior High, when two new schools began to share the same building, there was a sharp increase in student fights and graffiti, and students began to regularly miss classes and wander on other floors. In response, the turnaround principals reported that establishing order or getting their buildings “under control” was one of their first priorities and an essential condition for bringing about academic improvements. These leaders explained that safety and discipline problems greatly limited their teachers’ capacity to focus on instruction. One principal said:

*Behavior was the number one priority ....discipline preceded education at that point. We had to make sure the kids were behaving before they could learn. They weren't behaving, so they couldn't learn. That was a big part of it. That was a good struggle of the first six [to] eight months I was here.*

Other principals also talked about the cost of regular disruptions to instruction and their impact on the overall tone of the building. They reported that reducing discipline issues increased both instructional time and the energy staff could direct toward teaching and learning.

Among the discipline strategies principals described as most effective was significantly increasing principal and teacher presence in the areas where students most often congregated. The principal of Richard Clemmons Public School hired two full-time deans to work with their middle grade students. It was customary for principals and teachers in these schools to monitor particular locations in the schools, with greater intensity at certain points during the day. At Richard Clemmons, for example, the principal stood outside to greet students while her assistant principal stood on the middle school floor between classes. The principal of Jackson Barry Middle said that keeping students on one floor for all their classes cut down on discipline problems and allowed for greater familiarity between the teachers and students on each floor. According to one teacher: “Because of the wing structure and the academy structure [that keeps students on the same floor throughout the day], if there are little behavior issues or things, all the teachers in that wing jump on the kid.”

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<sup>21</sup> Impact Schools showed “high levels of crime and disorder” and were targeted by City Hall’s Impact Schools safety initiative. See <http://www.drummajorinstitute.org/library/report.php?ID=18>.

Alexander Adaire's principal perhaps best exudes this permeating adult presence. He describes "constant visits," hanging out with students in the playground, and checking for uniforms in the morning. When asked what had contributed to the school's success, he replied:

*Structure, structure, structure and being visible and interacting with teachers, interacting with students, and being there. You can't sit in your office, and you've got to be in the building. You've got to be—you can tell, I'm hyper. I'm in all of the classes. Every period we're just all over the place making sure the kids are engaged and making sure teachers are teaching and there's learning going on, so we got to be on top of it.*

When new schools moved into the building, he also decided to relocate his entire school to the fourth floor to make it easier for him and his teachers to monitor students and decrease interactions between his students and students from different schools. He thought this move was especially important because the principals at the other schools seemed to have a much more lenient approach to student discipline. He said, "I chose the fourth floor so nobody can bother us...nobody comes to my floor."

Importantly, principals coupled high expectations for student behavior with a caring attitude. They explained that attending to students' personal concerns about issues unrelated to their academic performance helped prevent or decrease the severity of discipline problems. Providing the students with formal and informal outlets to discuss troubling issues seemed to alleviate their tendency to bring these issues into class. Though principals and teachers reported that other support staff, such as guidance counselors and social workers, helped address students' socio-emotional<sup>22</sup> needs, the principals themselves served as parent or mentor figures for their students. Jackson Barry's principal explained:

*Seriously, you've got to know the kids, because if you don't know them, then they would not adhere to any of the particular rules or regulations or have respect for you, and you want to gain the respect from them so they can do better.*

Teachers in the turnaround schools reported that their principals were highly involved and invested in really getting to know students and creating relationships with them and their families. Comments such as, "[The principal] knows them like I know my own kids" were

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<sup>22</sup> In contrast to academic needs, socio-emotional needs center on student's social skills and emotional well being.

common. Principals and teachers reported that the combination of increasing principal and staff presence, enforcing high expectations for behavior, and exhibiting concern for students decreased discipline issues and created a more positive environment—one in which staff and students were more likely to succeed.

In contrast, the closing school—Edward Washington Middle—faced severe discipline issues that limited the staff’s ability to focus on instruction. Indeed, a large portion of what these teachers spoke of in their interviews revolved around student discipline, even when the question was not directly related to this topic. The teachers not only described what they called “typical” behavior problems—students cursing at teachers or students bringing neighborhood fights to school—but reported that attempts to focus on teaching and learning were often thwarted by a need to address behavioral problems. Regarding the middle grade team meetings, one teacher said:

*They look like the intent is to focus on things academic, but I find that the academic conversation does tend to falter to conversations on student behavior, which interfered with certain teachers getting things done. So they end up trying to solve a problem as to what to do with problem students.*

The interim principal of this school also noted that severe discipline issues “interfere with [a] teacher’s ability to teach.” Because a large portion of the staff’s energy and time is directed at resolving student discipline issues, they are less able to focus on instruction or have conversations about students’ academic progress. Thus, the lack of order in the building seems to have been a serious deterrent to the school’s capacity to improve performance.

### **Strategies for Improving Teaching and Learning**

Building on these three essential conditions, the turnaround schools employed several strategies to improve performance. In contrast to the leader-driven essential conditions, these strategies center on teachers’ work. Leaders and teachers in turnaround schools frequently and consistently reported that these strategies contributed to improving student outcomes, while staff in the non-turnaround school described the strategies differently or not at all. The contrast is not meant to suggest that schools must employ all of these strategies in order to improve, but rather to shed light on differences that may help explain the success of these particular schools.

### **Strategy #1: Developing Teacher Capacity within the School.**

Teachers in the turnaround schools reported that they received professional development from their peers in a way that was closely tied to their daily work. Turnaround schools employed specific structures, such as a Lead Teacher program, mentorship from more experienced teachers in the building, and inter-visitation to other classrooms. Implementation varied from school to school, but teachers consistently received support in areas of individual need from other teachers within the building. Because this type of professional development was collaborative in nature, it required a culture of openness to sharing and professional growth. To that end, teacher “evaluations” in turnaround schools focused on gathering information to improve teacher capacity overall rather than evaluating the performance of individual teachers.

Teachers in the turnaround schools distinguished between traditional professional development (PD) and the kinds of development they received in recent years under these turnaround principals. They spoke, for example, about traditional PD that was irrelevant to their specific needs versus in-school development opportunities that were much more targeted. A teacher at Mayfair School explained:

*I think professional development is helpful when the teacher... knows exactly what area there is a need and they get that support, and I think here we hear the teacher's voice. We listen to the voice of, "Okay, this where I need support. This is the area that I find that I'm struggling," and then we get support. So it's not just shoving professional development down their throat just to get professional development, but it's the area in which it's needed.*

A key difference between what the teachers described as irrelevant and effective PD lies in its source. One teacher from Jackson Barry said that when a mentor was provided “from the outside,” teachers were reluctant to participate. She described targeted, internal PD sessions as opportunities to openly share work with a colleague and obtain support in a particular area, “whereas before you just went, you listened to somebody, and then you left.” The shift from traditional PD provided by an external expert to more collaborative training sessions led by internal staff who better understand the needs of the staff and its students has increased teachers’ openness to professional growth.

Certain programs have been put in place to allow for these types of internal PD opportunities. Alexander Adaire Junior High employs a Lead Teacher program in which master teachers mentor three or four other teachers in their core subject areas. The Lead Teachers in the building devote 15 periods a week of peer coaching to both novice and experienced teachers. Peer coaching includes observations, co-teaching, and one-on-one conferencing. The school also uses other more informal structures, such as Lunch and Learns (working lunches with a teacher mentor) and weekly conferences with the two assistant principals, who each specialize in a different subject area. The lead teacher we interviewed said that one of the reasons the Lead Teacher program has been successful is because the principal rarely interferes with the time set aside for peer coaching, which she said is not the case in many other schools. At Jackson Barry Middle, there is also a system of peer coaching in which pairs of teachers work together throughout the year to help develop the skills of more novice teachers. These “buddy teachers” are assigned to fit their peers’ individual needs, whether they are struggling with a particular subject or a particular grade. The teachers reported the benefits of having a mentor relationship, especially from a more experienced teacher in the same department or learning academy.<sup>23</sup> Though implemented differently in each school, the tactic of leveraging the strengths and skills of particular teachers to develop the capacity of others was described as central to school turnaround.

