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Massachusetts School Redesign Grant Initiative

Final Evaluation Report

Key Findings

Submitted to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

The *2010 Act Relative to the Achievement Gap* signified a renewed and expanded focus on improving student learning in traditionally underperforming (Level 4 and 5) schools in Massachusetts. Specifically, the *Act* provided districts greater power and authority with respect to those schools, and it designated districts as the official point of entry for the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE). Largely, the *Act* signified that districts would be held accountable for reversing the patterns of underperformance that had plagued their systems in the past. “Turnaround” was the new order of the day. Additionally in 2010, ESE established the Framework for District Accountability and Assistance. The Framework introduced a five-level scale to identify schools based on need and incorporated the Conditions for School Effectiveness, thereby linking accountability and assistance measures.

The Massachusetts School Redesign Grant (SRG) initiative is used by ESE as a key lever to support historically underperforming schools in their efforts to increase student achievement and build capacity to sustain improvements over time. Since 2010, five cohorts of schools have received competitive funding and technical support to develop and implement redesign plans, which, over a 3-year period, are intended to support schools in moving out of their patterns of chronic underperformance and yield gains in student learning.

In 2012, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) engaged the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute (UMDI or the Institute) to design and conduct a program evaluation of the SRG initiative that would provide formative feedback to inform ESE’s management decisions and summative findings to assess whether the initiative is associated with positive outcomes. This evaluation study explores relationships between various elements of schools’ redesign processes and investigates why certain redesign strategies, and combinations of strategies, appear more likely than others to be associated with positive outcomes. The study addresses two primary research questions, as follows:

* Primary Research Question 1: How can ESE best support and manage the SRG project?
* Primary Research Question 2: In what ways and to what extent is SRG associated with trends in schools’ turnaround progress and improvements in student success?

Data sources included interviews with district and school leaders; online surveys of principals’ and educators’ beliefs, attitudes and perspectives on redesign; and document review. Through an analysis of educators’ and leaders’ perceptions of various aspects of their redesign experience, the study identifies those elements of redesign that are perceived to be associated with schools’ positive trajectories, highlights threats to the sustainability of improvement, identifies key ingredients of ESE’s turnaround support, and articulates implications for ESE’s future efforts to guide and strengthen struggling schools and build district capacity to support them.

## Overview of SRG and Performance of the First Cohort of Level 4 Schools

In 2010, Massachusetts launched its first Request for Proposals inviting districts to apply for School Redesign Implementation Grant funding. These funds were made available initially through a combination of Massachusetts’ FY09 federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA and US Department of Education School Improvement Grants (SIG) funds. Having recently enacted policy reforms relevant to school improvement, Massachusetts endeavored to integrate the federal requirements into its emerging policy frameworks and positions. To do this, the state conceptualized SRG to reflect three overriding principles: a) Districts would be the point of entry for the Department. The theory was that the Department would partner with districts to develop their capacity to turn around their lowest performing schools, so that they could improve their current set of underperformers and also apply that knowledge to its next group of low performers, thereby improving performance across the system. This new theory of action also reflected an acknowledgment that historically the greatest number of underperforming schools tended to cluster in the same small set of districts. b) Only a limited number of schools would receive funding, so that the Department could provide substantial and meaningful support, and c) Reciprocal accountability: increases in accountability would be met with greater assistance from the Department.

In 2010, the Massachusetts’ accountability system identified 35 schools as Level 4 schools that were required by state law to turnaround in three years. Of these 35 schools, 31 successfully applied for and were granted SRG funding in either 2010, 2011, or 2012. In 2013, the ESE reviewed the performance trajectories of the 35 schools that were originally designated Level 4 status in 2010 and released recommendations about those schools’ accountability levels. These schools are referenced throughout this report as the *2010 Decision Group*.

Of the 31 schools receiving SRG funds, regardless of whether they had been granted SRG funding for three, two or one year, over half of the schools (18 schools, or 58%) demonstrated improvement or evidence of a positive trajectory. Specifically:

* 13 SRG schools (42%)exited Level 4 status (moving up to Level 3, 2, or 1).
* 5 SRG schools (16%) were determined to be on a relatively promising trajectory but remained in Level 4 status for at least one more year.
* 10 SRG schools (32%) were determined to be on a flat or declining trajectory. In these cases, districts opted to partner with educational management operators, and the schools remained in Level 4 status.
* 3 schools (10%) were assigned Level 5 status, moving into state receivership.

Given a growing national recognition that turnaround requires time—as indicated by recent revisions to the federal guidelines expanding the timeline for turnaround grants from three to five years—these first round results may be considered promising.

## Key Study Findings

Key findings, presented below, articulate the ways in which the initiative is associated with improvement across all the SRG schools and identifies elements of redesign that distinguish schools that have demonstrated improvement from schools that have not.

Finding 1 SRG represents a very promising and more effective model for catalyzing improvement in struggling Massachusetts schools.

Consistently, leaders and educators affirmed that the initiative signaled a departure from prior reform efforts, which were often characterized by multiple—and often misaligned—short-term strategies that yielded little success. By contrast, reports from the field suggest that SRG provides the tools and mechanisms necessary for schools and districts to think strategically about barriers to improvement in their specific contexts, and to institute processes to address them. More broadly, district and school leaders report that a more effective model of interaction between ESE and Massachusetts school districts emerged. The centerpiece of this model is a perceived shift by ESE from a focus on compliance to a more productive, assistance-focused approach that emphasizes partnership and collaboration.

This study suggests that five elements of ESE’s approach to designing the initiative were particularly effective and explanatory of the progress described in the body of the report.

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| **Five Effective Elements of ESE’s School Redesign Approach** |
| * **The district as the point of entry.** ESE’s shift to directly engage and support districts’ ability to address the performance of underperforming and at-risk schools is a key element of the strategy. SRG has been described as a good training ground for building district capacity, and districts appear to be moving toward more strategic and proactive approaches to reform. While no single district support emerged as central to school success, the study suggests that district capacity to support improvement has, overall, been strengthened through participation in the SRG initiative. * **A rigorous SRG grant application process**. The process required that applicants show evidence that conditions are in place to support improvement. The application included a “district capacity” component and called for substantive evidence of strategic thinking about school improvement. * **Support for implementation of redesign plans**. Recognizing that implementation of aggressive redesign plans would be challenging, ESE provided processes and tools designed to support schools in monitoring their progress and prioritizing their efforts. Monitoring site visits, in particular, emerge as one of the key supports to implementation. * **A focus on capacity building.** In contrast to the discrete interventions offered through some previous reform efforts, SRG emphasized investments in people and processes. While redesign is a complex endeavor and a number of schools are situated somewhere along a continuum of improvement, the study suggests that the initiative was designed and managed to support capacity building across multiple dimensions and was generally successful in this regard. * **“Reciprocal accountability.”** Districts report increased access to ESE and interactions are largely positive. Leaders cited ESE’s willingness to simplify work processes as evidence of a more supportive partnership. Reflecting on modifications to SRG over time, leaders consistently reported that their state turnaround plan and redesign plan applications were better aligned as a result of increased engagement and shared accountability with ESE officials. This reportedly led to more coherent and efficient improvement plans. |

Finding 2 Improvement or positive momentum is evident across SRG schools. Progress is rooted in clear vision for improvement, aligned curriculum, educator development, and use of data.

Viewing all schools participating in SRG, it is clear that they are situated on a continuum with respect to improvement. Although improvement is not universal and all schools continue to strive, elements of progress are nonetheless evident across the Commonwealth’s SRG schools. Analysis reveals an emphasis within SRG schools on aspects of practice that are likely to impact the classroom. Although this study does not benefit from a comparison group or pre-SRG survey baseline, the progress described by leaders and educators appears to be substantive and consistent with redesign plans. Additionally, as described in later findings, clear differences are evident among schools that were successful in their efforts to exit Level 4 status and those that were less successful as of the conclusion of the study period.

Improvement appears to be rooted in shared vision and direction, which was evident on several levels. Educators from a wide majority of schools reported well-defined plans for instructional improvement and a common vision for learning. Teaching practice within and across grade levels reportedly was consistent at most schools, though vertical integration lagged horizontal. Additionally, most schools experienced a positive shift in teacher readiness and ability to work with students. Educators largely reported that their knowledge of teaching strategies and how to work with varied student populations was enhanced through the initiative. Finally, most educators reported that they now have access to essential student data and feel confident in their ability to analyze data and apply findings to instruction. Principals expressed similar positive views, associating the use of data with educators’ professional growth, as well as student learning.

*Underlying school success and progress in relation to shared vision, aligned curriculum, educator development and the use of data are critical structures and processes that help to differentiate those schools that were able to exit Level 4 status and those that continued to struggle.*

Finding 3 The most successful SRG schools are characterized by an intense focus on their redesign goals and integrated approaches to achieving them, beginning with leadership.

This study included extensive analyses of survey and interview data collected from the SRG schools comprising the “2010 Decision Cohort.” These analyses contrasted findings from the 13 schools that exited Level 4 status, with comparison to 13 schools that remained in that status but were determined to be on a flat or declining trajectory or were assigned Level 5 status, moving into state receivership. These groups are referred to as Exited and Not Exited, respectively.

Findings revealed substantive differences between SRG schools that improved and schools that did not. Leaders and educators in the exited schools reportedly saw the work of turnaround differently, utilized the tools at their disposal differently, and perceived the relative value of specific turnaround strategies differently. Viewing findings holistically, a key overarching difference is that, consistently across dimensions, the Exited schools showed greater focus on their redesign goals and evidence of integrated approaches to reaching them. Data suggest that these schools maintained a clear vision and plan for redesign, and that greater attention was paid to the alignment and integration of efforts to implement that plan.

Among the more successful, Exited schools, leadership apparently aligned decisions and practice with overall redesign goals, engaged in consensus building in relation to redesign goals, and displayed an intense focus on those goals. Through effective communication and clear focus on their redesign goals, the improved schools appear to have been better able to maximize the collective efforts and expertise of their staff, resulting in educator growth and improvement in instructional quality.

Finding 4 Several specific strategies support successful redesign and help to further explain the differences among schools that Exited Level 4 status and those that continued to struggle.

Evidence gathered through this evaluation does not suggest there is a singular path to redesign success. Rather, schools that exited Level 4 status were able to do so because they implemented distinct and multi-faceted turnaround strategies in particular ways, in particular combinations, and under particular conditions. However, this study does reveal several specific strategies that appear to be associated with school improvement.

**Supported, Shared Leadership**

Consistently, the study found that certain redesign strategies were more commonly believed to be associated with improvement than others. With regard to leadership, principals of the Exited schools presented a deep understanding of complexity of educators’ work and sought to minimize demands on teachers’ time to allow them to focus on instruction. Distributed leadership mechanisms such as instructional leadership teams were employed across a range of SRG schools, but Exited schools appear to have established more effective structures and processes for shared responsibility and decision making than their Not Exited counterparts.

**Structures to Support Educator Capacity Building**

The study found general agreement among leaders and classroom educators that structures to support teacher growth and collaboration have been a key element of success in redesign schools. Specifically, professional development, coaching, and common planning time were widely perceived to be highly effective strategies to support educator capacity and school improvement. However, these strategies were perceived to be more effectively implemented among the Exited schools. Within these schools there was a stronger perception that educator growth benefited from an ongoing and embedded system of support.

Among Exited schools, professional development was more likely to be characterized as relevant to school improvement goals, as well as properly differentiated to ensure relevance to educator learning needs. Similarly, district support for professional development was more widely perceived to be of high quality by respondents from Exited schools. Coaching, a critical link in the translation of learning into classroom practice, was more likely to be perceived as an integral part of educators’ professional development in the Exited schools. In some schools, coaches were central to a positive shift in professional culture, engendering trust among colleagues, and mutual learning. By working alongside teachers, risking vulnerability, and demonstrating that they were not experts but peers, coaches fostered trust and an ethos of continual improvement. Combined, effective professional development and coaching models supported application of relevant skills and knowledge in the classroom.

Common planning time emerged as another critical structure to support educator capacity building, contributing to the alignment of instructional practice among teachers within and across grade levels. Among Exited schools, common planning time, grade-level meetings, and other structures were reportedly implemented more effectively. Specific differences were apparent in terms of scheduling, the regularity of participation, efficacy, and processes for organization and collaboration. Within the improved schools, common planning time was more likely to be built into the school schedule and organized so that work accomplished during those periods aligned with schools’ redesign goals. Overall, practices related to common planning time in the improved schools reveal a focus on school-wide goals and a commitment to ongoing, embedded professional development.

Professional learning communities were described in similar terms by educators in the improved schools. They typically functioned as embedded professional development opportunities, offering educators time and structures useful in reflecting on their work.

**Systems for Data Use & Management**

Data use and management also arose as a highly valued aspect of turnaround efforts and success. A wide consensus is shared among principals of all schools that effective data use and data management strategies are an effective means to leveraging academic returns. Overall, educators and principals from Exited schools offered slightly more positive reports, suggesting that their overall school approaches to redesign (e.g., alignment of resources with the redesign vision, differentiated and supported professional development) may position them to derive stronger benefit from their use and management of data. Overall, this highlights the centrality of effective use of data to school improvement but does not widely distinguish practice among Exited and Not Exited schools.

**“Double-Yield” Contributions of Key Strategies**

The perceived efficacy of key strategies described above was also notable in that certain strategies were perceived by a strong majority of principals of the improved schools to be dually effective—effective in promoting both educator growth and student learning. These “double-yield” strategies include common planning time, grade-level or team meetings, professional learning communities, professional development, coaching, and distributed leadership. This finding is notable because it highlights what may be key levers in the improved schools’ capacity to effect substantive change within a three-year time period. Notably, the perceived efficacy of each of these strategies was dramatically lower in the schools that did not improve.

Finding 5 Sustainability of improvement is not ensured, but there is cautious optimism due to SRG’s focus on building the capacity of schools and the districts that support their success.

The SRG initiative appears to have set most, if not all, of the grantee schools on a pathway to improvement that is marked by increased coherence, distributed leadership, and a focus on building capacity to effectively deliver an aligned curriculum. The most successful schools display more consistent focus on their redesign goals, with greater integration in their approaches to reaching those goals. The results are a credit to the initiative’s design and to an apparent shift within ESE from a compliance focus toward targeted assistance through district- and school-level engagement.

While it remains to be seen whether the gains achieved through the SRG initiative will withstand the challenges that lie ahead, this study suggests that one factor in support of an optimistic view is the capacity building it has helped to achieve. District and school leaders tend to distinguish SRG from previous reform initiatives, noting that it invests in people and processes, rather than programs, technology, and other consumables that are highly vulnerable to funding shortages. SRG supported educators’ exposure to substantive professional development and coaching, encouraged and created collaborative structures to ensure development of common language and consistency of approaches, and helped many schools realize deep-seated cultural shifts, with these trends strongest among Exited schools.

Within the schools showing improvement, there is evidence that professional dialogue has increased, that leadership is more likely to be shared so that staff with relevant expertise are empowered to make decisions, and that leaders and classroom educators hold themselves accountable to one another as they work toward helping students meet their high expectations. Districts, in turn, were exposed to valuable learning opportunities, in part because redesign simply brought them into closer contact with the needs of schools. In many instances, this caused districts to reconceptualize their role and restructure their supports to schools, taking a more proactive and strategic approach to reform.

This study suggests that ESE has found a new and promising model for delivering support to underperforming schools across the Commonwealth and that this model may be more sustainable than past efforts. Among the most exciting findings is the emerging shift in ESE’s relationship with these schools and their districts. This change, if maintained and strengthened over time, bodes well for the continued success of schools that have participated in the School Redesign Grant initiative and those that may in the future benefit from the turnaround model it embodies.

# Introduction

The *2010 Act Relative to the Achievement Gap* signified a renewed and expanded focus on improving student learning in traditionally underperforming (Level 4 and 5) schools in Massachusetts. Specifically, the *Act* provided districts greater power and authority with respect to those schools, and it designated districts as the official point of entry for the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE). Largely, the *Act* signified that districts would be held accountable for reversing the patterns of underperformance that had plagued their systems in the past. “Turnaround” was the new order of the day. Additionally in 2010, ESE established the Framework for District Accountability and Assistance. The Framework introduced a five-level scale to identify schools based on need and incorporated the Conditions for School Effectiveness, thereby linking accountability and assistance measures.

