Emerging Insights on Factors Contributing to Level 4 School Improvement: Year One

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This preliminary analysis is intended to provide an assessment of turnaround policies and strategies that are contributing to improvement in student achievement in many Level 4 (L4) schools. While more in-depth analysis is necessary to fully address the unique experiences of each L4 school, this primary examination is critical to begin to understand why some L4 schools are making progress while others are not.

Research Question
After one year of turnaround implementation, what are some of the trends observed in L4 schools showing accelerated improvement that are absent in other L4 schools?

Methodology
Out of a total of 33 L4 schools included in this analysis, the ten L4 schools identified as having made the largest combined increase in the percent of students attaining Proficient and Advanced will be referred to as improving L4 schools. The ten L4 schools consisting of those with the smallest combined increases and, in some cases, decreases, in achievement were identified to serve as comparison schools. The following data from the 20 schools comprising the highest and lowest performing L4 schools were analyzed to explore trends and themes that might explain the differences in achievement gains: 2011 student performance data, original School Redesign Grant (SRG) applications, 2011 Monitoring Site Visit Reports (MSVs)¹, and 2011 Year 2 SRG Renewal Applications.

Results
All L4 schools are different, each characterized by its distinct culture and problems and requiring customized strategies and actions to successfully turn around the performance of the school. The early analysis provided here concludes that there are clear and relatively consistent differences in the implementation of turnaround efforts between improving and comparison schools. Improving L4 schools are implementing tangible and replicable actions (e.g., turnaround actions) that appear to be accelerating achievement and supporting sustainable improvement; these schools appear on course to turn around their performance on a compressed timeline. Three specific themes emerged:

Strong Leadership
Improving L4 schools are characterized by strong individual and organizational leadership that actively cultivates shared responsibility among all school staff for turnaround efforts. Leadership galvanizes shared buy-in through a common focus, framework, or set of guiding principles aimed specifically at enhancing the school environment and the quality of instruction. Comparison L4 schools have functioning instructional leadership teams, but have not yet fully or strategically communicated a vision or focus for turnaround to the entire school community. This lack of articulated focus appears to result in fragmented approaches to professional development and instructional improvement.

Effective Instruction and Data Systems
Building on the foundation of this strong leadership, improving L4 schools are able to maximize available time and resources (e.g., common planning time, expanded learning time, weekly professional development sessions, literacy and math coaches) to improve instruction. Specifically, improving L4 schools use

¹ L4 schools receive a yearly MSV conducted by an independent team that assesses the school’s progress toward implementing their Turnaround or Redesign Plan by conducting focus groups, classroom observations and document review
common planning time and coaching in a variety of ways that reflect the focus on school and instructional improvement, including:

- Accessing teachers’ expertise and knowledge of the school and their students
- Developing customized instruction (e.g., lesson plans)
- Aligning curriculum across grades, and
- Using existing data to refine instructional strategies

Comparison L4 schools have additional time, common planning time, and coaches, but are not yet focusing these structures and resources strategically to improve instruction.

Improving L4 schools have used the strong data systems and formative assessments that are instituted in all L4 schools in a more timely fashion. These schools use data systems to develop knowledge and skills among teachers and administrators so they can inform instruction with student data. Having a strong assessment system is necessary but not sufficient to improve instruction. Many of the comparison L4 schools have access to data, but do not yet understand how to effectively use assessment data, how to organize common planning time to look at student data, and perhaps most importantly, do not yet have strategies in place that allow them to use that data to directly inform instruction.

**Tiered Systems of Support**

The majority of improving L4 schools have a functioning (e.g., responsive and adaptive) system of tiered instruction that targets students for Tier II and Tier III support and provides ongoing flexible grouping. Many of the comparison L4 schools have not yet implemented a system of tiered instruction. This analysis suggests that the implementation of a strong system of continuously responsive and adaptive tiered instruction may be the foundation to improving other weaknesses in the school.

Improving L4 schools are predominately characterized by a safe and respectful school climate. A safe and respectful school climate appears to be essential to meeting turnaround goals. External providers and programs are useful to build positive school culture, but only to the extent that school leadership sets and enforces clear expectations for behavior and respect among students and between teachers and students. Some of the comparison L4 schools have made considerable efforts to implement their turnaround plans, only to have school climate continue to negatively impact classroom instruction and teacher-to-student relationships.

**Highlights of 2011 MCAS results in L4 Schools**

- All ten improving L4 schools made gains both in ELA and Math. Eight of the ten improving L4 schools exhibited greater gains in Math than in ELA.
- Five of the improving L4 schools had gains of over 20 percentage points for LEP students scoring proficient or advanced in Math. None of the comparison L4 schools demonstrated similar gains for LEP students in Math.
- Of the ten improving L4 schools, seven had an increase in the percent of LEP students scoring proficient or advanced in either Math or ELA. In contrast, of the ten comparison schools, only two had an increase in the percent of LEP students scoring proficient or advanced in either Math or ELA.
- Seven of the ten improving L4 schools had yet to receive School Redesign Grant funds, suggesting that supplemental funding may not be a determinant of success.

**Summary**

Overall, the leadership in improving L4 schools appears to have the “know-how” needed to engage in rapid improvement. School leaders and staff alike have a strong understanding of what a high-performing school looks like and they are using the turnaround opportunity, further supported and enhanced by SRG funding, to drive improvement. The comparison L4 schools are implementing their turnaround plans, but they have not yet been able to connect key turnaround policies and strategies (e.g. data use, collaborative meeting time, instruction, and
professional development) within a common strategic focus in order to realize significant gains in student achievement.