Formal structures for mentorship and collaboration were strengthened by frequent opportunities for informal sharing. Alexander Adaire’s principal explained, “Sometimes, formal time is hard to come by with budget cuts, so it’s important to create a culture of sharing.” The teachers in these turnaround schools spoke at length about this kind of professional community, especially in contrast to what existed prior to the time the principal took leadership. One teacher, who described a time in the school’s history when teachers were much more isolated, spoke positively about the growing number of opportunities to meet in small groups with other teachers. For example, teachers meet weekly by academy or department to share best practices. At Mayfair School, a teacher who described this work as “much more focused now” also reported the benefits of conversations with colleagues around instruction: “It has [changed], I mean, in the sense that you’re sharing the work between the teachers. There’s an opportunity for the other teachers to tell you perhaps how you could improve on that particular skill or task.”

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<sup>23</sup> A learning academy within a school may be focused on a particular theme.

Overall, there was a shared sense among these teachers that they could easily find support from another teacher and that their skills were enhanced by the formal and informal opportunities to learn from their colleagues.

### ***Spotlight: Teacher Mentorship at Alexander Adaire Junior High***

Alexander Adaire teachers had established structures for collaboration and mentorship. These structures ranged from formal mentoring provided by master teachers to informal mentoring provided by assistant principals. Teachers and principals used these structures regularly and relied on them as core parts of their work. Several of these structures are described below.

#### **What It Looks Like**

- ***Lead Teacher Program:*** This is a mentoring program in which master teachers visit three to four other teachers' classrooms and provide feedback to them in conferences—both on instructional strategies and on other skills, such as time management. The feedback is not negative or punitive, but rather constructive. At the time of our visit, the principal said that there were two lead teachers (one in literacy and one in math) who spend 15 periods each week visiting classrooms. One of the lead teachers pointed out that the program benefitted both the mentee and the mentor: “We give lesson feedback as colleagues, suggestions, areas of concern...I always learn from the teachers I visit. So I use some of their strategies in my teaching. It’s a two-way process.”
- ***Lunch and Learns:*** During Lunch and Learns, a teacher mentor works with other teachers to build specific capacities. For example, teachers discussed one Lunch and Learn in which the literacy coach talked to teachers about how to use student writing assessments.
- ***Conferences with Assistant Principals:*** The school also holds weekly voluntary conferences with the two assistant principals, who each specialize in a different subject area. This practice intended to provide support to teachers of all levels of experience.

#### **How It Works**

***Creates a positive work environment for teachers.*** These structures for mentorship helped create a positive and nurturing environment for teachers. Teachers described changing from an administration that was top-down to a more collaborative environment in which teachers felt supported in their daily work. Their descriptions of being respected and supported were often related to the principal’s ability to prioritize and respect the time for these capacity-building activities.

***Builds the capacity of teachers.*** In this environment, teachers expressed that they not only felt supported, but also motivated by the opportunities to grow as professionals. The collaborative approach to developing teachers’ capacities encouraged them to engage fully in PD activities, which were now more meaningful, since they were shaped in part by teachers.

Another successful strategy for developing teacher capacity schoolwide was employing instructional rounds, “walk throughs,” or intervisitations in which administrators and other teachers visited classrooms to learn more about successful instruction. One principal noted that the standard evaluation process—observations and subsequent recommendations to the individual teacher—“wasn’t really fixing the problem.” In response, she decided to incorporate Richard Elmore’s<sup>24</sup> work on instructional rounds in her building. In these structured walk throughs, each visitor on the team is focused on one particular facet of the lesson (e.g., content-related questions, student engagement, teaching strategies, etc.) to explore together what’s working and what needs further examination. One teacher described the process as follows:

*[The principal] has introduced instructional rounds into the buildings where it’s not just administrators but also staff members who are able to look around and look at instruction. Again, it’s not in a punitive fashion [and] not to say, “You have this” or a checklist, but to say, “What’s the focus of our walk through?”*

The results are not only used to help inform or improve the instruction of the teachers being observed, but they also contribute to the development of all staff members. The visitation team follows this model with three or four classrooms at a time, discusses what they have learned about “patterns” of teaching and learning, and then shares its observations with the rest of the staff in a team teacher meeting. The teacher also called these observations a great learning tool for teachers who are not performing as well; looking at exemplary teaching in another classroom allows them to get a clearer picture of effective instruction and strategies for addressing areas in need of improvement.

Again, this kind of activity requires building a culture of sharing and openness to developing one’s capacity. Jackson Barry’s principal admits she could not have utilized this tool six years ago when she first came to the school, explaining that building relationships with staff and developing a professional community among teachers was a necessary first step. While not all of the turnaround schools employ this intervisitation practice, they do employ structures that encourage observation, feedback, and regular communication about best practices.

In contrast, the staff in both of the persistently low-performing schools reported a lack of or decrease in professional development within the building. At Ralph Charles Junior High,

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<sup>24</sup> See <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news-impact/2009/05/treating-the-instructional-core-education-rounds/>.

budget cuts reduced the number of teacher leaders who were available to provide professional development. One of the teachers reported that the school lost three of its four full-time staff developers. He described that this has been a real loss for the teaching staff when they need support around instruction.

The interim principal of Edward Washington Middle School reported that the staff received very little teacher development before she came and that there was no culture around reflective practice or improving instruction. Although she hired an instructional coach to work with teachers one-on-one and in small groups, she reported that the staff is so demoralized they show very little motivation to improve. When talking about closure in particular she said, “They feel like their job is almost done here, so they don’t have the incentive to build their capacity.” The school will be open for three more years, and the interim principal communicated a commitment to improve teacher capacity despite low morale. Her strategy is to create a core team of teachers to work with her to determine changes that need to be made and to help other teachers implement those changes in their classroom. She believes that the combination of this team and the instructional coach will help make a difference for the school’s remaining students.

**Strategy #2: Creating Smaller Learning Communities.**

Another strategy used in the turnaround schools was to reduce class sizes and create smaller learning communities. When students transition from elementary to middle school, they often must adjust to having multiple teachers (five or more) throughout the day. Thus, it becomes important to provide middle grade students with opportunities for more personalized relationships with staff. The principals and staff in the turnaround schools reported that smaller learning communities have helped foster positive relationships with students, improved instruction, and increased the level of collaboration among teachers.

The principals of both Richard Clemmons Public School and Jackson Barry Middle instituted significant structural changes to create smaller communities. At Jackson Barry Middle, the principal divided up the floors by learning communities instead of grades. In the original assignment, each floor was occupied by one grade level. Now, each of the three floors is divided by three themed academies with three different wings for each grade. Students of the same academy spend most of the day on the same floor with the same group of teachers. The principal of Richard Clemmons also implemented two significant structural changes. The first was to

reduce the average classroom size by 30 percent (from 30 students to 21). To achieve the smaller teacher-student ratio, the principal had to shift her resources from extra programs to staffing. She viewed this shift as a strategic tradeoff that would ultimately yield better results for the school and its students:

*I primarily use the majority of the funds within my budget to support teachers, so I'd rather have more hands on deck than maybe being able to have an after-school program that would start in September and run all the way to May, so that we don't have to have the large classroom sizes. We can support those kids in a small classroom setting from the time that they walk into the building until the time that they leave.*

The second structural change she made was to institute homogenous grouping in grades 6 to 8. This involves placing students into different groups based on their state test data, school test simulations, and report card data. The lowest performing students are placed in extremely small classes (fewer than 15 students). The principal also strategically assigns teachers to certain classrooms. Richard Clemmons has coupled this homogenous grouping with looping, a system by which students remain with their teachers for consecutive years.