The Massachusetts School Redesign Grant (SRG) initiative is used by ESE as a key lever to support historically underperforming schools in their efforts to increase student achievement and build capacity to sustain improvements over time. Since 2010, five cohorts of schools have received competitive funding and technical support to develop and implement redesign plans, which, over a 3-year period, are intended to support schools in moving out of their patterns of chronic underperformance and yield gains in student learning.

In 2012, ESE engaged the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute (UMDI or the Institute) to design and conduct a program evaluation of the SRG initiative that would provide formative feedback to inform ESE’s management decisions and summative findings to assess whether the initiative has made an impact. This evaluation study explores relationships between various elements of schools’ redesign processes and investigates why certain redesign strategies, and combinations of strategies, appear more likely than others to be associated with positive outcomes. The study addresses two primary research questions, as follows:

* Primary Research Question 1: How can ESE best support and manage the SRG project?
* Primary Research Question 2: In what ways and to what extent is SRG associated with trends in schools’ turnaround progress and improvements in student success?

Through an analysis of educators’ and leaders’ perceptions of various aspects of their redesign experience, this study identifies those elements of redesign that are perceived to have made a difference in schools’ positive trajectories, highlights threats to the sustainability of improvement, identifies key ingredients of ESE’s turnaround support, and articulates implications for ESE’s future efforts to guide and strengthen struggling schools and build district capacity to support them.

Over the duration of the study, the Institute developed periodic reports and management briefing memos to keep the Department apprised of emerging findings. This report presents a synthesis of the study’s findings, identifying factors that educators and leaders associate with rapid and dramatic school turnaround.

## Context and Overview of the Initiative

In 2010, Massachusetts launched its first Request for Proposals inviting districts to apply for School Redesign Implementation Grant funding. These funds were made available initially through a combination of Massachusetts’ FY09 federal School Turnaround Grant (STG) funds and resources allocated through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) / US Department of Education School Improvement Grants (SIG) program.

Having recently enacted policy reforms relevant to school improvement, Massachusetts endeavored to integrate the federal requirements into its emerging policy frameworks and positions. To do this, the state conceptualized SRG to reflect three overriding principles: (a) Districts would be the point of entry for the Department. The theory was that the Department would partner with districts to develop their capacity to turn around their lowest performing schools, so that they could improve their current set of underperformers and also apply that knowledge to its next group of low performers, thereby improving performance across the system. This new theory of action also reflected an acknowledgment that historically the greatest number of underperforming schools tended to cluster in the same small set of districts. (b) Only a limited number of schools would receive funding, so that the Department could provide substantial and meaningful support. And (c) Reciprocal accountability: increases in accountability would be met with greater assistance from the Department.

Massachusetts also made efforts to align state and federal grant processes. First, ESE recognized the potential for duplication of effort and misalignments that might result from the state’s requirement that Level 4 schools develop a *Turnaround Plan* and SRG’s requirement for a *Redesign Plan*. To reduce the potential for inefficiency or confusion, the state worked to align these requirements. Specifically, state mandated Turnaround Plans reflected the need to fulfill the commissioner’s turnaround requirements, but also to surface ideas for a potential Redesign Plan application. Secondly, ESE set a high bar for application standards in order to limit the number of applicants. There was an expectation of “smart, strategic thinking,” as one ESE staffer described it, which would lead not only to rapid and dramatic school turnaround but also improved district capacity. One ESE staff member described it as “a standards-based process to ratchet up expectations for smart turnaround planning.” The redesign application, for example, included from the beginning a district capacity component, examining district-level supports to be provided to schools applying for the funds—a departure from the federal requirements.

Further, the state’s particular imprint on the SRG program included recognition that implementation of the aggressive plans being proposed could be challenging, and so required that each applicant articulate Implementation Timeline Benchmarks (ITBs), which would be monitored over time. The state introduced a Monitoring Site Visit mechanism to support schools’ progress and keep the Department apprised of progress and challenges in the field.[[1]](#footnote-1) ESE articulated from the start that exit decisions would be based on three clear criteria:

* Evidence of a 3-year trend in academic improvement
* Evidence of Conditions for School Effectiveness in the schools
* Evidence that district systems of support could sustain improvement

The state partnered with an independent consultant to design and implement a rigorous SRG application process which included a redesign grant application, an interview process, and a rubric-driven review process with training for reviewers in how to score applications. The consultant stated, “We wanted a strategic, radical turnaround plan that dealt with both school improvement and district capacity. … We didn’t want schools to think about redesign in a linear fashion but rather in a systemic fashion and also [we wanted] to wrap in district capacity.” The spirit of the process was that while the selection of a federal model was part of the process, it was not so much which federal models were selected but rather it was the “conditions surrounding the school and the extent to which the school is able to implement the plan.”

Over time, the redesign and the renewal application were modified to increasingly emphasize the district role in turnaround (questions about district strategy and capacity), for example, and to establish priority areas for improvement (organizing the materials by a set of core priorities to be more tangible and useful for school improvement). Despite these modifications, the spirit of the process and tools remained largely constant—to nurture examination and capacity on the part of districts and schools by asking three fundamental questions: What worked? What didn’t? What are you going to change?

# Methodology

ESE engaged UMDI to design and conduct a program evaluation from January 2012 through June 2014. The purposes of the evaluation were to provide ESE with formative feedback that would support continuous improvement in school, district, and ESE implementation of SRG, and to capture evidence of short- and long-term changes, developing explanations of changes (progress, success) that are likely associated with elements of SRG.

This section details the research design, participants, data sources, and data analysis methods used to support those purposes. A consideration of the limits to the study concludes this section.

## Research Design

The evaluation followed an emergent design, such that questions posed in an initial phase yielded preliminary findings that were further explored in a next phase. This time-phased approach allowed for testing and confirmation or disconfirmation of findings on an ongoing basis, and has allowed ESE to develop a growing knowledge base about what works and does not work as schools move through their turnaround processes. The evaluation has yielded an important retrospective look at ESE’s design and implementation of the SRG effort—one that (a) identifies key ingredients of ESE’s turnaround support, (b) highlights critical threats that warrant immediate attention, and (c) articulates recommendations for ESE’s future support to struggling schools.

The study identifies relationships between variables that appear likely to be associated with school progress based on ESE performance levels. Inquiry has been oriented toward complementing a growing understanding about emerging practices, trajectories of schools in different performance levels after one, two, or three years of SRG funding, and sustainability. Understanding the role of districts and partners in turnaround are also related areas of interest.

The study is driven by two main **research questions**:

* Primary Research Question 1: How can ESE best support and manage the SRG project?
* Primary Research Question 2: In what ways and to what extent is SRG associated with trends in schools’ turnaround progress and improvements in student success?

Primary Question 1 addresses ESE’s implementation of the grant. Secondary questions in support of this primary question include:

* To what extent and in what ways have tools and procedures employed in the application and renewal processes, and Level 4 exit processes proven useful and reliable? In what ways are modifications suggested?
* What lessons should inform ESE’s continued implementation of the SRG program and/or similar efforts to support turnaround in historically underperforming schools? In retrospect, what might ESE have done differently? What, if any, implications for program managers and policy makers are suggested?

Primary Question 2 explores relationships between various elements of schools’ redesign processes and evidence of progress over time. Secondary questions in support of this primary question include:

* What does effective **turnaround leadership** look like?
* How have **school-district relationships** affected redesign efforts?
* To what extent does **professional development** make a difference with respect to school performance?
* To what extent do **common vision and clear instructional goals** affect school turnaround?
* To what extent do **school structures** support staff growth and student learning?
* Is there a relationship between **strategies to address students’ social, emotional, and health needs** and improved student performance?
* In what ways, if at all, is **school culture** associated with school performance?
* Which turnaround strategies are most likely associated with sustainability of change?
* Which elements of ESE’s support are most closely associated with increased school and district capacity and improved student performance?

Using a mixed method design, the research questions are addressed through surveys, interviews, and document review.

## Schools Participating in the Study

The findings in this report describe two distinct populations. **First**, all 44 schools that received SRG funding across the first four cohorts were targeted for both principal and educator surveys, as well as some interviews. Principals were surveyed three times (SY12, SY13, and SY14) while educators were surveyed twice (SY13 and SY14). The longitudinal results of these surveys are discussed in one section of the Findings. **Second**, in addition to the longitudinal results based on this total population of SRG schools, a subset of schools were designated for further in-depth analysis based on whether the schools exited from Level 4 status or not, referred to throughout the report as Exited (those schools that exited Level 4 status as part of the 2010 Decision group) and Not Exited (those schools that did not exit Level 4 status). This subset of schools includes 31 SRG schools from what is described herein as the “2010 Decision Group,” which is further described below. Although statewide there were 35 schools in the 2010 Decision Group, of these SRG schools given priority to apply for and receive SRG grants, only 31 of the 35 actually received SRG funding. These 31 schools are therefore included in this study.

The characteristics of the schools used in these two separate analyses are described in this section.

### All SRG Schools

The MassachusettsSchool Redesign Grant initiative completed its fourth year of implementation in SY 2013-2014. Of the 100 schools that met federal eligibility guidelines for the first round of funding in 2010, the state accountability system identified 35 schools that were required by state law to pursue turnaround. Ultimately, the state allocated only 12 grants in Cohort 1, distributing approximately 20% to 30% of available funds (compared with 80% in other states).[[2]](#footnote-2) Another 18 schools were funded in Cohort 2 and completed their third full year of funding in spring 2014. A third and fourth cohort are currently proceeding through their redesign work. Cohort 3 includes 9 schools and Cohort 4 includes 6 schools. A full list of SRG-funded schools, Cohort 1 through Cohort 4, is presented in Table 1.

| Table 1. Massachusetts SRG Schools | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Cohort I** Year 1 – September 1, 2010 – August 31, 2011 | | | |
| **District** | **School** | **Redesign Model** | |
| Boston | Blackstone Elementary School | Turnaround | |
| Boston | Dearborn Middle School | Transformation | |
| Boston | Greenwood (Elihu) Leadership Academy | Transformation | |
| Boston | English High School | Transformation | |
| Boston | Harbor School | Turnaround | |
| Boston | J.F. Kennedy Elementary School | Transformation | |
| Boston | Holland Elementary School | Transformation | |
| Boston | Orchard Gardens K-8 School | Turnaround | |
| Boston | Dever Elementary School | Turnaround | |
| Boston | Trotter Elementary School | Turnaround | |
| Chelsea | Chelsea High School | Transformation | |
| Springfield | M. Marcus Kiley Middle School | Transformation | |
|  | | | |
| **Cohort II** Year 2 – September 1, 2011 – August 31, 2012 | | | |
| **District** | **School** | **Redesign Model** |
| Boston | Burke High School | Turnaround |
| Boston | UP Academy Charter School of Boston (formerly Patrick F. Gavin Middle School) | Restart |
| Fall River | John J. Doran Elementary School | Transformation |
| Holyoke | Morgan Elementary School | Transformation |
| Holyoke | William J. Dean Technical High School | Restart |
| Lawrence | Arlington Elementary School | Transformation |
| Lowell | Charlotte M. Murkland Elementary School | Transformation |
| Lynn | E.J. Harrington Elementary School | Transformation |
| Springfield | Alfred G. Zanetti Montessori Magnet School | Transformation |
| Springfield | Brightwood School | Turnaround |
| Springfield | Chestnut Accelerated Middle School | Transformation |
| Springfield | Elias Brookings School | Turnaround |
| Springfield | German Gerena Community School | Transformation |
| Springfield | Homer Street School | Transformation |
| Springfield | John F. Kennedy Middle School | Turnaround |
| Springfield | White Street School | Turnaround |
| Worcester | Chandler Elementary Community School | Transformation |
| Worcester | Union Hill School | Transformation |
|  | | |
| **Cohort III** Year 2 – September 1, 2012 – August 31, 2013 | | |
| **District** | **School** | **Redesign Model** | |
| Brockton | East Middle School | Transformation | |
| Lawrence | Business, Management and Finance High School | Transformation | |
| Lawrence | International High School | Transformation | |
| Lawrence | James F. Leonard High School | Restart | |
| Lawrence | South Lawrence East Middle School | Transformation | |
| Lynn | William P. Connery Elementary School | Transformation | |
| Salem | Bentley Elementary School | Transformation | |
| Springfield | High School of Commerce | Turnaround | |
| Worcester | Burncoat Street Elementary School | Transformation | |
|  | | | |
| **Cohort IV** Year 1 – September 1, 2013 – August 31, 2014 | | | |
| **District** | **School** | **Redesign Model** | |
| Boston | Mattahunt Elementary School | Turnaround | |
| Boston | The English High School | Turnaround | |
| Lawrence | Oliver Partnership School | Restart | |
| Lawrence | UP Academy Oliver | Restart | |
| New Bedford | Hayden-McFadden Elementary School | Transformation | |
| Springfield | DeBerry Elementary School | Restart | |

### The 2010 Decision Group

In 2010, the Massachusetts’ accountability system placed 35 schools in Level 4 accountability status. These schools were then required by state law to turnaround in three years. Of these 35 schools, 31 successfully applied for and were granted SRG funding in 2010, 2011, or 2012. In fall of 2013, ESE reviewed the performance trajectories of the 35 schools that were originally designated Level 4 status in 2010 and released recommendations about those schools’ accountability levels. Together, these schools comprise a distinct cohort, the “2010 Decision Group.” The 31 SRG schools in this group are the basis for findings presented in the section on exited and not exited schools.

Of the 31 schools that received SRG funds, over half of the schools (18 schools, or 58%) demonstrated improvement or evidence of a positive trajectory, regardless of whether they had been granted SRG funding for three years, two years, or one year. Specifically:

* 13 SRG schools (42%)exited Level 4 status (moving up to Level 3, 2, or 1).
* 5 SRG schools (16%) were determined to be on a relatively promising trajectory, but remained in Level 4 status for at least one more year.
* 10 SRG schools (32%) were determined to be on a flat or declining trajectory. In these cases, districts opted to partner with educational management operators, and the schools remained in Level 4 status.
* 3 SRG schools (10%) were assigned Level 5 status, moving into state receivership.

Table 2 displays the SRG schools that were included in the Level 4 2010 Decision Group schools and the commissioner’s 2013 recommendations for each school’s accountability status. Note that the table is organized and color coded accordingly. It is these SRG schools that were included in the initial analysis of differences among exited and not exited schools. Further refinement of this group of schools is discussed in the Analysis of Data subsection of the Methodology.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Table 2. Exit Recommendations for SRG Schools in the Level 4 2010 Decision Group | | |
|  | **School** | **Recommendations** |
|  | Trotter ES | Exit (Level 1) |
|  | Zanetti K–8 | Exit (Level 1) |
|  | Orchard Gardens K–8 | Exit (Level 1) |
|  | Murkland ES | Exit (Level 1) |
|  | Doran K–8 | Exit (Level 2) |
|  | Union Hill ES | Exit (Level 3) |
|  | Connery ES | Exit (Level 3) |
|  | Harbor MS | Exit (Level 3) |
|  | Gerena ES | Exit (Level 3) |
|  | Harrington ES | Exit (Level 3) |
|  | Homer ES | Exit (Level 3) |
|  | Blackstone ES | Exit (Level 3) |
|  | JFK ES | Exit (Level 3) |
|  | Brookings ES | Continuing Level 4 (No Operator) |
|  | Brightwood ES | Continuing Level 4 (No Operator) |
|  | Chandler ES | Continuing Level 4 (No Operator) |
|  | Dearborn MS | Continuing Level 4 (No Operator) |
|  | Burke HS | Continuing Level 4 (No Operator) |
|  | Greenwood | Continuing Level 4 (With Operator) |
|  | S. Lawrence East MS | Continuing Level 4 (With Operator) |
|  | Commerce HS | Continuing Level 4 (With Operator) |
|  | The English HS | Continuing Level 4 (With Operator) |
|  | White Street ES | Continuing Level 4 (With Operator) |
|  | Arlington ES (grades 2–4) | Continuing Level 4 (With Operator) |
|  | Dean VTHS | Continuing Level 4 (With Operator) |
|  | Kiley MS | Continuing Level 4 (With Operator) |
|  | Chestnut Street MS | Continuing Level 4 (With Operator) |
|  | JFK MS | Continuing Level 4 (With Operator) |
|  | Holland ES | Level 5 |
|  | Morgan K–8 | Level 5 |
|  | Dever ES | Level 5 |

## Data Sources

From its inception, the study employed document review, individual and small group semi-structured interviews, and survey research. Following is additional information regarding these data sources.