While they have implemented different structures for achieving smaller learning communities, the principals and teachers in these schools agreed that the structural changes have helped foster positive relationships with students. These more tight-knit structures allow for greater familiarity with individual students and more opportunities for personalized instruction. For example, the teachers reported that being in the same academy allowed regular opportunities to build rapport with students who were not in their classes. One teacher in Richard Clemmons explained that maintaining largely the same group of students for three years also fostered closer relationships with their families as well as stronger peer relationships among students: "My class has been together for quite a long time, so they are very comfortable with each other. They're friends, like a little family." The principal of Richard Clemmons described the instructional advantages of having teachers with the same group of students at the beginning of the year:

*They know the students. The students know the expectations, so from the time that they walk in in September it's already a risk-free environment. They know the teacher. It's not about getting to know a new teacher, the teacher assessing the kids. It's just about, "You know what, okay, you had the summer. I'm going to give you this assessment. I'm going*

*to see how much you retained during the summer, how you've progressed, and then we can just hit the ground running."*

The teachers reported that these new structures also led to more individualized instruction. With smaller classes and more cross-discipline talk about individual students, teachers felt better prepared to differentiate instruction based on students' needs.

Interviewees reported that the small learning communities have not only promoted positive relationships with students, but they have also fostered more collaboration amongst teachers. Teachers at Richard Clemmons described that teaching the same students within the same learning community led to many formal and informal conversations about those students, especially when teachers shared the same free planning periods throughout the day. One teacher said, "We get together, and we have discussions around the kids, where before we didn't have that." A teacher in Jackson Barry described a similar phenomenon:

*"I looked at so and so's report card, and I noticed she received an 85 in your class, and in my class she got a 65. Let's talk about some approaches you're taking in working with that student, so maybe I can do something similar, and I can have this student achieve the same level of success in my class." Those are the types of conversations that we're hearing now.*

### **Strategy #3: Targeting Student Sub-Populations.**

Targeting student subgroups with specific instructional techniques was another turnaround strategy cited by interviewees. Two groups of students that pose challenges to many city schools are special education and ELL students. In 2011, more than a third of 8<sup>th</sup> grade special education students scored a Level 1<sup>25</sup> in ELA versus just 7 percent of general education students. Similarly, about 44 percent of 8<sup>th</sup> grade ELL students scored a Level 1 in ELA compared with 7 percent of English proficient students. Focusing on the performance of these groups drove the turnaround principals to take specific measures to serve these students directly, such as hiring new staff, assigning staff to particular classes, and offering specialized programs. These steps allowed staff members to more closely monitor the progress of students who are commonly at risk for low performance.

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<sup>25</sup> There are four different levels of proficiency on state tests: below standard (Level 1), meets basic standard (Level 2), meets proficiency standard (Level 3), exceeds proficiency standard (Level 4).

For example, a quarter of Alexander Adair Junior High’s population is composed of special education students. These students were particularly struggling in math. In response, the principal hired a math specialist to train the middle grade math teachers who work with special education students. He also placed two math teachers in the special education department. While we cannot attribute outcomes to these specific changes, it is important to note that special education students made significant test score gains in math in 2008, 2009, and 2010, earning the school credit on the city’s Progress Report.<sup>26</sup> Mayfair School employed a similarly strategic placement of staff to better serve special education students. The self-contained<sup>27</sup> classes receive ELA and math instruction from the school’s specialists in those subjects. Unlike the regular self-contained teachers, these teachers are certified in these particular subjects and thus have greater expertise in their content areas. Many of the special education students at Mayfair, however, are “mainstreamed”—that is, placed in non-special education classrooms. Thus, in order to maintain a level of individual attention, the principal directed some of his budget to provide collaborative team teaching classrooms in which one general education and one special education teacher are placed in the same classroom. The teachers praised this structure for allowing more students to get the opportunity to go through general education classes and reported that this change has been “very successful” in increasing performance.

Mayfair also provides targeted instruction for ELL students. Since 2004, over 30 percent of Mayfair’s student population has been designated as ELLs. Many of these students are also newcomers to the country. The principal and teachers spoke of the challenges—and the richness—of working with students that speak 33 different languages. Students who speak little to no English are assigned to a self-contained “welcome class,” so they have time to assimilate into the building and the culture of their new communities. Teachers can pay attention to how these students are adjusting and transfer them into their regular classes at different times throughout the year depending on each student’s progress. As one teacher described, “We want them to get as much language and culture as possible and then get them into the mainstream classrooms.” When these students do enter their regular classrooms, the school provides push-in services for any who are still struggling with English, in which specialists help adapt the lesson

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<sup>26</sup> These gains are based on the percentage of high-need students who improve by at least one-half of a proficiency level in English or math (e.g., student improves from 2.25 to 2.75 in ELA or 3.20 to 3.7 in math).

<sup>27</sup> In the self-contained classroom model, students receive “appropriate instruction together in all content areas.” See <http://schools.nyc.gov/ChoicesEnrollment/SpecialPrograms/default.htm>.

for the ELL student. Teachers said that this strategy was more effective than pulling the students out for a separate English as a Second Language (ESL) class and having them miss valuable daily instruction. They also spoke of the inherent advantages of having two teachers in the classroom and its benefits for non-ELL students. One teacher said:

*I'd have two math teachers in one classroom, and they would split up the classroom, or one would lead and the other one would monitor and make sure they're on task and make sure they were helping in a certain way or say, "Hey, let's pull these four kids aside because they're struggling." Or, "You take this group of students. I'll take this group of students and let's work." It was basically cutting class size down even smaller.*

The school was able to maintain this structure for four years, but ended it in 2010 because of budget cuts.

Targeting student sub-populations was not limited to low-performing students. Because they have been successful at moving Level 2 students to Level 3, Jackson Barry Middle has increasingly focused on raising the performance of Level 3 students and increasing the rigor of instruction for Level 4 students. As the principal of Jackson Barry described:

*We really wanted to look at our Level 3s and our Level 4 students, and what we found out is that we remediate very well. Our Level 1s—we know how to get rid of our Level 1s. Level 2s—we know how to push them to a high Level 2 or a 3. But when it came to our Level 3s coming into the building...they were stagnated at a Level 3, but we worked very hard to move them to a Level 4 in literacy and mathematics. We really wanted to look at academic rigor.*

Again, with so many competing concerns, school staff strategically chose where to direct their often limited resources. Mayfair School also chose to focus on their high Level 3 students in 2009, for example, but found that they had less success pushing them into the Level 4 range than they had moving Level 2 to Level 3. Thus, they opted to focus on Level 2s in 2010 and are trying to understand what it would take to increase the rigor for their stronger performing students.

### ***Spotlight: Serving ELL Students at Mayfair School***

Mayfair School implements an innovative strategy tailored to the needs of ELL students. This involves a structured way for ELL students to learn new cultural practices and slowly integrate into classrooms with the support of two teachers.

#### **What It Looks Like**

- ***Self-Contained Welcome Class:*** Students who speak little to no English are assigned to a self-contained “welcome class.” Teachers help them assimilate into the “culture” and language of their new communities. When teachers believe that a student has made sufficient academic progress (including progress in their language abilities), they recommend that the student move out of the class.
- ***Push-In Services:*** ELL students who have been moved out of the self-contained welcome class and into mainstream classrooms receive push-in services from ESL teachers. These teachers adapt lessons to these students’ needs and work to keep the students on track within a particular subject.
- ***Collaborative Team Teaching:*** In some classes, Mayfair is able to provide two teachers per classroom. In this way, teachers could split the class and adapt lessons based on the levels of proficiency and needs of individual students.
- ***ELL-Focused Professional Development:*** A local community college provides professional development specifically around the instruction of ELL students.
- ***Recruiting ELL Students for After-School Programs:*** Teachers make a special effort to recruit ELL students into after-school programs, where they have access to additional resources that can aid in their success.
- ***Supporting Parents of ELL Students:*** The school holds workshops for parents on learning English, American customs, filling out forms, and using ARIS.