### Documents

On an ongoing basis, the evaluation team reviewed documents and online materials to develop and maintain a working knowledge of SRG processes and of ESE’s approach to working with Level 4 and other underperforming schools and districts. These include documents and websites detailing the federal School Improvement Grants program and the Massachusetts Office of District and School Turnaround efforts, including SRG program guidelines, tools, and processes. In order to maintain familiarity with the grantees’ work, the team reviewed redesign materials prepared by schools and districts, including (as appropriate) redesign plans and renewal applications as well as results of annual site visits to each school commissioned by ESE (Monitoring Site Visits) and summary reports prepared by the grant’s external consultant, SchoolWorks. The purpose of the Monitoring Site Visit (MSV) was to provide schools with formative feedback in support of turnaround efforts. The MSV process was designed around the Essential Conditions for School Effectiveness and used multiple sources of evidence (documents, interviews, classroom visits) to understand the progress the school has made toward implementing plans for school turnaround. The written report presents the team’s findings (strengths and areas for improvement) and documents the discussion between the team and the school regarding priorities and next steps.

Additional documents that informed the evaluation team’s ongoing inquiry and understanding include ESE’s online district and school profiles data, notes from interagency meetings, news articles, relevant school and district materials (e.g., websites, meeting agenda), and other materials developed by ESE, including district systems of review reports and communications relevant to school and district performance (e.g., Measurable Annual Goals monitoring, communications regarding exit status decisions).

### Interviews

Throughout the evaluation,UMDI conducted individual and small-group interviews by telephone and in person with ESE staff and district leaders across the Commonwealth. The quantity and depth of these interviews was greatest in the initial phases of the study, when its formative role was of paramount importance. Interviews continued over the life of the study, but were reduced in number as the study shifted to a more summative focus, minimizing potential distractions for district and school leaders focused on the work of school turnaround.

#### ESE Consultant and Staff Interviews

Interviews with ESE consultants and staff at project start-up provided an introduction to SRG and set the initiative in context. Interviews with the ESE program officer—one conducted in January 2012 at the start of the evaluation, one in the fall of 2012, and one in the fall of 2013—provided relevant updates on SRG programming and helped customize the focus of the evaluation inquiry to best meet the Department’s emerging information needs. Interviews with ESE district liaisons—field-based ESE employees assigned to support turnaround efforts in specific districts—contributed to the evaluators’ initial understanding of ESE’s work with districts. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three of the ESE’s four liaisons in the spring of 2012 and the evaluation team maintained less formal communication with all four liaisons over the course of the study (e.g., occasional brief telephone calls to clarify our emerging understanding or to prepare for upcoming data collection activities).

#### District Leader Interviews

Interviews with district leaders explored perspectives on the redesign process, contributing to a cumulative understanding of factors associated with progress as well as formative feedback to ESE. Increasingly over time, the interviews explored as well leaders’ perspectives on district capacity to sustain progress achieved under SRG and to share and apply lessons learned across the system. Interviewees included superintendents, assistant superintendents, redesign officers, chief academic officers, directors of curriculum and instruction, directors of assessment, grants managers, and accountability officers. These interviews were conducted by telephone as follows:

* Spring of 2012: 16 district leaders from Boston, Chelsea, Fall River, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, Lynn, Springfield and Worcester
* Fall of 2012 through winter 2013: 18 district leaders from Boston, Chelsea, Fall River, Holyoke, Lowell, Lynn, Salem, Springfield, and Worcester
* Winter and spring 2014: 10 district leaders from Brockton, Fall River, Lawrence, Lowell, Lynn and Worcester.

#### Site Visit Interviews

In-person interviews were conducted through a series of 1- to 2-day site visits to schools, conducted in the spring of 2012 and of 2013. The purpose of these visits was to explore multiple constituencies’ perspectives on redesign, including principals and school leadership team members, classroom teachers, specialists, coaches, and other school-based staff. ESE guided the selection of sites and the development of customized interview protocols for these visits. In 2012, three site visits were conducted in Boston: two elementary schools (one large school and one small) and one middle school. This research was supported in part by complementary resources provided by the Boston Foundation, and culminated in a stand-alone report, *Massachusetts School Redesign Grant: A Boston Public Schools Brief* (August 2012). Similar visits were conducted in 2012 (one school each in Lowell, Lynn and Springfield) and 2013 (one school in Chelsea).

#### Targeted Interviews (Sustainability)

In the spring of 2013, targeted inquiry was conducted with respect to sustainability planning. Given that Boston constituted the majority of Cohort 1 SRG schools and was the first district to encounter the end of SRG funding, ESE directed the evaluation team to identify lessons from the Boston Public Schools experience in order to inform plans to support Cohort 2 districts and schools that would face similar circumstances in SY 2014. UMDI reviewed sustainability planning materials prepared by ESE in the fall of 2012, attended two workshops conducted by the District Management Council[[3]](#footnote-3) and conducted telephone interviews as follows: an individual interview with a representative of the District Management Council, two individual interviews with representatives of Boston Public Schools’ central office, and one joint interview with two representatives of Boston Public Schools’ Data and Accountability office*.*

### Surveys

Two distinct surveys were developed and administered online over the course of the evaluation. A survey of all SRG principals was developed in spring 2012 and sent to all SRG school principals in the second half of school years 2012, 2013, and 2014. The number of respondents and the response rate for each year is shown in Table 3:[[4]](#footnote-4)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Table 3. All SRG Principal Surveys Completed | | | |
|  | Spring 2012 | Spring 2013 | Spring 2014 |
| N | 24 | 29 | 32 |
| Response rate | 80% | 78% | 74% |

A survey of educators working in SRG schools was developed in spring 2013 and administered to school personnel in in the second half of school years 2013 and 2014. The number of respondents and the response rate for each year is shown in Table 4.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Table 4. All SRG Educator Surveys Completed | | |
|  | Spring 2013 | Spring 2014 |
| N | 1,146 | 948 |
| Response rate | 63% | 54% |

The surveys were developed in consultation with ESE and, as shown below, explored each respondent group’s beliefs and attitudes about supports and barriers to progress under the SRG initiative.

The principal survey consisted of 100 questions and was structured to capture principals’ perspectives on their role in the redesign mission; district support for the redesign mission; leadership structures and processes; instructional resources and processes; strategies to address students’ social, emotional, and health needs; external partnerships; ESE’s implementation and oversight of the grant; and effectiveness and sustainability of redesign strategies. The survey was modified only slightly from one year to the next. The 2014 principal survey instrument is shown in Appendix A. Responses by item for 2012, 2013, and 2014 are included in Appendix B.

The educator survey consisted of 48 questions and was structured to capture educators’ perspectives on their role in the redesign mission, leadership structures and processes, curriculum and instruction, professional development, use of data, school climate, teacher and student outcomes, and effectiveness and sustainability of redesign strategies. It was administered to classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, specialists, and any other educators who provided instruction to students. The survey was modified only slightly in 2014. The 2014 educator survey instrument is shown in Appendix C. Responses by item for 2013 and 2014 are included as Appendix D.

### Follow up – Spring 2014 Focal Inquiry (District Coaches and Partners)

In the spring of 2014, survey results suggested that while not all schools perceived the value of district coaches and external partners equally, respondents from schools perceived these supports to be more valuable than did respondents from other schools. In an effort to identify factors that account for the differing experiences of these schools, follow-up questions were sent by e-mail to five principals. Responses were received from three of the five principals and their observations are discussed in this report. This narrowly targeted approach to data collection reflected the limited availability of potential respondents and the concerns of ESE that the important work of school redesign not be adversely impacted by the continuing demands of research.

## Analysis of Data

Each aspect of data analysis is presented for the varying types of data and different applications.

### Qualitative Analysis

The study employed an iterative approach to data collection and analysis such that, on an ongoing basis, researchers identified patterns and anomalies in the data (surveys and interviews), summarized those patterns and anomalies and shared them with ESE, and crafted future data collection tools and processes with an eye toward challenging, confirming, and/or learning more (“digging deeper”) about what they might suggest. Interviews were audio recorded and then summarized and coded by secondary research question, identifying commonalities across respondents and anomalies as the study progressed.

The team of researchers worked collaboratively to ensure that the data were interpreted by multiple individuals and that emerging analyses reflected data collected from multiple sources. For example, as emerging findings were identified and articulated by some members of the team, other members reviewed those findings, checked for supporting evidence across data sources as well as alignment with previous findings, and contributed to the writing and editing of research reports detailing those findings.

In Years 1 and 2 of the study, inquiry focused largely on identifying statewide patterns and trends, while in Year 3 the emphasis shifted to a closer examination of the relationships between various elements of schools’ and districts’ experience with redesign and school-level outcomes.

### Longitudinal Analysis of Survey Data

Survey data were first analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine frequency of responses for the different groups of respondents on each survey question for each year. Each year, data were aggregated and presented for all SRG schools combined. Data were also analyzed longitudinally to determine any changes within the principal group or the educator group over time. Chi-square analysis was used to test for statistically significant changes in response on the educator survey. Chi-square analysis was not used with principal survey data since the number of responses each year was relatively small, producing many cell sizes that were too small for accurate or appropriate analysis or meaningful interpretation. Thus, the findings from descriptive analyses of principal survey data were examined for any noteworthy year-to-year changes in trends.

### Analysis of Exited and Non-Exited Schools

To distinguish between schools that moved up from Level 4 (to Level 1, 2, or 3) and those that did not, initial analyses compared the survey responses of personnel from schools that exited Level 4 and those that did not. There were no statistically significant differences between the two groups. On examination of the decisions for exiting Level 4 status (shown in Table 2), a group of schools was determined to be on a relatively promising trajectory, but remained in Level 4 status for at least one more year. That differences between exited schools and not exited schools did not emerge could be attributable to this group of schools in the middle that neither moved up nor opted to work with an operator. When this middle group was removed from analysis, differences in responses between exited and not exited schools emerged. Thus, subsequent analyses looked at schools that moved up from Level 4 versus those that were placed in Level 4 with an operator or Level 5 (receivership).

In addition, analyses were conducted excluding Level 5 schools to ensure that respondents from schools in the most difficult of circumstances were not skewing survey results, as schools were notified of the Commissioner’s accountability status recommendations in fall 2013, prior to administration of the 2014 surveys. No differences were observed when these Level 5 schools were removed from analysis. Thus, analyses presented in this section of the report were conducted using only the exited and not exited groups as described above, with middle performers, those remaining in Level 4 status for at least one more year, excluded.

Table 5 shows confirmation of receipt of principal and educator surveys during Spring 2014 from schools organized by these analysis groups, hereafter referred to as **Exited, Middle Performers,** and **Not Exited.**

| Table 5. Number of Surveys Received from 2010 Decision Cohort Groupings  (Total Count of Responding Schools: Principals: 22 / Educators: 25) | | | | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **School** | | **Surveys Received** | | **School** | | **Surveys Received** | |
| **Principals** | **Educators** | **Principals** | **Educators** |
| **Exited** | | | | **Not Exited** | | | |
| 1 | Trotter ES | — | — | 1 | Greenwood | — | — |
| 2 | Zanetti K–8 | X | X | 2 | S. Lawrence East MS | X | X |
| 3 | Orchard Gardens K–8 | — | — | 3 | Commerce HS | — | X |
| 4 | Murkland ES | X | X | 4 | The English HS | — | X |
| 5 | Doran K–8 | X | X | 5 | White Street ES | X | X |
| 6 | Union Hill ES | X | X | 6 | Arlington ES (grades 2–4) | X | X |
| 7 | Connery ES | — | X | 7 | Dean VTHS | X | X |
| 8 | Harbor MS | X | — | 8 | Kiley MS | X | X |
| 9 | Gerena ES | X | X | 9 | Chestnut Street MS | X | X |
| 10 | Harrington ES | X | X | 10 | JFK MS | X | X |
| 11 | Homer ES | X | X | 11 | Holland ES | — | X |
| 12 | Blackstone ES | — | — | 12 | Morgan K–8 | X | X |
| 13 | JFK ES | X | X | 13 | Dever ES | — | — |
| **Middle Performers** | | | | | | | |
| 1 | Brookings ES | X | X | 4 | Dearborn MS | X | X |
| 2 | Brightwood ES | X | X | 5 | Burke HS | X | X |
| 3 | Chandler ES | X | X |  |  |  |  |

To identify any statistically significant differences between Exited and Not Exited groups, chi-square analysis was used to test the differences in proportions of responses. In the discussion, statistically significant differences (p < .05) in educators’ responses are typically foregrounded, but depending on the theme, other meaningful, although not statistically significant, results will be noted and described as such. These include notable disparities between groups’ responses—especially, differences that confirm emerging findings noted elsewhere, even when these results do not meet significance criteria. Note, however, that due to the small number of principals completing the survey, statistical significance is not reported. Nonetheless, notable patterns are evident in the principals’ data and so comparisons by percentage of respondents are presented.

## Limitations of the Study

The SRG initiative is comprised of a set of tools and processes used by educators in their particular settings and often in combination with other tools and processes. The broad range of contexts within which the initiative is implemented as well as the overlapping efforts that typically take place in schools constitute challenges both to attribution and generalizability. Accordingly, the study does not ascribe causality in linear terms and does not predict that factors typically associated with improvement in the participating schools will necessarily yield similar results in other contexts. Rather, the study develops explanations of the relationships between the perceived effectiveness of various components of redesign and improvement trajectories, taking into account the multiple factors that are likely associated with change. In this light, the study is intended to inform policy debate and related conversations or decisions about leadership and teaching practice within school reform, but it is not prescriptive and caution is suggested in applying the findings across settings. Additionally, the small sample of principals further limits the potential generalizability of the findings. The study may also reflect the limits to self-report that are typically associated with survey and interview research (e.g., response bias, social desirability).

# Perspectives of All SRG Schools

Through annual surveys, this study systematically investigated school principals’ and other educators’ (e.g., teachers, specialists, paraprofessionals) unique, field-level perspectives on the SRG turnaround experience. Data collected through these surveys offer insight into the ways in which various turnaround strategies were perceived to have affected school improvement over time across the Commonwealth. This section presents findings from analyses of survey responses from all SRG schools, while a subsequent section explores differences among a subset of schools that exited Level 4 status and others that did not. This reflects an interest in understanding how SRG is perceived to have affected turnaround at all schools, as well as identifying strategies that distinguish the most successful turnaround schools.

As described in the Methodology section, SRG school principals were surveyed in spring 2012, 2013, and 2014, whereas other educators were surveyed in spring 2013 and 2014 only. Following are summary points emerging from analyses of these data, which included year-to-year (SY 2012, 2013, and 2014) and start-to-end (SY 2012 to 2014) response comparisons. In assessing these longitudinal data, it should be noted that there is no real baseline for the study, as principals were first surveyed at the end of the school year in which the intervention began (SY 2012). Educators were not surveyed the first year, so their first responses, in spring of SY 2013, came after nearly two years of SRG implementation.

The section begins with an exploration of building principals’ perceptions of the return of specific redesign strategies, continues with a more detailed consideration of key elements of practice with relevance to redesign and turnaround, and concludes with a summary of these participants’ views of SRG’s contribution to school improvement. To ensure a concise and understandable narrative, this section focuses on salient findings and does not draw upon every possible survey item. For the same reason, in most instances, tables summarizing principal and educator survey responses are referenced throughout the narrative, with data tables presented in the appendices. Principal survey data appear in Appendix B, Tables B-1 through B-56. Other educators’ responses are presented in Appendix D, Tables D-1 through D-36. Statistical significance is noted throughout this section in relation to educators’ survey results. Significance tests were not performed in relation to principal survey data since the number of responses each year was relatively small. Nonetheless, notable patterns are evident in the principals’ data and so comparisons by percentage of respondents are presented and discussed as appropriate.

## Principal Perspectives on Overall Return of Specific Redesign Strategies

In spring SY 2013 and 2014, principals were asked to indicate which redesign strategies offered the best return on investment relative to school turnaround. Specifically, they were asked to identify items from a list that appeared within the question (this list is included below in Table 6). This line of inquiry, which did not appear in the SY 2012 survey, varied slightly in the two succeeding years.

In 2013 principals were asked, “In thinking about sustainability of the school-level changes made, which of the following strategies do you feel offer the best return on investment?” In 2014, they were asked, “In thinking about the school-level changes that were made to date, which of the following strategies were highly effective in achieving your redesign goals and/or gave you the best academic return on investment?” Small sample sizes (2013, N = 29; 2014, N = 32) do not support significance testing in principal survey data analysis.