#### **How It Works**

***Provides extra academic support to ELLs.*** By using push-in services, providing teachers with ELL-focused professional development and giving more attention to students through collaborative teaching, ELL students at Mayfair are able to receive more tailored instruction that meets their individual needs. In addition, Mayfair targets parents of ELL students to build their capacity to provide academic support for their children.

***Provides a social community for ELLs.*** The welcome class eases the transition process for recent immigrant children by allowing them to share the common experience of arriving as new immigrants and learning the customs and rules of American schools and the English language. In addition, involvement in after-school programs provides a way for ELL students to become more integrated into the school community.

#### **Strategy #4: Using Data to Inform Instruction.**

Using data to inform instruction is another strategy that teachers in the turnaround schools reported using. Performance data were used to group students and tailor instruction to meet their needs.

In the turnaround schools, teachers and principals used frequent assessments (both standardized and teacher-created) to identify students' strengths and weaknesses. Technology played a role in this practice; certain online programs allowed teachers to create graphs and evaluate results with relative ease. Teachers used these results to revisit lessons with students who had not mastered certain concepts or skills within a given content area. They also used these data and performance measures to homogenously group students in order to differentiate instruction and materials, which helped create more manageable groups of students within each classroom. This practice was especially important given the fact that differentiation was mentioned as a challenging instructional goal for both turnaround and persistently low performing schools. In some cases, data were also used to help teachers reflect on and refine their instructional techniques.

Teachers in the turnaround schools had structures for sharing data with their students as well. Making the data transparent to students provided an opportunity for students to better understand academic expectations, set goals, and become more engaged in the learning process. This practice was implemented differently in each of the schools. At Alexander Adaire, the staff reported having one-on-one conversations with students about their results on formative assessments and areas in need of improvement. In Richard Clemmons, the process is more public. Teachers discussed how displaying data publicly, both anonymously and sometimes with student names, increased student motivation. They noted that this result was only possible after building a classroom culture in which students did not tease each other for poor performance.

Sharing data with students took on the most formal structure at Jackson Barry. At this school, each teacher posted an "Emerging - Development - Mastery" (EDM) chart outside of their door. These charts indicated how each student in the class was performing with regard to specific skills and concepts. ("Emerging" was used to describe the lowest achievers, "Developing" for the middle achievers, or "Mastering" for the highest achievers.) Teachers

talked about how the EDM charts established a culture of student accountability that increased students' sense of responsibility for their own learning:

*We have very clear expectations early on. I think that contributes to their success also, that there is no ambiguity. They know what's expected of them and that it's unacceptable if they're not doing their best to reach their goal.*

In addition, students were given rubrics to understand how they were assessed, which also demystified academic expectations. Teachers reported that taken together, these practices encouraged students to set attainable goals for themselves and gave them the confidence to believe they could improve academically. One teacher at Jackson Barry described students making comments, such as, "I'm E in this [skill]. Look, I'm an M in [another skill]. So I'm going to be an M. Watch, I'm going to be an M next week!"

Although data were also used to convey high expectations and to promote accountability in the persistently low-performing schools, neither principals nor teachers discussed making data transparent to students. In Edward Washington, for example, data were not used effectively to target student needs. The DOE expects every school to have an inquiry team of teachers, often charged with looking at state tests to identify a group of 15 students to target for intervention. While there was an active inquiry group at Edward Washington, it was not operating effectively. As the principal described:

*There used to be consistent meetings, but when I came, there was an issue with the product that was coming out of the inquiry team. People were receiving per-session funds<sup>28</sup> and overtime for it, but no one can tell me which students they were pinpointing or which item analysis<sup>29</sup> issue or skill was targeted, so I sort of stopped it until they were able to focus.*

This example illustrates that while schools can have the requisite structures to assess student data, their effectiveness also depends on how well these structure are implemented.

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<sup>28</sup> Per-session activity means any activity for which pedagogic employees are paid at an hourly rate. See <http://docs.nycenet.edu/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-327/C-175%20%2012-3-08%20Final.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> Item analysis allows teachers to view test data to "a) compare each class to citywide averages for each item, b) compare the performance of each class to all other classes at each school, for every item, and c) view a summary of the results of all classes in each school side by side." See <http://schools.nyc.gov/Academics/EnglishLanguageArts/EducatorResources/NYSItemAnal3809.htm>.

### ***Spotlight: Using Formative Assessments and Student Data at Jackson Barry Middle School***

The staff of Jackson Barry use ongoing, regular assessments of students' mastery of specific concepts across subject areas. Frequently collecting information on student performance helps teachers identify areas of greatest need, target certain students for remediation, and place students in homogenous groups. There is also a significant amount of transparency around student data, which motivates teachers and students to focus on setting and meeting higher academic goals.

#### **What It Looks Like**

- ***Skills of the Week/Month:*** Teachers focus on a standards-based skill (e.g., identifying a main idea) throughout the week/month and assess students' performance on that particular skill at the end of the week/month.
- ***Bi-Weekly Mock Exams:*** Students are given practice examinations every other week. Teachers keep meticulous logs of their performance and track progress over time.
- ***E-D-M Charts:*** The E-D-M chart is a matrix of discrete standards-based skills (e.g., sequencing) signifying three levels of performance: *emerging*, *developing*, and *mastery*. The chart—posted outside every classroom—displays each student's level of mastery in each skill.
- ***Systems for Collecting Data about Students:*** *Workfolios* are a collection of student work in a particular subject area. *Conferencing notes* record one-on-one or small group sessions between teachers and students receiving extra support. The *37.5 minutes binder* helps teachers track the progress students make in the school's 37.5 minute sessions (extra periods designed to support low-performing students).
- ***Parent-Friendly Progress Reports:*** These quarterly reports are specifically designed for parents. They include task-specific rubrics to help parents understand how they can support their children.
- ***Student-Friendly Rubrics:*** One area of focus for the school has been increasing student accountability and ownership. Providing students with rubrics that correspond to the E-D-M charts helps them understand expectations and set goals for themselves.
- ***Strategy Fridays/Writing Fridays:*** Strategy Fridays in math provide opportunities for students to focus on a strategy, such as time management or multiple-choice testing using an exam booklet. Writing Fridays in ELA implement a similar strategy to increase students' fluidity with writing.

#### **How It Works**

***Enables strategic grouping:*** Teachers use data to homogeneously group students in their classes. Teachers explained that prior to the school implementing the regular collection of student data, grouping was done more haphazardly. Homogeneous grouping allows teachers to differentiate instruction more effectively. Because the groups are based on performance in particular skills or units of learning, groups change frequently throughout the year.

*(Continued)*

***Targets students for extra support:*** The school provides multiple opportunities throughout the day for students to receive extra academic support, including early morning, during lunch, and after-school tutoring as well as Saturday and Sunday school. Though some students “attend everything,” teachers have a dialogue with students and advise them to attend specific programs depending on their areas of need. Teachers reported that these decisions are “all driven by data.” Information is also passed on to the parents of students who need extra help.

***Motivates students:*** Teachers reported that making data and assessment criteria transparent for students motivated them to succeed academically. While teachers were at first concerned about the embarrassment that might result from posting mastery levels with student names, they explained that since students are assessed on a variety of skills and concepts, they learn to appreciate that everyone has strengths and areas in need of improvement. Seeing their levels move up reinforces the idea that everyone has the potential to obtain mastery over a skill or concept. The principal added that sharing data with students has cut down on discipline problems. When faced with a disruptive student, teachers can turn their attention to the student’s performance and encourage the student to refocus on academics.