Acknowledging the shift in language, these questions elicited relatively consistent responses, as shown in Table 6 (also see reference Table B-55). Principals consistently reported that common planning time, professional development (PD), and coaches yielded the best returns in regard to their school improvement efforts. In the context of this report, those investments are characterized as providing a “strong” return by virtue of the ratings they received at each of the two time points, which exceeded 75% in at least one of the two time periods. A second level of practices were deemed to offer a “moderate” return, having appeared on more than half of responding principals’ lists in both 2013 and 2014. These strategies include a focus on data use and data management, social-emotional support and services for students, and distributed leadership.

Results were mixed for several other strategies, which may in some instances be distinguished from those appearing in the strong and moderate return categories by their comparative distance from the classroom. That is, items identified as providing a strong or moderate return on investment appear to affect teaching and learning in comparatively direct and obvious ways, for instance by enhancing teacher and student readiness to engage in the learning process. Some of the items falling into the upper portion of the mixed return category are similarly capable of directly affecting classroom instruction.

While it is notable that union support and external partners[[5]](#footnote-5) fell in the lower range of perceived return on investment, several factors should be considered when interpreting these results. First, and applicable to both items, it is important to acknowledge that the ratings may be affected by perceptions of the *relative* value of items in the response list. It is therefore possible that these less clearly directed investments suffered from comparison to what were perceived as more targeted investments in instruction and student support. Bolstering this theory are findings that suggest substantial value resulting from external partners, highlighted in positive survey findings regarding partners’ work in specific areas of school improvement.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Specific to ratings of external partners, variation in the nature and extent of relationships among schools/districts and partners must be acknowledged. Some schools worked with multiple external partners while others worked with none, and the duration and intensity of interaction also varied. In some instances, partners worked closely with administrators, but in others, their work was less embedded in school redesign efforts and potentially less well understood by administrators. Accordingly, ratings of return on investment may also reflect varying knowledge of school partners’ work. Taken together—and in light of positive ratings of more explicitly stated supports provided by external partners—these factors create some uncertainty regarding the relative rating of external partners’ academic return on investment.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Table 6. Principal Perceptions of Return on Investment by Strategy | | |
|  | **2013** | **2014** |
| **Strong Return** |  |  |
| Common planning time | 72% | 88% |
| Professional development | 66% | 78% |
| Coaches | 66% | 75% |
| **Moderate Return** |  |  |
| Data use and management | 52% | 72% |
| Social-emotional support and services for students | 62% | 66% |
| Distributed leadership | 62% | 56% |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Table 6 (continued). Principal Perceptions of Return on Investment by Strategy | | |
| **Mixed Return** | **2013** | **2014** |
| Professional learning communities | 41% | 47% |
| Extended school day | 41% | 44% |
| District support and resources | 38% | 34% |
| Family and community outreach | 38% | 31% |
| Specialists | 24% | 25% |
| Union support of turnaround strategies | 31% | 16% |
| External partnerships | 31% | 9% |

The funding resources associated with the School Redesign Grant initiative will not be available to turnaround schools over the long term. With this in mind, the 2014 survey asked principals to consider the extent to which their schools could sustain these features of redesign. The good news found among their responses is that to at least some extent, all the turnaround strategies could be sustained, with selected strategies showing particular promise for sustainability. Substantial majorities of respondents indicated that their schools could sustain common planning time and data use and management to a great extent, with the balance indicating they could do so to at least some extent (Table B-56). Over 40% reported that their schools could sustain distributed leadership, social-emotional support and services for students, professional learning communities, coaches, and professional development to a great extent. Extended day programming was considered the least sustainable of all the strategies.

In 2014, principals were also asked to indicate how effective various redesign strategies were in fostering both educator professional growth and student learning. Notably, the same eight strategies emerged as most effective in relation to each of these questions, and responses aligned closely with perspectives of the return on investment of specific turnaround strategies. These include common planning time, grade-level or team meetings, professional learning communities, professional development, coaches/specialists, data use and management, distributed leadership, and social-emotional support and services. Fewer than half considered extended school days, external partnerships, family and community outreach, district support and resources, and union support of turnaround strategies to be effective in promoting student learning or professional growth (Tables B-39 and B-40). Again, this displays an apparent emphasis on strategies that most directly affect classroom instruction and reinforces the perceived value of investments that target teacher capacity and collaboration to successful turnaround.

## Perspectives on Key Elements of Practice

Transitioning from a focus on the relative return on investment of individual turnaround strategies, the following section considers principals’ (SY 2012, 2013, 2014) and other educators’ (SY 2013, 2014) insights into key elements of practice, including a range of factors with implications for turnaround. Findings are presented in a series of subsections that follow emerging understandings of the key components of turnaround. These include curriculum and instruction, leadership, structures for collaboration, data use and management, and school culture and climate. These subsections are followed by brief reflection on the role of the district and of ESE itself as part of the school redesign and turnaround equation.

As this section is considered, it is important to note that the study was designed and implemented after the SRG initiative began, which limits the ability to contrast pre- and post-intervention perspectives on school-level practice and capacity. Similarly, the limitations of self-report data are acknowledged. However, these findings do serve as an important window into the change process occurring within schools over the course of this study, and are highly relevant in the context of the comparison of Exited and Not Exited SRG schools that appears later in this report.

## Curriculum and Instruction

### Instructional Vision and Curriculum Alignment

In each administration of the educator survey, in spring 2013 and 2014, respondents were asked a series of questions concerning a range of aspects of instructional practice within their school, with substantial attention focused on curriculum, pedagogy, and educators’ ability to focus on the needs of students.

Overall, educators’ responses were positive and are very consistent from one year to the next (Table D-16). In both 2013 and 2014, over three-quarters of educators reported that their schools have well-defined plans for instructional improvement and a common vision for learning, suggesting a common focus for improved student learning—one of the primary goals of SRG. A similar proportion of educators reported that curriculum and instruction were consistent among teachers in the same grade—an essential element of improvement in a standards-focused era. Vertical alignment is a similarly critical concept and over two-thirds of educators reported that curricula are aligned across grade levels.

In addition to these generally positive impressions of the state of curriculum planning, vision, and alignment in their schools, some 85% of educators in each year agreed that redesign had expanded their knowledge of multiple teaching strategies and helped teach them to work effectively with varied student populations (Table D-29). Adding to the sense of positive direction, about two-thirds of educators reported that they feel stronger as a professional and a similar percentage that their expectations of their students have changed for the better. Further, in 2014 most educators reported that students were more engaged in meaningful work (70%), showed deeper levels of understanding of key ideas (63%), and were more focused on their work (61%; Table D-32).

Overall, these data suggest a positive shift in teacher readiness and capacity to work effectively with the diverse population of students encountered in Massachusetts public schools, and that these teachers have access to what are generally viewed as well-planned and properly aligned curricula in the vast majority of SRG schools. This should be taken as a positive indication of progress toward a critical goal of the initiative. However, challenges to instructional focus persist, as approximately 40% of educators indicated that they have insufficient time to meet the needs of their students and that they are frequently interrupted (Table D-16). Further, some 45% of educators expressed concern that students are still not receiving the academic support they need.

### Professional Development

Educators were asked a series of questions regarding the professional development they received and responses were again highly consistent from one year to the next. Findings reveal that at least 75% of respondents believed these PD offerings to be relevant to school goals and that these programs left them better prepared to meet the needs of their students (Table D-22). Educators were also asked to reflect on the PD provided by their districts. In each year, just over 60% agreed that district-provided PD was of high quality and was relevant to their subject area or grade level (Table D-23).Overall, these findings are consistent with principals’ views, presented in the preceding section, that PD is a sustainable, effective way to foster student learning and educator growth.

While generally positive, results also suggest opportunities for continued improvement of professional development. Approximately one-third of educators indicated that PD is not sufficiently differentiated to be relevant and that there is insufficient mentoring or coaching to help them apply what is learned through PD. Consistent with this latter finding, the responses of about 25% of educators suggest the need for better implementation support for professional development.

### Tiered Instruction

Although not a subject of the teacher survey’s inquiry, each year’s principal survey included questions related to the effectiveness of tiered instruction, defined as “the use of benchmark, formative and summative assessments to place students and continually inform instruction.” While significance tests could not be conducted due to the small sample size of principals, substantial changes were observed from 2012 to 2014 as principals increasingly described tiered instruction as very effective in promoting change at their school. Over half reported that tiered instruction was very effective in the final year of the study compared with just over one-third in the first year (Table B-37). With each passing year, principals also indicated a greater level of satisfaction with the support they received from their districts around tiered instruction (Table B-11).

Although trends suggest improvement in the implementation of tiered instruction from the viewpoint of principals, they also acknowledged numerous ongoing challenges to its consistent implementation, and these challenges tended to persist or even increase over time (Table B-41). Chief among these were meeting the needs of ELL and special education students, student behavior issues, insufficient or inexperienced staff, the need for more professional development, and limited time—each of which was of concern to over 50% of surveyed principals. Educators were also asked to identify challenges to implementation of tiered instruction (Table D-25). Overall, their concerns were aligned with those of principals and were very consistent over time. However, they expressed far greater concern regarding the impact of student behavior issues, which were cited by approximately 60% of educators in 2014. By contrast, approximately 30% of principals identified student behaviors as a barrier.

Overall, findings suggest that although numerous ongoing threats to effective implementation of tiered instruction remain, the practice shows promise for promoting positive change in turnaround schools.

### Instructional Coaches and Specialists

Acknowledging that a range of terminology is in use across the state, educator and principal surveys frequently asked respondents to reflect on the effectiveness of *instructional coaches* and *specialists* in the aggregate (e.g., the use of “instructional coaches and/or specialists” or “coaches/specialists”). The evaluation team’s use of these terms assumes that coaches more commonly provide supports to educator growth and specialists more commonly work directly with students (e.g., reading specialists). In this light, analysis reflects consideration of a range of staff dedicated to supporting instruction both through work with educators and with students. However, the study did distinguish between coaches and specialists in two specific areas: principals’ perceptions of various turnaround strategies’ relative to return on investment, and the sustainability of those strategies. This distinction allows a more nuanced understanding of principals’ views of their redesign efforts.

The educator and principal surveys revealed contrasting perspectives on the effectiveness of instructional coaches and specialists in bringing change to their schools. Overall, educator survey responses display similar views of the effectiveness of coaches and specialists, with 58% and 62%, respectively, rating these staff as effective or very effective in 2014. These ratings were slightly higher than the previous year’s (Table D-36). By contrast, three-fourths of principals identified coaches as one of the redesign strategies offering the best return on investment in 2014, but only 25% offered this assessment of specialists (Table B-55). Principals also perceived coaches as substantially more effective and sustainable than specialists (Table B-37 and Table B-56).

Principals also displayed a clear preference for school-based coaches and specialists over staff in district positions in each of the three years that the survey was administered. When asked to identify the obstacles preventing district-based coaches and/or specialists from being an effective redesign strategy, 83% of respondents indicated that professionals in these roles were spread too thin and had insufficient time for individual schools. Half of respondents said district-based coaches and/or specialists were not familiar with the schools in which they worked (Table B-38).

Overall, it seems that building leaders and other educators view coaches and specialists as part of a system of support, and responses to questions related to professional development and tiered instruction suggest that coaches and specialists may potentially play a pivotal role in supporting implementation of new practices. Limits on their time and their building-level knowledge, however, may lessen their effectiveness as agents of change.

## Leadership

### Educators’ Perspectives of School Leadership Practices

The 2013 and 2014 educators’ surveys asked respondents to consider an array of items pertaining to the quality, inclusiveness, and efficacy of school leadership practices. In several areas, educators found these practices to be effective, as over three-fourths agreed with four items that reflect on their principal’s efforts to align school improvement practice with redesign goals and student needs, as well as maintaining school focus on those goals and ensuring the sustainability of redesign efforts (Table D-11). A similar proportion of educators agreed that principals appreciate their work, understand the challenges they face, and provided timely feedback from instructional walkthroughs (Table D-13).

Ratings of other aspects of principals’ leadership also tended to be positive, if not quite as positive as those listed above. In general, 50%–60% of respondents were favorable in response to whether school leaders built consensus around school issues, were careful to add responsibility only where absolutely necessary, and willing to assume responsibility for some challenges so educators can focus on instruction. In the stressful context of redesign schools, these ratings of leadership behavior may be relatively promising, but also underscore the challenges inherent to leading in a school environment in which many educators feel they lack enough time to do their jobs. Educators’ perceptions of school leadership were relatively stable from 2013 to 2014 (Table D-11).

### Distributed Leadership

As discussed, principals report that the practice of school-level distributed leadership, as illustrated by teacher leadership teams among other possible manifestations, yields a moderate return on investment relative to other strategies. Overall, about 60% of principals in 2014 identified distributed leadership as among those strategies offering the best return on investment, with a similar number reporting that they perceived distributed leadership being sustainable to a great extent (Table B-56). In the same year, 56% of principals reported that distributed leadership was a very effective way to promote educators’ professional growth and 47% identified it as a very effective avenue for fostering student learning (Tables B-39 and B-40).

Leadership teams are a key facet of distributed leadership as implemented in SRG. Each year, about 55% of surveyed educators reported serving on a leadership team (Table D-6). According to respondents, the most common function of these teams is instructional leadership, followed by school redesign planning and/or implementation, and student support (Table D-7). In both years, nearly three-fourths of the educators’ teams met as scheduled almost all the time (Table D-8). In 2013, 74% of respondents indicated that their team was effective or very effective in helping to advance their schools’ progress toward redesign and this percentage increased significantly (p<.01) to 79% in 2014 (Table D-9).

Examining leadership through the lens of practice and structure, it does appear that critical SRG structures, such as the redesign plan, which frames and maintains a consistent focus on key redesign goals, as well as educator-staffed, goal-focused leadership teams, are important mechanisms for advancing school goals and building capacity among staff to support school improvement.

### District Leadership and Support for Redesign

Any discussion of leadership and school redesign must also consider the broader context in which schools function. Specifically, schools function within districts that set a foundation for virtually every aspect of operation, and districts function in collaboration with ESE, leveraging key policy and program initiatives in support of school and student success.

Beginning in SY 2013, the principal survey included items intended to gain insight into leaders’ relationships with the districts in which they work. They reported several ways in which districts commonly support their work as redesign principals. In 2014, district supports most prominently included formal assessments of job performance; support and feedback; formal coaching and mentoring; open-door policies; and informal assessments and mentoring (Table B-8). While the sample was too small to support significance testing, one can observe a dramatic spike in the percentage of principals whose jobs were formally assessed by their districts over the course of the study (from 33% to 78%). Increases, though less striking, are also observed in the amount of formal coaching principals received and in the expansion of district open-door policies. On the other hand, downward trends were seen in relation to district support for the facilitation and coordination of external partnerships, as well as the monitoring of those partnerships (29% to 13%). This is consistent with declines in principal ratings of the return on investment of external partnerships (from 31% to 9%) over the same two-year period.

Principals were asked to identify in which of several areas they would prefer to see district involvement in their school either increase, decrease, or remain unchanged. In all three years, at least 62% of principals requested increased district involvement with sustainability planning. Overall, they also showed particular interest in increased district support for family outreach and relations, community partnerships, student data management and analysis, and tiered instruction (Table B-11). It is notable that, unlike sustainability, the proportion of respondents who felt that no change was necessary in relation to these latter four areas of involvement often approached and sometimes matched the proportion that felt increased involvement would be of benefit.

In contrast, principals most frequently reported that their school would benefit from decreased district involvement in the area of curriculum. This sentiment was strongest in 2012 (45%), and declined to about one third in later years, which was only a few percentage points above the proportion of principals who reported increased involvement would be beneficial. Overall, district involvement in curriculum trended toward levels that principals felt were appropriate over the course of the initiative, as evidence by increasing numbers of principals who indicated that no change was necessary. This trend was evident in other areas as well, including tiered instruction, student behavior management, family outreach, and staff professional development.

## Structures for Collaboration

Principal and educator survey findings underscore the importance of establishing structures to support collaboration among educators. For example, when educators were asked to rate the effectiveness of various redesign strategies in bringing the school closer to its design goals—including strategies such as instructional coaching, forming partnerships to support curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and social service support for students—the most positive ratings were directed toward the use of formal structures to support teacher collaboration (Table D-36), with 65% of respondents describing this as an effective strategy. Mirroring these results, in each of the three years that principals were asked to rate the effectiveness of nine redesign strategies related to curriculum and instruction, over 85% reported that formal structures for teacher collaboration were effective in promoting school-level change (Table B-37). Similarly, principals reported in 2013 and 2014 that common planning time offered the strongest return on investment relative to other strategies (Table 6).