## **Ongoing Challenges**

We found that some of the practices that emerge in the literature as important for school turnaround remain ongoing challenges for both the turnaround and persistently low-performing schools in our study. These challenges include communicating with and engaging parents and providing services and programs that support students’ socio-emotional health. Though all of the schools implemented some form of extra support for students, the administrators and teachers cited difficulty in acquiring and maintaining resources to meet their students’ many needs.

One of the major challenges that emerged across all six schools was a lack of parent engagement. All principals reported that getting parents involved in the school or engaged in their child’s learning proved very difficult, a “long, hard road,” as described by the principal of Alexander Adaire. These schools’ staff believed that increasing parent involvement would contribute to student success. Yet they reported that while some parents would show up when report cards were distributed, attendance at parent-teacher conferences or parent association meetings was extremely low.

In the face of low parent involvement, schools tried several strategies to lure parents into the building. Jackson Barry and Richard Clemmons provided workshops around understanding state standards and assisting their children academically. Richard Clemmons also offered parents

the opportunity to take the test themselves. Another strategy involved providing services to parents. Alexander Adaire’s parent coordinator organized ESL classes for parents, and Richard Clemmon’s community coordinator implemented a GED program coupled with employment and housing assistance. Other schools chose to incentivize participation. Ralph Charles’s parent coordinator organized parent meetings alongside student performances and award ceremonies, while Alexander Adaire raffled prizes like Thanksgiving turkeys and a plasma TV at parent meetings.

Although schools implemented a variety of strategies to increase parent engagement, it remained an ongoing challenge that principals and teachers said was important to resolve. Richard Clemmons School, although still struggling with parent engagement, presents one example of how schools can develop more targeted strategies to engage parents. Their success in this area is described below.

### ***Spotlight: Parent and Community Engagement at Richard Clemmons Public School***

Richard Clemmons’ strategy to improve parent and community engagement is an obvious exemplar. The school dedicates resources (time, money, and staff) to a coherent and multipronged strategy to reach out to and work with the surrounding community. At the core of the school’s approach is its community coordinator, whom the principal hired three years ago. In addition to the community coordinator role, the school also has a parent coordinator (provided by the NYC DOE). The roles of the community coordinator and parent coordinator are described below.

#### **What It Looks Like**

##### ***Community Coordinator’s Role***

- **Builds partnerships:** The coordinator actively searches for community organizations with which to partner. Recently, the community coordinator and principal partnered with SoBro, a Bronx-based organization that engages in community development by offering GED classes, job outreach, and other programs. Through this partnership, the community coordinator brought a GED program into the school, which was open to parents and members of the outside community.
- **Provides services for parents:** In addition to the GED program, the coordinator also helps parents find employment through one-on-one counseling and posting job listings. She advocates for parents who need help in retaining or finding permanent or temporary housing. She also assists parents in finding meals for their families and has coordinated an ESL program for parents.
- **Fundraises for students in need:** The coordinator solicits donations from local businesses to support school events and help students cover event fees.

*(Continued)*

### ***Parent Coordinator's Role***

- **Communicates with parents about students' academic progress:** Among the parent coordinator's responsibilities is the task of notifying parents that students are not meeting minimum proficiency levels.
- **Recommends students' attendance at academic programs:** The parent coordinator also suggests to parents that their children attend academic programs after school. This work is supplemented by teachers, who communicate with parents about their child's progress and needs for further academic assistance.

### **How It Works**

***Addresses the lack of resources among the parent population.*** The community coordinator enhances parents' capacity to assist their children with their schoolwork. Indeed, the principal hails the value of parents "being able to better support their child academically and financially." By providing services that help parents bring in resources and attain more stability in the home environment, the coordinator seeks to build families' capacities to support their children's academic success.

***Addresses the lack of resources among the student population.*** The community coordinator's contributions likely trickle down to students, potentially addressing some of the learning barriers that they experience. A student who does not have a permanent home or resources to complete schoolwork is clearly less likely to succeed in school. Beginning to address some of the hardships of poverty can help mitigate these kinds of educational barriers.

***Actively engages parents in students' academic lives.*** In addition to increasing parents' capacities to engage with their children academically, the parent coordinator, together with the teachers, attempts to keep parents knowledgeable about their children's progress so they can be actively engaged in providing help where students need it most.

The commendable efforts of the principal, community coordinator, and parent coordinator at Richard Clemmons certainly do not guarantee success. While about 80 percent of the students' parents attend parent-teacher meetings, the school still struggles with increasing turnout at PTA meetings. Although Richard Clemmons continues to struggle to address the community's many needs, their efforts are prime examples of what can be done in middle schools to support students and their families.

The other major challenge for all schools revolved around resource constraints. Because of budget cuts during the study period, schools lost extracurricular programs and services as well as academic and staff supports. Richard Clemmons and Edward Washington lost after-school programs and Saturday School. Jackson Barry lost funding for America's Choice reading program, and Mayfair lost programs run by outside vendors, Kaplan and Brienza. In addition to losing funding for academic and nonacademic support programs, Ralph Charles's principal

reported having to increase class sizes and decrease staffing because of budget cuts. Professional development coaches at Richard Clemmons were eliminated, Mayfair's principal decided to let go of 10 teachers, and Ralph Charles's full-time staff developers were returned to the classroom. Similarly, Edward Washington's principal reported that she had to excess the school's dean and return the literacy coach to the classroom. Interestingly, some of the decrease in the budgets of the turnaround schools can be attributed to their improvement; once schools are removed from the Schools in Need of Improvement list, they are no longer provided with supplementary financial resources.

Resource constraints take a serious toll on a school's ability to provide adequate socio-emotional services to adolescents. As the principal of Richard Clemmons described, "I feel like the middle school piece is the most challenging piece to me, because it's such a transitional year for students .... One minute they're happy, the next minute they're angry, the next minute they're crying." Acknowledging the unique socio-emotional needs of middle grade students, principals and teachers spoke of the importance of providing them with ample services and supports. Unfortunately, these areas were often the first to be cut during budget reductions. Edward Washington, for example, lost its violence prevention program, which engaged students in positive after-school activities, such as chess and chorus. To offset budget cuts, all of these schools (except Edward Washington) have reached out to external partners. With grants from external funders, schools have funded language and reading programs, technology training, laptops, arts electives, and after-school programs. Nonetheless, securing partnerships and writing grant proposals can be complex and time-consuming, making the services they facilitate unstable. Overall, resource constraints have limited the schools' abilities to provide supports to staff and students and have forced schools to spend energy and time securing external sources of funding.

### ***Summary of Findings***

Using a sample of initially low-performing middle grade schools that have significantly improved, this study set out to learn which strategies the educators in those schools saw as essential to their success. More importantly, the study was designed to explore in some depth how these strategies were implemented. While our interview questions were informed by the topics most prevalent in the turnaround literature, certain features emerged as more salient in our

sample of schools. Aspects of leadership and teacher development, for example, were especially important to the improvement of these schools and were directly or indirectly related to many of the findings described in this report. The turnaround schools also shared a common group of strategies for improving teaching and learning. And a few of the areas found in the turnaround literature—particularly parent engagement and student services—emerged as challenges across all six schools in our study.

Our findings pointed to three *essential conditions* for improving academic performance. The first was establishing alignment between school needs, goals, and actions and targeting resources toward improving specific areas of need. As described in the literature, the leader played a key role in establishing schoolwide goals and ensuring that targeted actions were taken to meet these goals. The second condition was creating a positive work environment, which included establishing strong relationships with teachers by offering professional and personal support and empowering teachers to make decisions around curriculum and instruction. The third condition was addressing safety and discipline, which allowed the staff in the turnaround schools to focus on academics. Establishing order was an essential first step in creating visible changes in the school environment, which supported the staff's ability to teach and the students' ability to learn.