### Common Planning Time

Common planning time is a ubiquitous example of a formal structure for teacher collaboration. Almost three-quarters of educators who completed the 2013 survey indicated that they participated in common planning time and this number increased substantially in 2014 (Table D-17). In both years, more than 85% of educators reported participating in common planning time at least once a week and just over half did so more than once a week (Table D-18). Reviews of the effectiveness of common planning time were mixed: Just over 50% of educators rated common planning time as effective (Table D-19). Data suggest that the greatest concern regarding common planning time was that there simply is not enough time allotted to complete all the tasks that are necessary, as reported by over 25% of respondents. In most regards, however, educators were in strong agreement that key attributes of effective common planning time were present (Table D-20).

In the context of these very positive overall ratings, it should be noted that significantly more educators felt that the physical space they used for common planning time was conducive to collaborative work in 2014 than in 2013, by about 6 percentage points (p < .05). Other positive shifts from 2013 to 2014, although not statistically significant, can be observed in the degree to which set schedules were reportedly in use, the adequacy of time allotted for common planning, and the degree to which planning time was perceived to be focused, with each showing modest improvements (Table D-20).

### Restructuring the School Day

Survey results consistently show that slightly more than half of educators and close to two-thirds of principals believed that restructuring the school day was an effective redesign strategy (Table D-36 and Table B-37), with principals particularly likely (63%) to indicate that restructuring was very effective. Principals’ perspectives on the value of restructuring the school day generally increased over the course of the study, with the proportion describing these changes as very effective increasing by over 20 percentage points from 2012 to 2014.

Principals’ approval of restructuring of the school day did not necessarily carry over to extended-day programming. Although not unpopular, in 2014, principal ratings reveal that it was among those redesign strategies offering a mixed return, and less than 20% of principals expressed great confidence that they could sustain an extended school day (Table B-56). Ultimately, extended day programming was noted to hold benefits to teachers and students, but also to be a relatively expensive program, which may have affected perspectives on its sustainability and return on investment.

## Data Use and Management

### Principal and Leader Buy-in and Perspective on Value

Survey data reveal several positive findings related to data use and management in SRG schools. Among them, as previously described in Table 6, is the observation that the percentage of principals that rated redesign strategies focused on improving data use and management to be highly effective increased from 52% in 2013 to 72% in 2014. This was the single largest year-to-year improvement in ratings among the strategies addressed in this question (Table B-55). Further, in 2014, over three-fourths of principals reported that data use and management was effective in promoting educators’ professional growth, and 81% felt it was effective in fostering student learning (Table B-39 and Table B-40). Most principals viewed data-informed instruction as an effective way to promote change in their schools (Table B-47) and, perhaps as important, they widely viewed these practices as sustainable (Table B-56).

Educators consistently responded positively to a number of survey items focused on the use of data for instructional purposes. In both 2013 and 2014, over 80% reported that they had access to the formative and summative data needed to inform instruction, as they were confident in their ability to analyze those data to inform instruction. More importantly, close to 90% reported that they use these data to inform instruction on an ongoing basis, and over three-fourths agreed with the statement, “I have seen evidence that my use of data has had a positive impact on my students' academic performance” (Table D-24).

### Support with Data from Districts and ESE

In each year of the study, approximately 55% of principals reported that the frequency of district monitoring of school progress through data analytics was sufficient to support continued progress at their school, with a substantial proportion of respondents suggesting the district did “more than enough” (Table B-12). Principals were also asked about the usefulness of this data-driven monitoring, with results that fluctuated over time. In 2013, nearly three-fourths described district support as useful, compared with about half in 2012 and 2014 (Table B-18). There is no obvious programmatic explanation for this spike in ratings in 2013. Principals were also asked to rate the usefulness of ESE-provided student performance data to their school improvement efforts. Overall, it appears to have been limited, particularly as compared to perceptions of district data support (Table B-53).

Principals were also asked whether their schools would benefit from more or less district support with student data management and analysis. Overall, responses suggest a need for continued—and in several cases increased—district support in this area. Although response fluctuated from year-to-year, 2012 and 2014 results were quite similar. In the latter year 59% reported that district involvement in this area was about right, with 38% requesting more district involvement (Table B-11).

Principals reported that the most useful aspects of districts’ data services were that districts provided needed expertise, helped schools focus on redesign goals, and shared responsibility for work that needs to get done (Table B-22). Less than 40% but more than 20% of respondents reported each of these aspects of district data services to be among the most useful. Survey data also revealed limitations in district capacity, as well as sometimes ineffective communication and an incomplete understanding of schools’ needs as factors that limited the effectiveness of these services (Table B-23).

## School Culture and Climate

### Professional and Student Culture

Educators and principals alike reported a number of important positive changes in the culture and climate of their schools, which they attributed to school redesign. In 2013 and 2014, approximately 65% of educators expressed a belief that their professional relationships are stronger than they have ever been because of redesign efforts (Table D-29). In these years, about three-quarters of educators agreed that they trust other teachers in their school, and 85% stated that they feel comfortable discussing teaching and learning with their colleagues (Table D-27). Further, in both 2013 and 2014, just over 50% of educators reported that their schools prioritize the development of a positive school culture to a great extent (Table D-28).

This promising perspective extends to student culture as well. Each year, educators were asked whether specific changes resulted from their school’s redesign efforts. Results were very consistent and there were no significant differences across years. Furthermore, approximately 80% agreed that students feel safe in their schools and that staff make an extra effort to build personal relationships with students and parents.

Principals were also asked questions related to school culture and climate, including items related to school safety and behavior. Over 80% of principals believed the safety and behavioral expectations for both students and staff had a positive effect on their school. Although significance tests were not performed on these data due to the small number of respondents, a positive trend can be observed over time, suggesting that creating clear expectations resulted in improvements over time. Principals also indicated that creating a school-wide system of support for students was particularly effective in promoting change in their schools (Table B-45). Respondents also identified that this practice was sustainable and offered a good return on investment (Tables B-56 and B-55).

Another important aspect of school culture and climate is whether staff share a common vision for the direction in which a school is moving. Approximately 80% of educators in both years were very or somewhat familiar with the goals their school must achieve to exit Level 4 status (Table D-34) and with the goals and strategies of their school’s redesign efforts (Table D-35). Similar proportions agreed they and other staff share a common vision for student learning, and about 75% felt that they shared a common vision for student behavior (Table D-16). Approximately 95% of principals felt it is realistic for them to articulate a clear vision of the schools’ goals (Table B-5).

### Redesign and Burnout

While there were reportedly many positive sentiments regarding the impact of redesign on school culture, “burnout” is one notable challenge to turnaround schools. In 2013 and 2014, about 33% of educators reported that they recognized the potential for or were already experiencing burnout to a great degree (Table D-30). As for principals, 33% recognized the potential for or were already experiencing burnout to a great extent in 2012 (Table B-6). On a positive note, this number decreased over time, suggesting that feelings of burnout among principals may have diminished.

Principals identified the following factors as most effective in protecting them from burnout: implementing distributed leadership, establishing collegial networks, and maintaining communication with their districts (Table B-7). The perceived value of ongoing communication with districts increased markedly over time, as the percentage of principals citing this as a protective factor increased from 33% in 2012 to 63% in 2014.

## Discussion

The principal and educator surveys that are the source for this analysis provide tremendous insight into the relative value educators see in specific elements of redesign, their potential sustainability, and the ways in which they have contributed to school progress. In reviewing these data, which summarize the results of all schools, it is striking to note the consistency of findings from one year to the next, particularly in relation to educator survey findings, which contain a more than adequate sample to support significance testing across survey years. Overall, these data suggest that the SRG initiative is succeeding in moving many schools forward on the path to school improvement. The next section of this report focuses explicitly on those schools that have succeeded in exiting Level 4 ESE accountability status and those that have not, but there is much to be learned at this aggregate level as well.

Principals’ responses provide important insight regarding those elements of redesign that they feel provide the greatest academic return on investment and those elements with strong and moderate return that appear to affect teaching and learning very directly. Common planning time, professional development, and coaching—among other elements—all reflect a focus on developing and supporting teacher capacity. Data use and management, and student social emotional support services, represent important tools that enable educators to better understand and work with their students, while distributed leadership may reduce the likelihood of principal burnout and places teachers in the center—as directors rather than mere players—of the school redesign process. Other practices are described in this report as offering mixed returns—as presented in Table 6—but may nonetheless offer real value to improvement efforts. Their effects on classroom instruction might not be as immediate or direct as other strategies, but each may still be an effective approach. In short, it seems advisable to maintain openness to a range of what may be viable improvement strategies.

A focus on curriculum and instruction is clear throughout the survey findings. Educator responses reflect the opinion that a wide majority of these schools have well-defined plans for instructional improvement and benefit from a common vision for learning. Teaching practice within and across grades is reportedly very consistent at most schools, though vertical integration lags horizontal. Beyond describing current conditions, educators reported that redesign has expanded their knowledge of teaching strategies and helped teach them to work with varied student populations. They also believed that students’ expectations for their own learning have increased. Overall, it would appear that many schools have experienced a positive shift in teacher readiness and capacity to work effectively with students, and generally have access to well-planned and aligned curricula. Still, challenges persist, as educators expressed concern regarding the availability of time to meet student needs and the lack of other supports for some students.

Professional development stands out as a centerpiece of a strategy to move schools forward. A wide majority of educators believed the PD they have received to be relevant and effective in better preparing them to meet the needs of students. As reported, PD would in many instances benefit from better differentiation and from embedded support through mentoring or coaching. Tiered instruction is another critical component of curriculum and instruction, and principals increasingly considered it to be an effective mechanism for change. Challenges remain in the implementation of tiered instruction, as many staff expressed concerns about the ability to meet the needs of ELL and special education students. Many also cited behavior issues as a disruptive factor.

Effective leadership practice is a critical concern in school turnaround and many indicators suggest that principals’ practice is promising in this area, with educators indicating that school leaders have maintained a focus on school redesign goals and efforts to promote sustainability of reforms. A wide majority of educators felt that principals appreciate their work and understand the challenges they face. Leadership team structures have served to create more inclusive decision-making and implementation processes in many schools, and most principals considered distributed leadership to be a highly effective redesign element, which may also help to reduce principals’ feeling of burnout.

Leadership is a difficult concept to deconstruct and replicate, but it appears that core components of SRG—such as redesign plans that frame key goals and teacher leadership teams—may complement and enhance the many other talents of school principals. As the point of entry for school improvement, districts also bring capacity to bear on school improvement, providing another source of leadership. Principals increasingly rely on districts to provide feedback on their job performance, but also benefit from other support and feedback, mentoring, and more accessible district leaders with open door policies. They are in greatest need of support for sustainability planning, but also commonly express the need for district assistance with family and community engagement, and tiered instruction.

Survey findings suggest that structures for collaboration are essential to improvement among SRG schools. Educator ratings of various school redesign strategies show that opportunities for focused collaboration, such as common planning time or professional learning communities, are particularly effective in advancing school redesign goals. Similarly, the vast majority of principals consider formal structures for teacher collaboration to be effective in promoting school-level change. The challenges with common planning time, in particular, are finding sufficient time to accomplish what is on the meeting agenda and securing effective working spaces to promote team productivity. Restructuring the school day may often be necessary to create opportunities for collaboration, but the practice of extending school days received muted praise. This was in part attributable to concerns regarding the sustainability of extended school days, which carry substantial personnel costs.

Effective use of student data to inform instruction and understand school performance is another critical dimension of school redesign, and one that gained traction among principals who rated its academic return on investment. Principals see increased use of data as a support to educators’ professional growth and an effective means to fostering student learning. Educators themselves widely reported that they have access to the data they need and are confident in their ability to analyze those data and apply findings to instruction. They also generally believed it is having a positive impact on student learning. Data are also used to assess school performance and principals generally saw districts as providing as much of this type of analysis as is needed, or sometimes more. Principals saw a continued need for districts to provide or expand data analysis services because districts provide needed expertise in this area, aid schools’ focus on key goals, and help to lighten the load of school staff by distributing the work.

Finally, survey respondents related a number of changes to both the professional and student cultures within their schools, which they attributed to school redesign. In terms of professional culture, they reported enhanced collegial relationships, increased trust, and increased comfort discussing teaching and learning. Among students, a wide majority of respondents believed students are more engaged in school work, show deeper levels of understanding, and are more focused on their work. Principals also saw benefits in the areas of school safety and student behavior, for which they believed there are now clear and agreed upon standards, further evidence of a more unified vision of school-level practice.

Overall, survey findings present a picture of improvement, if not full accomplishment of school redesign goals. They provide important insight into the strategies these educators consider to be most effective, outline areas of progress and concern, and present some evidence that the investments made in the SRG initiative have yielded real benefits in most schools, which lie on a continuum in their journey toward improvement. These data—and many other data presented in this report’s appendices—provide a sense of the scope of change being pursued as well as the complexity of that change. As many questions as these findings may answer, they also provoke many others. The following section addresses perhaps the most important of these questions: What practices differentiate those schools that have exited Level 4 accountability status from those that have not?

# Differences Between Exited and Not Exited Schools

Transitioning from an analysis of statewide trends demonstrated by all SRG schools, this section focuses on the 2010 Decision Group (see Methodology, p. 7), exploring commonalities and differences between schools that exited Level 4 status and schools that did not. From the standpoint of the evaluation, ESE’s 2013 review offers a valuable opportunity to explore schools’ trajectories and identify factors reasonably associated with progress. While acknowledging that turnaround is a complex process and that it may remain ongoing after the study period, this study seeks to strengthen understanding of why certain schools demonstrated enough progress by the 2013 review to exit Level 4 status, in contrast to other members of the 2010 Decision Group that did not exit Level 4 status. A full discussion of this group can be found in the study methodology.

In order to understand the various components of schools’ differing trajectories, this section considers the experiences of leaders and educators in the 13 SRG schools that exited Level 4 status, with comparison to 13 schools that remained in Level 4 status but were determined to be on a flat or declining trajectory (10) or were assigned Level 5 status (3), moving into state receivership (comprising the “Not Exited” group). The bases for comparison in this section are findings of spring 2014 principal and educator surveys. Among the 2010 Decision Group, surveys were completed by leaders of 22 schools and by educators from 25 schools (n=648). These data are complemented by insights emerging from document review and earlier phases of interview data collection, where available, [[7]](#footnote-7) as well as selected references to longitudinal trends described in the preceding section.

Statistical significance is noted throughout this section in relation to educators’ survey results. Significance tests could not be performed in relation to principal survey results, given the small number of schools in the Decision Group. Nonetheless, notable patterns are evident in the principals’ data and so comparisons by percentage of respondents are presented and discussed as appropriate.

The section begins with a brief overview of differences between schools in the Exited and Not Exited groups, and then presents more detailed findings of an analysis of factors associated with school improvement. This begins with an examination of the improvement strategies principals believe yielded the greatest returns and then views differences among Exited and Not Exited schools through the lens of six distinct elements of school redesign, as described below. This section is followed by sections discussing the sustainability of progress and ESE support for school improvement.

## Overview of Differences

While the preceding section’s analysis of all SRG schools showed few relative changes over time, there are numerous and substantial differences between the Exited and Not Exited groups. Principals and educators from Exited schools expressed markedly different reflections on their redesign experiences than their counterparts from Not Exited schools. These data suggest that Exited schools saw the work of turnaround differently and utilized the tools they had at their disposal differently than Not Exited schools.

The overarching difference is that Exited schools—more typically than the Not Exited schools—articulated a clear vision and plan for redesign and ensured that structures and other conditions were put in place to allow aligned and integrated efforts to implement that plan and realize that vision. They maintained focus on their redesign goals and aligned resources (e.g., supports, staff, initiatives, use of time) with those goals. They set clear goals and priorities and established a school-wide focus.

Further, respondents from Exited schools more strongly asserted that they derived value from their redesign strategies, and, in some instances, that their efforts affected not only educator growth but also student learning than did their counterparts from Not Exited schools. Typically, representatives of the Exited group believed that they were able to exit Level 4 status because they implemented redesign in particular ways, leveraging turnaround strategies in particular combinations and under particular conditions. A closer look at these strategies—and leaders’ and educators’ reflections on their role in the redesign experience—is presented below.