As described by the interviewees, these three conditions set the stage for principals and teachers to execute key teaching and learning strategies. Four of these strategies figured prominently in the data. Developing teacher capacity internally, through collaborative structures and a culture of professional growth, was the first key strategy. In general, the turnaround leaders prioritized the development of teachers, acknowledging that academic goals were most readily met at the classroom level through the teachers' efforts and skill. Improving teacher capacity required allocating ample resources (time, money, and staff) toward this end. Another strategy was creating smaller learning communities, which increased opportunities for individualized learning and teacher collaboration. Targeting student sub-populations and using data to inform instruction were also cited as important for helping these schools make academic improvements, especially among students most at risk for failure.

Though we discussed each of these strategies separately, they were not implemented in isolation. Important relationships existed among them, and the relative strength of each one often

depended on the effectiveness of another. Creating a norm around data usage, for example, required targeted professional development in that area, and both strategies were built on a foundation of a positive work environment.

Finally, we found that all schools experienced similar challenges with respect to parent engagement and providing student services. While the turnaround literature identifies parent engagement as an important improvement strategy, it has remained a key challenge across all six schools in our study. Each of these schools has implemented different strategies to increase parent engagement, but has seen little improvement in this area over time. One school provided a particularly robust model of parent and community engagement, but even its parent engagement was not as high as expected. Further, each of the schools faced resource constraints that limited its ability to provide socio-emotional services to students. Decreasing budgets have resulted in cuts of support staff and student programs intended to address some of the nonacademic needs of middle grade students. The extent to which these factors impact the academic improvement of these schools is unclear, but they are pressing concerns that have the potential to negatively impact school's turnaround efforts.

## V. MAKING MIDDLE GRADE SCHOOLS MORE EFFECTIVE

The national conversation about school turnaround has largely focused on drastic reform strategies, including school closure, conversion to a charter school, dismissal of the principal and a substantial proportion of teachers, and the reassignment of students to other schools. In New York City, the underperformance of middle grade schools in particular has become an area of concern for the DOE, and middle schools recently became the target of large-scale policy changes proposed by the Chancellor.

This study was motivated by a desire to learn more about how to improve and support middle grade schools, without the aid of more dramatic reform strategies, which may not be applied as readily across an entire system. A key goal of the study (and the reason for its emphasis on the perspectives of practitioners) was to inform the work of school-level educators by providing rich illustrations of the practices that played a role in improving these schools. The strategies used by the teachers and principals in the study's turnaround schools are general enough that they would likely be applicable in a variety of contexts. At the same time, the findings suggest that implementing too many programmatic changes at once may limit a school's ability to develop them thoroughly or effectively. Based on what was reported in these schools, incorporating fewer schoolwide changes at one time allows teachers to be fully supported in their work and to obtain some mastery or facility with specific strategies or programs. Thus, the recommendations below focus on a small number of schoolwide practices that seemed most important to the improvement of the schools in our study. The recommendations also suggest ways that city and state administrators can support middle grade schools, and how further research may extend what we know about how to improve persistently low-performing schools. As such, we recommend the following:

- **Cultivate strong leaders for struggling schools.** The importance of the school leader in the turnaround of these schools suggests that strategic principal placement is critical for supporting the improvement of middle grade schools. School districts might consider offering incentives to successful principals to take positions in persistently low-performing middle grade schools. Another more limited measure would be to provide a sustained mentorship between these successful principals and principals in low-performing schools through intervisitation and principal learning groups.

- **Train leaders in strategic goal setting.** Districts and school support networks should help build principals' capacity for identifying *specific* areas where their school is struggling and creating measureable goals (and benchmarks) that address those needs (as in New York City's Comprehensive Educational Plan<sup>30</sup>). After establishing goals and measures, principals should select key teacher leaders who can help ensure that the goals are driving teachers' work. It also may be useful to develop a tool in ARIS<sup>31</sup> to help principals track their progress.
- **Train principals to head off potential disciplinary issues by offering socio-emotional support for students.** Concerns over safety and discipline are a common complaint among middle grade principals and teachers. We found that the principals of the turnaround schools made establishing order in their buildings a significant priority. Interestingly, it was not the addition of disciplinary actions (e.g., suspension, safe rooms) that helped the turnaround schools establish order in their buildings, but rather a more concerted effort on the part of the staff (especially the principal) to be physically present and prevent disruptions by attending to students' personal needs. Providing leaders with targeted training in this area may be an important first step in improving outcomes. Schools with high suspension rates and a large number of incident reports may particularly benefit from such training.
- **Develop structures to support increased teacher mentorship.** One of the most important commonalities among these schools was providing regular and ongoing opportunities to develop teacher capacity within the building. Setting up specific structures to support mentorship and the use of effective practices among the entire staff seems critical not only for enhancing teachers' capacity, but also for supporting their morale and confidence. One option in New York City would be a targeted forum on ARIS communities around mentorship.

The findings and themes that emerged from this study also raise challenging questions for ongoing research being undertaken by the Research Alliance and others. For example, how can these conditions and strategies be sustained? Under what circumstances can we expect the

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<sup>30</sup> Comprehensive Educational Plan is a "tool used for school planning that allows for a systematic review and analysis of student needs and existing activities to determine how instructional areas can be improved." See <http://www.nycenet.edu/whatsnew/dcep/default.asp>

<sup>31</sup> ARIS (Achievement Reporting and Innovation System) allows principals, teachers, and parents to view student information, explore instructional resources, and collaborate with other NYC educators. See <http://schools.nyc.gov/Teachers/QuickLinks/arisresources.htm>.

internally driven conditions and strategies exhibited here to grow and take hold across the spectrum of low-performing middle schools in New York City and other urban school districts? Are these conditions and strategies more or less likely to occur under the threat or implementation of dramatic and externally imposed turnaround models?

There are other dimensions of school functioning that may be critical to improvement initiatives, but were not explored in depth by the teachers and principals interviewed for this study. For example, although principals and teachers did not cite parent and community engagement and resources as factors that contributed to turnaround, they did speak of them as obstacles that must be addressed. How would additional resources for socio-emotional services to students impact schools' efforts to turnaround? How important are efforts to improve parents' capacity to support their children academically?

Exploring these critical questions and studying other middle school reform efforts as they unfold would help us better understand the success of these schools and provide further guidance on how to turn around other persistently low-performing middle grade schools in New York City and around the country.

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# APPENDIX A: SCHOOL LEADER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (ROUND I)

## Background

- Tell me a little about your background in education. *Follow-up:* How did you become a principal of this school?

*Probes:*

- How long in this school?
  - Experience with middle grade schools?
  - Other administrative experience?
  - Other instructional positions?
- How has the school been performing in the last three years?

*Probes:*

- Test scores?
- Progress?
- ELA? Math?
- Subgroups: Special education? ELL? 1s and 2s? Overaged students?

- How has the school changed over the past three years?

*Probes:*

- Test scores?
- Staff?
- Building?
- Policy?

## Leadership

*First, I want to ask you about your role as a principal and other people who may play a leadership role in this school.*

- What is your vision for this school? What specific goals do you have for this school?  
*Follow-up questions:* What specific practices in this school help you meet those goals? What things have made meeting those goals more challenging? What steps have you taken to overcome those challenges?
- Tell me about your network and network leader. What role does the network leader play in this school's operations and ability to improve performance?
- What role, if any, do your teachers play in the leadership of this school?
- Is there anyone else who plays a significant leadership role at this school?

## Professional Capacity

*Now let's turn our attention to the teachers in this school.*

- Please describe the teachers in your schools.
- What are some of their strengths? *Follow-up:* What do they still struggle with?