## Factors Associated with Improvement

Principal and educator perspectives can offer useful insight into why some schools exited Level 4 status and why some were unable to make the sufficient progress to accomplish this feat. Analyses discussed in this sectionreveal substantial differences between schools that have exited Level 4 status and schools that have not.Survey respondents from Exited schools expressed markedly different reflections on their redesign experiences than their counterparts from Not Exited schools. The section begins with consideration of principals’ perceptions of the relative value of specific turnaround strategies.

## Perceived Effectiveness and Return of Specific Turnaround Strategies

In 2014, principals were asked, “In thinking about the school-level changes that were made to date, which of the following strategies were highly effective in achieving your redesign goals and/or gave you the best academic return on investment (AROI)?” Comparing the perspectives of Exited and Not Exited principals on selected turnaround strategies, some similarities and differences are apparent. Table 7 shows the percentage of surveyed principals who selected each strategy, by group (Exited or Not Exited). Subsections of this table (strong, moderate, and mixed return) reflect a rank ordering of the frequency with which each strategy was reported to be highly effective and/or associated with AROI, with Exited schools’ data as the basis for the sequencing of the strategies.

It is notable that a majority of both groups identified strategies targeting capacity-building (PD and coaching), teacher collaboration (common planning time), data, and social-emotional supports. However, all of the principals from Exited schools highlighted PD and coaching as key to their turnaround success, in contrast to two-thirds and one-half, respectively, of their Not Exited counterparts. Comparing these findings to those of all SRG schools statewide, it is notable that the same five strategies were selected by a majority of principals (Table 6) and that a substantially greater percentage of principals selected common planning time, PD, coaching, and data use and management in 2014 than in 2013. These observations suggest sentiment is solidifying around the belief that building educator capacity, collaborative structures, and data use are key elements of school turnaround.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Table 7. Principals’ Perceptions of AROI/Effectiveness of Redesign Strategies, by Group | | | | |
|  | | **Exited** | | **Not Exited** |
| Strong Return | | | | |
| Professional development | | 100% | | 63% |
| Coaches | | 100% | | 50% |
| Data use and management | | 78% | | 75% |
| Common planning time | | 67% | | 88% |
| Social-emotional support and services | | 67% | | 63% |
| Moderate Return | | | | | |
| District support and resources | 56% | | 25% | | |
| Distributed leadership | 44% | | 50% | | |
| Professional learning communities | 44% | | 50% | | |
| Extended school day | 44% | | 38% | | |
| Family and community outreach | 44% | | 13% | | |
| Union support of turnaround strategies | 44% | | 0% | | |
| Mixed return | | | | | |
| Specialists | 22% | | 50% | | |
| External partnerships | 0% | | 13% | | |

About half of the principals from Exited schools considered district supports to be high-yield investments, as opposed to only one-quarter of the Not Exited group. Statewide, across all SRG schools, district supports were selected by about one-third of principals in both 2013 and 2014 (Table 6). It remains to be seen whether the effectiveness of the district hinges on the actual supports provided by specific districts to specific schools or whether school capacity (i.e., the ability to identify and request specific supports and also maximize the value of those supports) determines effectiveness.

Among those strategies classified as offering a moderate return on investment, it is notable that the two groups are largely consistent with all SRG schools (Table 6) with respect to distributed leadership and professional learning communities. These results further highlight the apparent importance of capacity building and collaborative structures in turnaround. Viewing the perceived value of family and community outreach, it is notably greater among Exited than Not Exited schools, though fewer than half of the Exited group selected it, and only about one-third of all SRG schools did so over two years (Table 6). Consistent with survey results, interviews conducted over the course of the study did not suggest that family and community outreach is viewed as a particularly strong lever in turnaround. A prominent theme is a belief that a very high level of effort is needed, relative to other strategies, in order to yield a positive return.

Union supports to turnaround were not selected by any of the Not Exited principals, in contrast to somewhat fewer than half of the Exited group. Table 6 shows that across all SRG schools perceptions of the relative effectiveness of union support for redesign were low in 2013 and declined in 2014. However, interviews suggested that union support will be essential to the sustainability of improvements, specifically with respect to the need to retain key agreements and autonomies that were negotiated during the redesign phase (e.g., extended school day, teacher contracts) after SRG funding ends.

Results related to the effectiveness and return of external partnerships suggest this strategy is less effective than others, as this option was selected by only a handful of the Not Exited principals and none of those in the Exited group. These data are largely consistent with ratings by all SRG schools (Table 6). The same cautions described in relation to Table 6 are applicable in consideration of this finding. As is detailed later in this section (see Table 21 and related narrative), ratings of external partners’ effectiveness in relation to specific and important areas (e.g., supporting curriculum and instruction, use of data to inform instruction, and social-emotional support) are very positive, with partnerships developed by Exited schools particularly effective.

A somewhat different look at the value of specific redesign strategies is presented in the section that follows, focusing on their perceived effectiveness in promoting both educator growth and student learning.

### Implementing “Double-Yield” Strategies

In addition to the consistently strong return associated with certain strategies across the board (especially common planning time, coaches, and PD), a few strategies appear to be dually effective. That is,a strong majority of Exited principals identified certain strategies that promote *both* educators’ professional growth and student learning. These “double-yield” strategies include common planning time, grade-level or team meetings, professional learning communities, professional development, coaching, and distributed leadership. This finding is notable because it highlights what may be key levers in the Exited schools’ capacity to effect substantive change within a three-year time period. Notably, the perceived efficacy of each of these strategies was dramatically lower in the Not Exited schools (Table 8).

|  |  |  |  |  |
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| Table 8. Double-Yield Strategies: Principals’ Perceptions  (Very Effective) | | | | |
|  | **Promoting Educator Growth** | | **Promoting Student Learning** | |
| **Exited** | **Not Exited** | **Exited** | **Not Exited** |
| Common planning time | 100% | 38% | 89% | 38% |
| Grade-level or team meetings | 89% | 38% | 89% | 38% |
| Professional learning communities | 89% | 13% | 78% | 25% |
| Professional development | 100% | 25% | 100% | 25% |
| Coaching | 78% | 38% | 89% | 50% |
| Distributed leadership | 89% | 38% | 67% | 38% |

These results offer an important view into the ways in which leaders of Exited schools perceive the impacts of their redesign efforts in their schools. With respect to double-yield strategies, principals associated inputs at the school level (e.g., PD) with educators’ professional growth and a wide majority of principals asserted that these inputs also positively affect student learning. Statewide data from all SRG schools (p. 14) shows that principals, overall, scored these same strategies as the highest in terms of promoting educator growth and student learning.

All SRG schools’ respondents indicated that two additional strategies are also dually effective: data use and management, and social-emotional support and services. These results further emphasize the observations noted above that educator capacity building, collaborative structures, and data use are key elements of school turnaround. In the sections that follow, distinctions between how these double-yield and other strategies were implemented in the Exited and Not Exited schools will be explored. That social-emotional supports and strategies were reported to be effective by all SRG schools and also selected as a strong return on investment by the Exited and Not Exited groups (Table 7) suggests that there may be a critical role for these interventions as well in school redesign processes.

### Other Reflections on Turnaround Strategies

The above discussion focused on 13 strategies explored through the question presented through Table 7. It is notable that other survey and interview data suggest three other areas of practice (or focus) are critically important to successful turnaround. These include curriculum and instruction, leadership, and school culture and climate.

These considerations are addressed in some detail in the next section of this report, *Differences in Key Elements of School Redesign*.

Finally, it is important to note that interview and survey findings suggested that Exited schools were able to shed the Level 4 status because they implemented their distinct and multi-faceted turnaround strategies in particular ways, in particular combinations, and under particular conditions. In that vein, it is important to acknowledge that while certain elements of redesign are believed to be relatively more important to improvement than others, study participants tended not to point to any one strategy as solely explanatory of their experience with redesign. In the discussion that follows, “overlap” (synergy, complementarity) between strategies will be noted as appropriate.

## Differences in Relation to Key Elements of School Redesign

Transitioning from a focus on the relative value of the individual turnaround strategies, important findings related to these strategies are presented below, grouped by these six topic areas: Curriculum and Instruction; Leadership Practices; District Support and Resources; Data Use and Management; External Partnerships; and School Culture and Climate. The findings reflect emergent understandings of the key elements of school redesign as experienced in Massachusetts.

### Curriculum and Instruction

**Overview of the section**: In this section, leaders’ and other educators’ perspectives on the ways in which school redesign has affected curriculum and instruction in their schools and districts are explored. After a brief summary of the findings, the section is organized as follows: Overview of Curriculum and Instructional Practices, Professional Development, and Coaches and Specialists.

**Summary of findings**: While there is no “baseline” (pre-SRG) data against which the SRG survey data can be compared, it is notable that representatives of these historically underperforming schools offered consistently positive reports about curriculum, instruction, and educator growth after one to three years of intervention. Statewide results from all SRG schools were positive overall and, looking more closely at the 2010 Decision Group, representatives of the Exited schools described greater focus on an instructional plan, greater alignment of practices, and more evidence of professional growth than Not Exited schools. With respect to PD, while indications are positive overall, educators in the Exited schools were more likely to report that they received the types of support they need to apply newly acquired skills and knowledge in the classroom than educators in Not Exited schools. In particular, school-based coaches were a key element of success in the Exited schools. Excessive workload, insufficient rapport with school staff, and scheduling challenges appear to limit district coaches’ effectiveness. Integration of the district-based coaches’ work into a longer-term plan for teacher development may enhance the effectiveness of the district coaches’ work.

***Overview of Curriculum and Instructional Practices***

Mirroring statewide educator survey results, respondents in the 2010 Decision Group offered positive reports overall about the curricular and instructional practices in their schools. However, reports from educators from Exited schools were significantly more positive than those of their Not Exited counterparts. For example, educators in Exited schools were significantly more likely to report that plans for instructional improvement have been articulated at their school, that they share a common vision with colleagues and can focus on teaching, and that curriculum is aligned horizontally and vertically (Table 9).

One notable exception to this strong pattern is that educators’ perceptions of the sufficiency of instructional time in their schools were relatively undifferentiated. In both groups, nearly 40% of educators felt that instructional time was insufficient in their schools. The same percentage of educators statewide felt they have insufficient time to meet the needs of their students (p. 16).

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| Table 9. Educators’ Perceptions of Curriculum and Instructional Practices | | |
|  | **Strongly Agree or Agree** | |
| **Exited** | **Not Exited** |
| Curriculum and instruction are consistent among teachers in the same grade\*\* | 91% | 67% |
| Curriculum is aligned across different grade levels\*\* | 83% | 61% |
| Our school has well-defined plans for instructional improvement\*\* | 92% | 75% |
| Teachers and other educators at my school share a common vision for student learning\*\* | 94% | 75% |
| Teachers and other educators at my school share a common vision for student behavior\*\* | 92% | 72% |
| Once we start a new teaching strategy, we follow up to make sure it is working for students\*\* | 88% | 67% |
| I can focus on educating students with minimal interruptions\*\* | 58% | 39% |
| \*\*statistically significant difference (p < .01) | | |

These results reinforce one observation presented in previous sections—that educator capacity building has been central to redesign. Further, in interviews, district leaders and principals consistently related that through SRG, schools engaged in processes to articulate carefully conceived plans, which helped to ensure that efforts were aligned in support of redesign specific goals and objectives. Accordingly, data suggest that leaders and educators from Exited schools, more typically than their Not Exited counterparts, fostered coherence and alignment of curriculum and instructional practices to support a commonly shared vision of excellence. In the sections that follow, further illustrations are provided of the ways in which Exited schools saw the curriculum and instruction work of turnaround differently and utilized the tools they had at their disposal differently than Not Exited schools.

***Professional Development***

As discussed, all Exited and a majority of Not Exited schools’ principals perceived professional development as highly effective redesign strategy, associated with AROI (Table 7). Further, PD was cited as a double-yield strategy by all of the Exited principals, in contrast to about one-quarter of the Not Exited principals (Table 8). Similar patterns are evident with respect to educators’ views of the role of PD in redesign: overall, professional development is highly regarded by educators in both Exited and Not Exited schools, but important distinctions are apparent.

Educators were asked to reflect on all the PD that they have received and Table 10 shows that while a majority of educators in both groups expressed agreement that all the PD is valuable, Exited school staff are more likely to report that PD is differentiated and relevant to school improvement goals, and that coaching is an integral component of an overall PD strategy. A number of other significant differences were observed. Educators from these Exited schools disproportionally reported receiving mentoring and/or coaching to support continued learning and application in the classroom. Further, educators from Exited schools were more likely to report that their classroom practices have changed as a result of the PD they have received.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Table 10. Educators’ Perceptions of All PD | | |
|  | **Strongly Agree or Agree** | |
| **Exited** | **Not Exited** |
| Professional development offerings are relevant to our school improvement goals\*\* | 94% | 79% |
| The professional development I receive is differentiated so that it is relevant to me\*\* | 78% | 56% |
| I receive mentoring and/or coaching so that I am able to effectively apply what I learned through professional development\*\* | 67% | 55% |
| Mentoring and/or coaching is an integral part of my professional development\*\* | 62% | 52% |
| My classroom practices have changed as a result of the professional development so that I better meet the needs of my students\*\* | 87% | 74% |
| \*\*statistically significant difference (p < .01). | | |

Another block of questions asked educators to focus more specifically on district-provided PD. Responses again show positive overall ratings among both groups, but educators from Exited schools were significantly more likely to rate district-provided PD positively when compared to their counterparts from Not Exited schools (Table 11). In particular, these educators were more likely to report that their district-provided PD was relevant, of high quality, and that the implementation support provided by the district was of high quality. Statewide about 60% of all SRG schools’ educators indicated that district-provided PD was of high quality and was relevant, but less than 60% reported that it supported their development as leaders and that the implementation support was of high quality (p. 16).

|  |  |  |
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| Table 11. Educators’ Perceptions of District-provided PD | | |
|  | **Strongly Agree or Agree** | |
| **Exited** | **Not Exited** |
| The professional development provided by my district is of high quality\*\* | 79% | 62% |
| The professional development provided by my district is relevant to my subject area and/or grade level\*\* | 80% | 65% |
| The implementation support provided by my district in relation to this professional development is of high quality\*\* | 71% | 53% |

\*\*statistically significant difference (p < .01)

In terms of capacity building through SRG**,** educators from Exited schools were more likely than their Not Exited counterparts to report that they experienced important professional growth through the redesign process. For example, they felt “stronger” as professionals than their Not Exited counterparts, and were more likely to report having acquired increased knowledge of teaching strategies and to have changed their expectations of students for the better (Table 12). Statewide results from all SRG schools were similar over both years in which the educator survey was conducted. In each iteration of the survey, about two-thirds of educators reported feeling stronger as professionals and about three-quarters reported that their expectations of students changed for the better (p. 16).

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| Table 12. Educators’ Perspectives on their own Professional Growth | | |
|  | **Strongly Agree or Agree** | |
| **Exited** | **Not Exited** |
| My knowledge of multiple teaching strategies has grown\*\* | 91% | 83% |
| My knowledge of how to work with varied populations of students has increased\* | 90% | 83% |
| I feel stronger as a professional because of the redesign efforts and initiatives\*\* | 84% | 57% |
| My expectations of students have changed for the better\*\* | 85% | 67% |
| \*statistically significant difference (p < .05)  \*\*statistically significant difference (p < .01) | | |

Taken together, these results suggest that while PD is well regarded overall, the attention to applying new skills and knowledge was stronger in the Exited schools. Differentiation ensures that the content of the PD is relevant for the educator, subject area, and grade level, and that follow-up support in the form of district-provided implementation support and mentoring and/or coaching strengthen the transition from the acquisition of new skills and knowledge to their application in the classroom. Finally, the opportunity to participate in PD in the context of school redesign efforts appears to have substantially benefited schools in terms of educator growth—creating new, and most likely sustainable, capacity.

***Instructional Coach and Specialist Roles***

As noted, coaching has consistently been cited by principals as a key element in the redesign process (p. 17), and was selected as a strong return on investment by all of the principals from Exited schools,as opposed to only half of their Not Exited counterparts (Table 7). Additionally, coaching was shown to be a double-yield strategy for Exited principals (Table 8). Further reinforcing the key role of coaches in successful redesign processes, educators from Exited schools were significantly more likely than their Not Exited counterparts to perceive the use of instructional coaches to be effective in promoting change at their school (72% versus 49% Not Exited, p < .01).

Digging deeper, principals have consistently given school-based coaches higher efficacy ratings than district-based coaches. In 2014,all Exited principals regarded their school-based coaches as effective or very effective, in contrast to only half of the Not Exited principals. In some redesign schools, interviews revealed the building of professional rapport was a vital component of the improvement process**:** leaders described an effort to effect cultural change, a shift in professional culture and values. Key to this effort was an intent to build trust and foster an ethos of question-posing and mutual learning among staff. In some schools, coaches were integral to this effort—working alongside teachers, risking vulnerability, demonstrating that they are not experts but instead peers. For example, one district leader described a principal who crafted the coach’s role such that the coach would first become “a part of the classroom” and then gradually move to a conversation with the teacher that revolved around the question, “What would you like to know more about?” Relationship building came first. In this paradigm, a district coach’s more limited ability to spend time with teaching staff and foster trust necessarily affects the potential for the coach’s work to positively affect the school’s progress toward its redesign goals.

Also, as suggested in the section just above, at some schools, coaches were an integral part of PD because they were based at the school and worked alongside teaching staff, mentoring and modeling on a routine basis. This model of embedded PD may have helped ensure that the learning was relevant to a specific educator and differentiated according to his/her needs and the particular classroom’s contexts (e.g., curriculum in use, specific student profiles), as well as sustained and reinforced over time. Further, surveyed leaders reported and educators confirmed in interviews that in some schools, this model of embedded PD also contributed to school-wide educator growth because coaches were assigned or assumed instructional leadership roles (e.g., lead teacher roles, membership on instructional leadership teams). Through ongoing interaction with all members of a teaching staff, coaches helped to spread the vision developed in the redesign plan and to operationalize it by working closely with school staff to adopt new strategies, including research-based practices identified in the plan. Owing to the strategic use of coaches, capacity building was ongoing and institutionalized.

By contrast, principals have reported in interviews and surveys that *district* coaches are “spread too thin,” are not always sufficiently familiar with the school, and/or have not established good rapport with the school staff (pp. 17-18). One interesting development in the 2014 survey results was that scheduling may also be emerging as a limit on the effectiveness of district coaching. In the case of working with a district coach, the need to schedule visits to coincide with the availability of teachers can prove challenging, as suggested by the following account from one of the principals engaged in the 2014 Focal Inquiry.[[8]](#footnote-8) In response to the question, “What, if anything, was important about the early phases of your school's work with a district coach (e.g., choices, decisions)?” the principal wrote:

The district placed the coaches in the school. The scheduling was at the convenience of coordinating a large number of placements, and for literacy this worked but for math it did not coordinate so well with our school schedule. Availability of the coach for common planning time was key.

Similarly, in response to the question, “Thinking about how best to maximize the utility of district-provided instructional coaches .... (a) What critical challenges did you encounter and how did you solve them? and (b) What advice would you give to turnaround principals working in a district such as yours?” the principal wrote: “Strategically plan the scheduling of coaches in schools at times that teachers from an entire grade level are available.” That same principal indicated the value of **a** longer-term plan that incorporates the work of the district coach**,** by advising, “Have a long-term plan for teacher development and ways to monitor progress.”

Turning to another component of the system to support teacher growth, specialists were associated with AROI by only 22% of principals from Exited schools (Table 7). Educators, however, offered a more favorable view, with educators from Exited schools more likely than their Not Exited counterparts (79% versus 54%, respectively, p < .01) to report that the “use of instructional and/or curriculum specialists (e.g., ELL, special education, reading)” has been very effective or effective in making changes at their school. Typically, the perceived effectiveness of specialists’ success has mirrored observations noted previously with respect to instructional coaches: specialists’ work was most effective when integrated into an overall instructional and/or professional development plan, and scheduling afforded their participation in grade-level and other common planning time meetings.

### Leadership Practices

**Overview of the section**: In this section, leaders’ and educators’ views on the ways in which school leaders’ decisions and practices have affected redesign are explored. After a brief summary of findings, the section is organized as follows: Turnaround Leadership, Distributed Leadership, Structures that Support Staff Collaboration and Leadership, and Union Support of Turnaround Strategies.

**Summary of findings**: Turnaround leadership reportedly hinges foremost on the establishment of a clear vision and common goals. In the Exited schools, leadership practices reflect decisions and practices aligned with overall redesign goals; consensus-building around redesign goals; and an unrelenting focus on those goals. Distributed leadership mechanisms such as instructional leadership teams are employed across a range of schools, but the Exited schools appear to have established more effective structures and processes for shared responsibility and decision making.

Further, Exited leaders demonstrate a deep understanding of educators’ work and seek to minimize demands on educators’ time so they can focus on instruction. There is general agreement among Exited educators and leaders that collaborative structures to support teacher planning and leadership have been a key element of success in redesign schools. Effective use of structures such as common planning time has reportedly contributed to school wide capacity building and alignment of instructional practices. The introduction of collaborative structures into redesign schools has raised questions for educational leaders and union representatives, and discussions are ongoing. Educational leaders contend that mechanisms to ensure a stable teaching force are critical to their continued success.

***Turnaround Leadership***

Analysis of survey data from all SRG schools revealed that a strong majority of educators found several school leadership practices to be effective (p. 18), including aligning school practices with redesign goals, making decisions that support integrated redesign efforts, and inspiring staff to stay focused on redesign goals. Overall, educators from the 2010 Decision Group expressed similarly positive views, but important differences emerge upon comparison of Exited with Not Exited respondents.

Educators from Exited schools consistently rated aspects of school leadership more positively than their counterparts from Not Exited schools. Perceptions of school leaders’ decisions and practices differed, first, with regard to the establishment of a clear vision and common goals**.** Table 13 shows that educators from Exited schools were more likely than their Not Exited counterparts to assert that leaders’ decisions reflected a focus on redesign goals, that school practices were aligned with redesign goals, and that leadership built consensus and fostered a shared understanding of redesign goals. Similarly, these data suggest that leadership practices in the Exited schools are more likely to be perceived to reflect decision-making based on students’ needs.

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| Table 13. Educators’ Perceptions of School Leadership Practices | | |
|  | **Strongly Agree or Agree** | |
| **Exited** | **Not Exited** |
| School leaders made decisions that support integrated redesign efforts**\*\*** | 90% | 69% |
| At our school, the entire staff shares a common understanding of redesign goals\*\* | 83% | 56% |
| School leadership builds consensus around various issues\*\* | 84% | 61% |
| School administrators align school practices with school redesign goals\*\* | 93% | 72% |
| Our principal inspires us to stay focused on redesign goals\*\* | 93% | 73% |
| School improvement decisions are based on careful consideration of students' academic needs\*\* | 94% | 70% |
| School improvement decisions are based on careful consideration of students' social-emotional needs\*\* | 88% | 55% |

\*\*statistically significant difference (p < .01)

Examining the 2010 Decision Groups’ perceptions in comparison with perceptions of educators from all SRG schools, similarities and differences are again apparent. Overall, a strong majority of all SRG school educators indicated that leaders appreciate their work (p. 18). Educators in the 2010 Decision Group shared this view, but those from Exited schools were significantly *more likely* (88% versus 74% Not Exited, p < .01) to feel so. Beyond that, educators from Exited schools were more likely than their counterparts from Not Exited schools to report positive forms of direct support provided to them by their principal or assistant principal (Table 14). This contrast suggests not only that successful turnaround leadership reflects consensus-building around a clear vision and alignment of resources in support of it, but also a deep familiarity with the work of educators and a commitment to managing competing demands so that educators are free to focus on that work.

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| Table 14. Educators’ Perceptions of School Leadership Direct Support | | |
| **My principal or assistant principal…** | **Strongly Agree or Agree** | |
| **Exited** | **Not Exited** |
| Understand(s) the challenges I face\*\* | 89% | 79% |
| Understand(s) the extent of my workload and only adds what is absolutely necessary \*\* | 77% | 58% |
| Assume(s) responsibility for some challenges so I can focus on instruction\*\* | 79% | 57% |

\*\*statistically significant difference (p < .01)

There appears to be less variation between groups in terms of the frequency with which administrators support educators’ instructional activities (e.g., by conducting classroom observations, reviewing student data, or participating in grade-level meetings). As an exception, however, educators from Exited schools were somewhat more likely than their counterparts from Not Exited schools to agree that administrators provide timely feedback from learning walkthroughs (88% versus 73%, p < .01). This further supports the suggestion that successful turnaround leadership reflects a focus on educators’ instructional responsibilities as well as their ongoing professional growth.Complementing the use of embedded and differentiated professional development (through coaching and leadership structures discussed above), timely feedback from walkthroughs further highlights the emphasis on capacity-building that more frequently characterizes Exited schools.

The above themes were echoed in interviews with principals and educators alike. Resoundingly**,** they emphasized the need to maintain focus in the midst of a typically fast-paced redesign process**.** School leaders function in large part as gatekeepers, managing the multiple demands that can distract from an intense focus on key priorities. Leaders must skillfully juggle tasks and timelines generated by the district and ESE, and deal with the careful scrutiny of external parties who might distract from their team’s work. This typically involved working to improve efficiency of communication and administrative tasks with staff so that teacher collaboration time could be used for its intended purpose. In terms of redesign planning, some principals described explicit decisions to prioritize their objectives, focusing on only one thing at a time**.** One principal explained, for example, that the school would be “getting good at one thing first,” even when that meant the competing objectives would not be addressed concurrently.

In interviews, district leaders emphasized the importance of effective leadership and focused on specific school-level conditions and practices that support turnaround; such as the clear vision and alignment of resources evident in some schools, and school leaders’ engagement in the classroom and overall attention to instruction. Effective principals were noted to spend time in classrooms, facilitate intervention groups, lead PD, and model lessons. Further, some district leaders noted the complementary skill sets of certain principals and assistant principals, as well as the opportunities some principals create for teachers to assume leadership and share their own skills and knowledge across the building. It was suggested that these capacities and practices, nurtured through SRG, were more important than any specific district support being provided to schools. This would seem to emphasize the critical role of school-level leadership.

***Distributed Leadership***

Across all SRG schools, distributed leadership emerged as a strategy that yields a moderate return on investment (p. 14). In 2014 just over half of these principals associated it with educator growth and just under half associated it with student learning (p. 18). Among Exited and Not Exited principals, little difference was observed regarding the effectiveness of distributed leadership (Table 7), but distributed leadership was identified by a majority of Exited principals as a double-yield strategy (Table 8), fostering educator growth and student learning.

Educators in both Exited and Not Exited schools are equally likely to participate in leadership roles, and there is little variation across groups in the kinds of mechanisms employed to distribute and share responsibility for redesign work. Exited schools, however, appear to have established more effective structures and processes for shared responsibility and decision making. Through effective communication and clear focus on their redesign goals, Exited schools appear better able to maximize the collective efforts and expertise of their staff, resulting in more educator growth and instructional quality. This distinction is explored below.

A variety of teams were employed across schools, including instructional leadership teams, redesign teams, and teams dedicated to social-emotional support for students. While the specifics of the composition and functioning of the teams varied from school to school, leadership teams were generally comprised of the principal, assistant principal(s), curriculum directors, grade-level teacher representatives, specialists in ELL and special education, and other staff identified by the principal.

The most commonly cited characteristics of teams that were perceived to be effective were consistent communication from the principal, regularly scheduled meetings, and focus. For example, educators from Exited schools were more likely than their counterparts from Not Exited schools to report that their leadership team or committee meets as scheduled “almost all of the time” (78% versus 60%, p < .05), and that their leadership team or committee is effective in advancing their school’s progress toward its redesign goals (88% versus 77%, p < .01). Examples of strategies used by principals to enhance teams’ effectiveness include weekly newsletters outlining progress, goals, and challenges; “think abouts” (periodic school-wide memos highlighting topics for team discussion); and brief meetings at the end of each day to check progress on “unfinished business.”

Also, educators from Exited schools tended to perceive a stronger sense of shared responsibility in their schools**.** These educators were more likely than their counterparts from Not Exited schools to report, for example, that administrators and teachers share responsibility for school redesign efforts (85% versus 58%, p < .01) and that leadership responsibilities are effectively distributed among individuals and/or teams at their school (77% versus 58%, p < .01). Further, despite similar participation rates in teacher leader and coaching positions—about 20% of educators in each group were teacher leaders and about 10% were coaches—Exited educators were more likely to report that their school provides opportunities to advance into leadership positions**.** These educators were more likely to indicate, for example, that their school provides opportunities to serve on leadership teams (86% versus 76%, p < .01), to advance into teacher leader positions (72% versus 54%, p < .01) and to advance into administrative leadership positions (54% versus 36%, p < .01). Overall, they expressed a sense that they played a key role in their school’s improvement and that channels existed through which they could continue to contribute.

In interviews, a number of specific benefits of distributed leadership were identified. In some schools, staff members with specific instructional expertise were empowered to make decisions, thereby freeing up principals to spend more time in classrooms. Principals, for their part, appreciated being able to stay in touch with the day-to-day needs and experiences of students and teachers. The principal’s close proximity to the classroom allowed for planning that was grounded in the daily achievements and challenges of the school, and was cited by some educators as a contributing factor to overall improved quality of instruction among the school staff.

These aspects of effective redesign leadership—a focus on instruction and deep familiarity with the work of educators –were noted above. Additionally, staff described flexibility in addressing urgent issues resulting from shared responsibility across staff members. One educator noted, for example, “You don’t have to wait around for the principal if you have an issue.” Finally, as noted in the analysis of all SRG schools (p. 22), principals have consistently identified distributed leadership as a key protection against burnout.[[9]](#footnote-9) The demands of school redesign are multiple and complex, and data suggest that the development and implementation of effective mechanisms for sharing leadership responsibilities among school staff may be important to redesign efforts. One Exited principal concluded, “The principal can’t do it alone.”

***Structures that Support Staff Collaboration and Leadership***

Statewide, principals and educators underscored the importance of structures to support educator collaboration (pp. 19-20). Principals and educators from Exited schools echoed these findings. They contended that their use of teacher collaborative structures in general, and common planning time in particular, has been an integral component of their redesign success to date. For example, more Exited principals and educators believe that “formal structures for teacher collaboration (e.g., common planning time, grade-level meetings, and professional learning communities**)** have been very effective in promoting change**”** at their school. The finding was very strong and striking among principals and less intense, but also very different, among educators: 100% of Exited versus 38% of Not Exited principals, and 42% of Exited versus 23% of Not Exited educators (p < .01).

Focusing on common planning time (CPT)—a strategy broadly endorsed by a majority of educators from all SRG schools (p. 20) and identified as a double-yield strategy by the Exited principals (p. 28)—data reveal important differences between the Exited and Not Exited groups’ experiences with common planning time. This includes differences regarding regularity of participation, scheduling, perceived efficacy, and processes of organization and collaboration. Illustrative differences follow:

* Educators from Exited schools are more likely than their counterparts from Not Exited schools to participate in CPT on a regular basis (84% versus 74%, p < .01). Among educators who do not participate in CPT on a regular basis, educators from Not Exited schools were about five times more likely to report that CPT is not built into their school schedule (26% of the Not Exited group compared to 5% of the Exited). Educators in the Exited schools are more likely to feel that school leadership supports their use of time for this purpose (nearly half versus one-third Not Exited, p < .01).
* Educators from Exited schools were more likely to believe that their common planning time is effective (78% versus 60% Not Exited, p < .05). Specifically, they were more likely to feel that the work they accomplish during common planning time aligns with their school’s redesign goals (39% Exited versus 27% Not Exited, p < .01).
* In the Exited schools, common planning time was more likely to be focused: educators from Exited schools were more likely than their counterparts from Not Exited schools to use an agenda, a facilitator, or other mechanism to organize their work (38% versus 28%, p < .05); and they were more likely to establish shared, attainable goals for their teaching during CPT (37% versus 27%, p < .01). In the Exited schools, educators were more likely to feel that they hold one another accountable to get the work done (36% versus 27% Not Exited, p < .01).

Examples of strategies to foster productive use of CPT typically reflect school leaders’ intent to help structure the time so that educators’ work aligns with school-wide goals**.** One principal, for example, “seeds” each session by e-mailing suggestions to focus on and directs coaches to do the same. In some schools, principals arrange the schedule so that coaches participate in CPT on a regular basis.

These differences further illuminate certain key characteristics common to the schools that successfully exited Level 4 status. Specifically, leadership’s commitment to supporting time for teacher collaboration through CPT is apparent. Also, common planning time practices in the Exited schools reveal focused attention on school-wide goals and a commitment to ongoing, embedded professional development, to the extent that coaches are regular participants in educators’ ongoing reflection on their work, and principals actively guide the work to ensure continued progress toward teaching and learning goals.