*Probes:*

- Using data and technology?
  - Differentiated instruction?
  - Classroom management?
  - Subject knowledge?
- How are teachers evaluated in your school? *Follow-up:* How do you work with teachers who do not seem to meet expectations?
  - What kinds of professional development do they receive throughout the year? *Follow-up:* Which have been particularly effective or helpful?
  - How often do teachers work together? *Follow-up:* What does it look like? Can you describe some examples?
    - Teacher subject meetings?
    - Teacher grade meetings?
    - Teacher mentor?
    - Lead teacher?
    - CTT (collaborative team teaching)?
    - Common planning time?

## Student Engagement and Support

*Now let's turn our attention to students.*

- What are some strategies your school uses to improve student achievement? *Follow-up:* How does your school specifically help support low-performing students?

*Probes/Listen for:*

- Subgroups: ELL, special education, overaged students, 1s and 2s?
  - AIS (Academic Intervention Services)?
  - Saturday school?
  - 37 1/2 minutes?
  - After-school programs?
- What are some strategies your school uses to improve student engagement?
    - Specific curricular programs?
    - Instructional techniques?
    - Classroom resources?

- What are some strategies your school uses to support students' socio-emotional needs?

*Probes/Listen for:*

- After-school programs?
  - Clubs, student government, mock trial?
  - Saturday workshops?
  - Support staff (e.g., guidance counselor, social worker)?
  - Community groups?
- How does your school deal with discipline and student safety? *Follow-up:* How would you describe the relationships between teachers and students in this school? How would you describe the relationships among the students themselves?

*Probes/Listen for:*

- Classroom management?
- Safe room?
- Detention?
- Suspensions?
- Dean?
- School safety guards?

## **Parent and Community Engagement**

*Finally, I want to ask you about parent and community involvement.*

- How would you describe parental involvement at this school? *Follow-up:* How do you encourage parental involvement?

*Probes/Listen for:*

- Parent coordinator?
  - Parent meetings?
  - After-school workshops/programs?
  - Saturday workshops/programs?
  - Translators?
- How, if at all, does the school interact with the neighborhood community?
  - Does the school have any partnerships with outside organizations? If so, what role do they play in the school? Are there partnerships that have been particularly important over the last few years?

## **Summative Thoughts**

*Thinking more broadly about your school and all the facets we talked about so far....*

- *(To turnaround schools)* Which factors do you think are most responsible for your success?
- What challenges do you face this school year? *Follow-up:* What types of support do you think would help you address those challenges?

- *(To non-turnaround schools)* Which factors do you think are most responsible for the challenges you are facing with raising student achievement?
- What types of support do you think would make a difference in your school?

## APPENDIX B: TEACHER FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL (ROUND I)

### Background

- (*Quickly around the room*) What grades and subjects do you teach? How long have you been teaching in this school?
- How has the school been performing in the last three years?

*Probes/Listen for:*

- Test scores?
  - Progress?
  - ELA? Math?
  - Special education? ELL?
- How has the school changed (if at all) over the past three years?

*Probes/Listen for:*

- Test scores?
- Staff?
- Building/facilities?
- External policies?
- Schoolwide policies?

### Leadership

*First, I want to ask you about the leadership in this school.*

- How would you describe the goals of the principal? *Follow-up:* What steps has the principal taken to reach these goals? What things have made meeting those goals more challenging? What steps has the principal taken to overcome those challenges?
- Which decisions, if any, do teachers make outside of their classrooms?

*Probes/Listen for:*

- Curriculum?
- Textbooks?
- Professional development?
- Scheduling?
- Clubs?
- Other?

### Professional Capacity

*Now, I want to ask you about the work of teachers in this school.*

- Who supports you in your work at this school?
  - Principal/Assistant Principals?

- Data Specialists?
- Network specialists?
- Other teachers?
- What kind of professional development have you received? What has been the most effective? Least effective?
- How do you work with other teachers? *Follow-up:* Please provide a few examples.
  - Common planning?
  - Subject meetings?
  - Grade-level meetings?
  - Inquiry meetings?
  - CTT?
  - Other?

## **Student Engagement and Support**

*Now let's turn our attention to students.*

- What are some strategies your school uses to improve student achievement? *Follow-up:* How does your school specifically help support low-performing students? If one of your students was experiencing academic difficulty, what would you do?

*Probes/Listen for:*

- Subgroups: ELL, special education, overaged students, 1s and 2s?
- AIS?
- Saturday school?
- 37 1/2 minutes?
- After-school programs?
- What are some strategies your school uses to improve student engagement? *Follow-up:* Which instructional or curricular practices have you found to be most successful with middle grade students?

*Probes/Listen for:*

- Specific curricular programs?
- Instructional techniques?
- Classroom resources?
- What are some strategies your school uses to support students' socio-emotional needs?

*Probes/Listen for:*

- After-school programs?
- Clubs, student government, mock trial?
- Saturday workshops?
- Support staff (guidance counselor)?
- Community groups?

- How does your school deal with discipline and student safety? *Follow-up:* How would you describe the relationships between teachers and students in this school? How would you describe the relationships between the students themselves?

*Probes/Listen for:*

- Classroom management?
- Safe room?
- Detention?
- Suspensions?
- Dean?
- School safety guards?

## **Parent and Community Engagement**

*Finally, I want to ask you about parent and community involvement.*

- How would you describe parental involvement at this school? *Follow-up:* How does the school encourage parental involvement?

*Probes/Listen for:*

- Parent coordinator?
- Parent meetings?
- After-school workshops/programs?
- Saturday workshops/programs?
- Translators?
- How, if at all, does the school interact with the neighborhood community?
- Does the school have any partnerships with outside organizations? If so, what role do they play in the school? Are there partnerships that have particularly important over the last few years?

## **Summative Thoughts**

- *(only to Turnaround schools)* Which factors do you think have contributed most to the success of your school?
- What challenges do you face this school year? *Follow-up:* What types of support do you think would help address those challenges?
- *(to non-turnaround schools)* Which factors do you think are most responsible for the challenges you are facing with raising student achievement? *Follow-up:* What types of support do you think would make a difference in your school?

## APPENDIX C: SCHOOL LEADER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (ROUND II)

### Leadership

- Looking back at this school year, what were your two or three most important goals for this school? *Follow-up:* How have you been able to accomplish these goals? What challenges did you face in trying to meet these goals? How did you overcome those challenges?
- What role, if any, do your teachers play in the leadership of this school? Is there anyone else that plays a significant leadership role at this school?
- The principals we have spoken to have mentioned the challenge of recent budget cuts. Are there any ways you have been able to get around budget cuts or limited resources?

### Professional Capacity

- How would you evaluate the work of your teachers this year? *In response to any challenges mentioned:* How were teachers supported in this area?
- Which professional development opportunities have been the most effective? (*Probe for what made them most effective.*)
- How often did your teachers work together? *Follow up:* Can you describe some examples? What did it look like? How, if at all, was effective? What impact did it have?

### Student Engagement and Support

- What were some of the strategies this school used to improve academic performance this year? What challenges did this school face in terms of improving student performance? How were those challenges addressed?
- What were some of the strategies this school used to improve student engagement this year? What challenges did this school face in terms of improving student engagement? How were those challenges addressed?
- In terms of this year, how would you describe the relationships between teachers and students in this school? How would you describe the relationships between the students themselves?

### Parent and Community Engagement

- How would you compare the relationship and communication with parents and families this year to previous years?
- How would you compare the school's partnerships with outside organizations this year to previous years?

## **Overall Reflection**

- In terms of this school's academic performance, what two or three things have been the most influential this year?
- What two or three things would you change in this school in order to be able to improve academic performance?
- Is there anything we haven't asked you about that you would like to share?

## APPENDIX D: LIST OF CODES

Code	Category	Sub-category	Description
A-ALIGN	Academics	Instructional Alignment <i>(various forms)</i>	Describes various forms of instructional alignment: 1) alignment between curriculum and standards; 2) vertical alignment across grades; 3) horizontal alignment across content areas; 4) alignment between curriculum and student skills/needs; and 5) schoolwide alignment across classrooms or teachers
A-ENGAG	Academics	Student Academic Engagement	Describes student engagement/ownership of their education or efforts to produce engagement/ownership
A-EXTRA	Academics	Extra Academic Support	Activities or efforts that provide additional academic support for students, either during school or after school (tutoring, double periods, external organizations providing academic services)
A-INST	Academics	Curriculum and Instruction	Descriptions of how or what students are taught: coursework, pedagogy, textbooks, academic rigor
COM-COM	Parents/Community	Communication with/Outreach to Parents and Community	Interactions between school and parents; efforts at reaching out to community or parents
COM-SERV	Parents/Community	Services to Parents and Community	Services that the school provides or coordinates for parents or community like meals, health services, daycare, etc.
D-CNTXT	Description	School Context Before Turnaround	Descriptions of what the school was like before turnaround was attempted or as the effort was starting
D-LCHANGE	Description	Changes in Leadership	Description of changes in principals or AP's
D-STUD	Description	Student Characteristics	Description of students' characteristics (home life, demographics, etc.)

D-TEACH	Description	Teacher Characteristics	Description of teacher characteristics (education, age, experience, etc.)
ENV-ADREL	Learning Env	Adult-Student Relationships	The ways in which students and teachers, staff, or leadership interact with one another on both professional and personal levels (communication, trust, respect)
ENV-EXP	Learning Env	Expectations	Teacher or principal expectations for students
ENV-EXTRA	Learning Env	Socio-Emotional Support - Extracurricular	Nonacademic extracurricular activities like art, music, sports, etc.
ENV-ORD	Learning Env	Discipline/Order	School or classroom safety, order, behavior problems, disciplinary practices
ENV-PEERREL	Learning Env	Peer Relationships	Interactions among students
ENV-SERV	Learning Env	Socio-Emotional Support - Services	Nonacademic (social) services that the school provides or coordinates for students(e.g., counseling)
L-BACK	Leadership	Leadership Background	Describes the history (e.g., education, work experience) of the school leadership
L-INST	Leadership	Instructional Leadership	Describes the principal acting as an instructional leader, modeling or providing guidance on instructional techniques
L-MAN	Leadership	Management of Resources, Operations and Procedures	Principal's management of organizational operations, procedures, systems, and resources, including taking initiative to navigate systems and procure resources
L-REL	Leadership	Principal Interactions with Teachers/Staff	Describes the ways in which the principal interacts with teachers and staff (motivating, disciplining, managing, socializing)
L-VIS	Leadership	Vision/Mission/ Goal Setting	The principal's vision or goals for the school
NET-DIST	Network/District	Role of network and district	Describes the network and district's role in school policies and practices

PART	Resources	Partnerships	Any references to partnerships with other organizations (businesses, nonprofits, etc.)
RES	Resources	Resources	Any reference to resources, funding, etc.
T-COLL	Teacher	Collaboration	Activities in which multiple teachers come together to improve instruction or student learning
T-DATA	Teacher	Data Use and Assessment	Describes whether or how teachers and school leadership use student data and assessments
T-DEC	Teacher	Teacher Decision Making/ Autonomy	Describes either the importance of teacher involvement in decision-making at the school or classroom level or describes actual teacher decision-making that goes on in the school
T-DEV	Teacher	Development <i>(focused on teaching and learning)</i>	Activities explicitly aimed at improving the capacity of teachers to effectively instruct students: formal professional development, inquiry groups, teacher evaluation
T-MOR	Teacher	Teacher Morale, Confidence, and Commitment	Teacher emotions and norms that involve their belief in their ability and desire to commit to teaching and developing students (i.e., morale; confidence or efficacy; commitment to student learning)

## APPENDIX E: DATA ANALYSIS

This section provides more detailed information regarding the data analysis process of this study. We hope to show how we arrived at our findings through a rigorous and systematic treatment of the data.

Using Atlas.ti (qualitative analysis software), two researchers each coded two transcripts, assigning codes that were grounded in the literature review to certain sections of the data. For example, we coded a quotation with the code *L-REL* (Leadership Relationships) when a teacher or principal discussed the principal's relationship with teachers. Examining the quotations attached to this code revealed the ways in which these leader-teacher relationships were or were not described as a means to achieve school turnaround. After we completed coding all of the data, we discussed the overlap in our coding.

After this initial coding exercise, we saw that our existing codes could not capture all of the topics in the data. Thus, we added six codes, including school context before turnaround, leader's relationship with staff, resources, and curriculum and instruction. We also merged other codes together. For example, we condensed five codes about various forms of alignment (horizontal, vertical, standards-based, etc.) into one more cohesive code for *curriculum alignment*. We were more confident that this revised list of codes could 1) characterize how the data related to our research questions and 2) provide mutually exclusive categories of themes.

Codes were also grouped into categories. Categories are groups of codes that represent a broader theme that may explain turnaround. We grouped our codes into the following categories: description (of students, teachers, leadership background, and school changes), leadership, teacher capacity, academics, learning environment, parents and community, network and district support, and resources. These categories overlapped with, but were not the same as, the topic areas we began with, indicating that some topics in our data were more salient than they were in the literature. Each member of our team then coded a different set of transcripts using the revised codes. We exchanged these transcripts, coded each other's transcripts, and checked for inter-reader reliability. We did this by assessing the overlap between each other's coding and noting the codes that did not match. The large majority of our coding was aligned. When coding did not

match, we discussed the match between the data and the code and resolved the disagreement jointly.

Based on the frequency of codes in our data, we decided to focus only on some of the codes for further analysis. These codes were more closely aligned with our research questions and most frequently identified in the data across the four turnaround schools. We did not undertake the same level of analysis on the following subtopics and codes: services or outreach to parents and community, partnerships with external organization, and relationship with network and district. Although we will describe our general findings with regard to these codes, we chose not to focus heavily on them for two reasons. Principals and teachers did not discuss them as frequently, and there was very little variation across the six schools in these particular codes. For example, all schools experienced challenges with parent and community outreach, and turnaround schools did not describe these outreach strategies as reasons for school turnaround. All schools described having partnerships and the difficulty of serving students with limited resources; turnaround schools did not describe their turnaround as a result of increased resources—rather, all schools experienced this as an obstacle. Lastly, school principals spoke little about the network and district and provided no indication of specific ways in which they have influenced the school’s capacity to turnaround.

After deciding to focus on specific codes, we analyzed the data linked to these codes in order to draw broader summaries of how each code related to school turnaround. To that end, we first listed statements from principals and teachers in a table that contained each school and each code within a category (e.g., *academics*). For instance, within the *academics* category, we examined each quotation that was attached to each code within academics (alignment, engagement, extra supports, and instruction) for one school (examining both principal and teacher data). We recorded the main points of these quotations in the table. We repeated this process for each school. Then, we noted teachers’ and principals’ descriptions of whether and how each subtopic (alignment, engagement, extra supports, instruction) related to school turnaround within their school. After that, we examined whether the turnaround schools discussed similar strategies and whether the persistently low-performing schools exhibited strategies that diverged from the turnaround schools. Throughout this process, we extracted quotes that captured the relationships between salient codes and school turnaround. Thus, by using this analytic process, we 1) described important themes within each code for turnaround

and persistently low-performing schools, 2) made broader statements that summarized how salient codes related to school turnaround, and 3) extracted quotes that captured themes within the data. Using the broader statements, certain themes emerged more prominently than others within each category. These are the themes we report on in the paper.