On a related note, interviews with educators and principals suggested that, in some redesign schools, grade-level or team meetings had the same focus and commitment to goals as CPT (which could include vertical as well as grade-level planning). Grade-level or team meetings were identified by Exited principals as a “double-yield” strategy (Table 8). In interviews, some district leaders suggested that principals who preserve time for grade-level and vertical team meetings demonstrate respect for teachers’ work. Some of these leaders observed that teachers in these schools work to achieve the implicit high standards set by their principals.

Another collaborative structure which was widely endorsed by Exited principals was professional learning communities (PLCs), identified as double-yield by a majority of Exited principals. Typically, the characteristics of PLCs that were considered effective mirrored the characteristics of effective common planning time, as described above. In some cases, PLCs have functioned as embedded professional development opportunities. For example, one Exited principal described the time allocated to PLCs as “the time that teachers need to collaborate [in order to] give strong, high-level instruction.”

***Extended School Day***

The study suggests that, to varying degrees, schools have used extended time to create opportunities for teacher collaboration. However, analysis of the ways in which the two groups structured additional school time reveals several differences. Specifically, schools in the Not Exited group were more likely to gain additional time by adding minutes to the school day (all of the Not Exited principals versus two-thirds of the Exited) as well as using time during vacations (25% versus 0% of the Exited) and on weekends (13% versus 0% of the Exited). Schools in the Exited group, by contrast, more typically used additional time in the summer (67% of the Exited principals versus 25% of the Not Exited).

While the two groups have tended to structure extended time differently, leaders of the Exited schools expressed a stronger belief than their counterparts from Not Exited schools that an extended school day and other extended time options have been effective in promoting change. More than two-thirds (67%) of the Exited group found these strategies to be very effective in promoting student learning, as opposed to 13% of their colleagues. Nearly half of the Exited group believed these strategies to be very effective in promoting educators’ professional growth, as opposed to 13% of their colleagues.

Some interviewees emphasized the value of added time that SRG made possible, citing the capacity building that derives from collaborative practice. They commented that strong collaborative practices have contributed to the evolution of school culture and establishment of a common language among educators, and have also reinforced shifts toward aligned instructional practice. One leader described the particular value of teachers’ extra time to look at data, plan instruction, and create tiered instruction in order to “get at the heart of children’s difficulties.” Another described the value added by SRG as time to meet for professional development and time for coaches to work with teachers on improvement—which she described as the key to ongoing teacher feedback that gets beyond and/or supplements the purchase of specific programs and professional development.

The potentially high cost of extended-time options was among the greatest concerns raised by district leaders with respect to sustainability of current programs and redesign work. Some leaders emphasized the need to specify, during the budgeting processes, the intended purposes and beneficiaries of extended time. One leader said, for example, “Always keep money in the back of your mind. ELT is hard. Be strategic, look at it carefully, be very thoughtful. Figure out which kids need to learn what.”

It is notable that the introduction of collaborative structures into the redesign school has had implications for educational leaders and union representatives. Though a deeper understanding of the issues that redesign raises for specific schools and districts with respect to the involvement of unions extends beyond the scope of the present study, a brief consideration of leaders’ perspectives on the importance of negotiated agreements follows.

***Union Support of Turnaround Strategies***

School redesign has, in many cases, brought educational leaders and unions together to reexamine long-standing conventions regarding educator working conditions and longer-term career paths. For example, reconfigured—and often extended—workdays have in some cases necessitated negotiated changes to teachers’ employment agreements. Similarly, schools’ investment in PD for specific educators in specific (SRG) schools has challenged existing policies regarding seniority, replacement, and/or transfer of staff (e.g., “bid and bump” contract provisions may facilitate teacher-initiated transfer from one school to another in the same district). Schools have noted the need to retain a school-level teaching force that not only has acquired substantial skills and knowledge during redesign but has also come to share a common vision and common language.

While only a minority (44%) of Exited principals (Table 7) associated union support with AROI, district leaders and school principals have consistently identified the need for union support of their turnaround efforts as a necessary component of school improvement. From their perspective, the importance of negotiated agreements with union representatives cannot be overstated. Without union contracts that support extended days and provide flexibility in terms of hiring and placement, for instance, many schools stand to lose teachers in whose capacity they have invested and who have likewise invested in the school’s redesign mission and goals.

One district leader eloquently described the role of a stable teaching force as follows, highlighting its importance not only in terms of professional culture but also student development:

The union-negotiated exemption from the “bid and bump” system has allowed the school to build a stable, committed teaching staff that has persisted for two years. Some veterans have claimed it’s the first time in their career with [the district] that they have had this benefit. … This stability has fostered a strong collaborative culture at grade levels and across them. Several teachers have said it has made them better teachers, and they’ve also said, given a choice of another school, they would stay at [the school]. ..[And we have seen] the impact on students: students are noticing that the teachers are staying put and are starting to plan forward: “I want Miss Smith for third grade.” This did not happen before SRG. It is a crucial developmental piece for many of our students who have little stability in their home lives.

A somewhat fuller discussion of leaders’ views of the role of union support in their redesign success is presented in the Sustainability section of this report.

### District Support and Resources

**Overview of the section:** This section explores leaders’ and educators’ perceptions of the effectiveness of specific district supports in school redesign and explores apparent differences in the level of engagement districts have with Exited and Not Exited schools. The section also includes a broader look at the evolving role of the districts in school redesign, with an examination of district-level capacity-building under SRG.

**Summary of findings:** The district support that principals considered most useful to improvement efforts was the provision of data management services; however, overall, principals offered a mixed view of the usefulness of most district supports identified in the survey. Educators were asked questions focused on district support for redesign and survey data show significant differences between the perceptions of those from the Exited and Not Exited groups. Educators from Exited schools were far more likely to report that their district actively supports their redesign efforts, understands school issues, and has aligned its mandates with school redesign efforts. Overall, it appears that principals from Not Exited schools have greater engagement with and may be more closely managed by the district than principals from the Not Exited group.

While districts were conceptualized as the point of entry for school improvement through SRG, establishment of the district role and capacity to support improvement lagged behind school-level processes at the initiative’s inception. However, the critical nature of the district role was quickly elevated and SRG appears to have stimulated action in the development of capacity to support schools. Interviews suggest that districts, to varying extents, began to demonstrate: more strategic approaches to reform; an improved understanding of schools’ capacity and needs; a sharpened the focus on priorities for improvement; a shift toward data-driven processes; a focus on developing new capacity to support turnaround schools; and a more proactive approach to identifying and supporting at-risk schools.

***District Support to Schools***

The principal and educator surveys each contained questions focused on specific aspects of district support for school improvement. Principals were asked whether a number of districts supports were useful to the school as it implemented redesign plans. As presented in Table 15, district provision of data management services was the most useful of the supports considered through the survey, with over three-fourths of principals from Exited schools and nearly two-thirds of those from Not Exited schools viewing it favorably. On the other end of the spectrum, only one-third of principals from Not Exited schools perceived district support for sustainability planning as useful, compared to about half of their counterparts from Not Exited schools. About half of principals from both groups considered three other supports to be useful.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Table 15. Principals’ Perceptions of District Supports to School  (Very Useful and Useful) | | |
|  | **Exited** | **Not Exited** |
| District provision of data management services | 78% | 63% |
| Evidence from district learning walks | 56% | 50% |
| District monitoring | 55% | 38% |
| Meetings with district staff to review school performance and needs | 55% | 49% |
| District assistance with sustainability planning | 33% | 48% |

Educators’ perceptions of district supports reveal a sharp and significant contrast between Exited and Not Exited schools. Overall, those from Exited schools were far more likely to agree that district leaders are actively supporting their redesign efforts, convey an understanding of their school’s issues, and have aligned district mandates with their school’s redesign efforts (Table 16). This suggests a level of engagement and understanding that would seem to be an essential basis for effective support of any improvement effort.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Table 16. Educators’ Perceptions of District Supports  (Strongly Agree or Agree) | | | |
|  | **Exited** | **Not Exited** |
| District leaders actively support our redesign efforts\*\* | 79% | 43% |
| District leaders convey an understanding of the issues that are particular to our school\*\* | 71% | 36% |
| District mandates align with our school’s redesign efforts\*\* | 69% | 48% |
| \*\*statistically significant difference (p < .01) | | |

Considering the perspectives shared through tables 15 and 16, the most striking finding may be the distinction in the perceptions of educators from Exited and Not Exited schools. The data suggest that improvement may follow when districts are engaged, understand school-level issues, and align support with schools’ redesign work. This may reflect the emphasis at the start of the SRG initiative on school-level redesign planning. As is detailed later in this section, redesign planning generally began with school-level processes, with the emphasis on district engagement and capacity developing shortly thereafter. This may have placed districts in a more reactive role relative to redesign support, at least initially and in relation to this early SRG cohort. This may be why, during interviews, district leaders frequently suggested improvement was due more to the school-level conditions and practices fostered under redesign than it was to specific district supports.

***District Support to Principals***

The SRG survey also probed to understand what support principals were receiving from their district. Perhaps the most notable aspect of responses to this question is that principals from Not Exited schools were far more likely to indicate that they received the supports identified in the survey (Table 17). Overall, these data suggest that district staff were more proactive in their engagement of principals from the Not Exited schools. This included formal assessment, coaching and mentoring, and time to reflect on school progress and challenges. It is unclear whether this reflects a strategic approach on the part of the district (i.e., concentrating resources on the schools that most needed support) or is attributable to some other phenomenon, but data presented in Table 18 (next page) suggest there may in some instances be a tendency for some districts to more closely manage and engage with schools that are not showing obvious indications of improvement.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Table 17. District Supports to Principals | | |
|  | **Exited** | **Not Exited** |
| Formal assessment of my job performance | 56% | 88% |
| District staff or leaders from whom I can solicit support or feedback | 56% | 75% |
| Formal coaching and/or mentoring | 44% | 63% |
| Informal assessment and/or mentoring | 44% | 63% |
| Open-door policies at the district that allow me to share both challenges and successes with district staff or leaders | 44% | 75% |
| Facilitating and coordinating external partnerships | 33% | 25% |
| Facilitating professional networks | 33% | 13% |
| Monitoring external partnerships | 11% | 13% |

As displayed in Table 18, about two thirds of principals from both groups of schools report that their district granted them “some autonomy,” characterized as the ability to make some decisions, but not others. More interesting are response trends at the extremes of this three-point scale. Some 22% of respondents from Exited schools reported “nearly complete autonomy”; compared to none of the principals from Not Exited schools. This is mirrored at the other end of the spectrum, as principals Not Exited schools were three times as likely as those from the Exited group to report that they had “little autonomy.”

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Table 18. Principals’ Perceptions of Autonomy from the District | | |
|  | **Exited** | **Not Exited** |
| Nearly complete autonomy: I make most decisions independently of the district | 22% | 0% |
| Some autonomy: I can make some decisions without them, but not others | 67% | 63% |
| Little autonomy: I make very few decisions without the district | 11% | 38% |

It would be premature to draw a definitive conclusion regarding the reason schools perceive different levels of autonomy, and it is not the intent of the authors to imply cause and effect; however, it is notable that during interviews and through surveys, some Exited principals from districts with multiple SRG schools described the value of autonomy in the areas of budgeting, hiring, curriculum, professional development, and a general freedom to innovate. Illustrative open-ended survey comments include:

* “It helps to have autonomy because we are able to make strategic changes after reviewing data.”
* It allows me to make instructional decisions [based] on data.”
* “[Autonomy gives me] control over staffing and professional development.”
* “If a district encourages autonomy, it helps motivate the leadership to take greater risks and be more innovative.”

***A Closer Look at District Capacity-building under SRG***

This study’s early inquiry found that under SRG, *schools* had to undergo a process of comprehensive self-analysis and reflection from the start, but parallel processes were not immediately introduced at the *district* level. Schools were moved through various stages of a change process—including, for many, stages such as these: state designation as a high-needs school; comprehensive needs assessment; stakeholder buy-in and shaping of a common vision; infrastructure-building, including significant personnel turnover in many cases, as well as hiring of additional support staff (typically coaches and specialists); and innovation in and reflection on teaching, learning, leading, and sustaining improvement. Through these structured processes, schools took stock of their strengths and weaknesses, developing responses to their highest priority needs. Structured processes at the school level included Monitoring Site Visits, SRG application and renewal procedures that demanded self-reflective analyses, and ongoing review of MAGs and consultations with the ESE program officer.

Districts, by comparison, were called to support their SRG-funded schools, but many began without clear mandates and focused capacity with respect to school redesign. While some districts did allocate funds to enhance district-level support for their SRG schools, the ESE mandated district accountability standards were lenient compared to those for schools. Additionally, the processes through which districts began to engage in the redesign experience were comparatively less structured and much less focused on an analysis of internal capacity than the processes taking place in schools. For example, districts were not required to comply with explicit turnaround models and so did not have to examine their staffing, operations, and overall performance in the same way that schools did. In other words, they were called to embark on a new reform endeavor, but, unlike schools, were not presented with an explicit mandate to depart from a “business as usual” model.

Through participation in redesign work *over time*, districts were exposed to feedback, ongoing needs assessment, and more extensive planning processes. Districts began to reconceptualize their role and the supports they could provide. It is important to note that the extent to which and the ways in which districts grew and developed through SRG varied greatly from situation to situation, and that no single district has demonstrated evidence of having achieved complete transformation. There are elements of reported positive change in *all* districts, albeit to varying degrees and for varying reasons, but *no single district* can be said to have finished its work and no schools or group of schools appeared to credit their improvement to district supports *substantially more* than other elements of their redesign work. With these caveats in mind, one broad finding to emerge is that, over time, districts’ participation in SRG at least somewhat enhanced their focus on and capacity to support school redesign.

Reflecting on SRG’s contribution to district-level capacity building, some district leaders have, for example, described SRG as a fruitful “training ground.” One leader commented that “Capacity-building was a big outcome of the grant” and also remarked that through SRG, the approach to improvement was fairly organic and characterized by mutual learning between schools and the district. The leader noted, “We’re trying to improve a school *and* a district. It’s not like we [at the district level] were a well-oiled machine.” The process of having to “define” support based on feedback from an SRG principal reportedly aided this district in modifying its support system over time. In this regard, the results suggesting that schools do not, to date, credit their improvement to district supports *substantially more* than to other elements of their redesign work makes sense.

The following discussion, informed through analysis of district and school leader interviews, summarizes the types of change reported to have occurred or be emerging in multiple districts.

* **A more strategic approach to reform**

School redesign calls for a systematic approach to school change: evidence from Exited schools suggests that coordination, integration, and alignment are the cornerstones of improvement. In contrast to prior experiences attempting to improve underperforming schools—sometimes characterized by short-term planning and an abundance of initiatives—some districts now demonstrate more reflective, purposeful, and integrated approaches to improvement. Some districts have re-conceptualized their roles and restructured aspects of their operation to be more strategic in their support for schools.

In 2014, severaldistrict leaders described ongoing efforts to strengthen their systems—to “make connections” as one leader described it—so that educators and administrators can develop a common language and knowledge base and better align their work in support of student achievement. One superintendent reported, for example, having created internal systems related to grant management, facilities and operations, instructional materials, curriculum, and professional development with the intent of “help[ing] everyone at the district understand that they contribute to student achievement.”

* **Better understanding of schools’ strengths and needs, and application of learnings from schools to district level work processes**

Through increased contact with schools (e.g., district representation in school leadership structures, district participation in MSV report-outs, and district coaching and other district staff presence in schools), districts received more specific and more frequent feedback than they did prior to SRG, and understanding of schools’ strengths and needs was enhanced. A few leaders noted, for example, that some district staff now have a greater presence in the schools, are known by staff and students, and that relationships have become less formal and more familiar. One district leader partially attributed the success of a particular school to the fact that a district leaders’ office was located in the school, rather than at the central office, and identified this as one of the most significant investments her district made. She believed that this leader’s placement at the school allowed for a more hands-on, active role, better relationships, and the ability to provide a more accurate view of the school to the district.

Some districts applied school-level learnings gleaned through SRG to their own work at the district level. In one district, leaders felt that the MSV protocol and process were so useful that they adapted the tool and used it to conduct their instructional walkthroughs. In some instances, SRG is credited with nurturing interdepartmental work at the district level, which some leaders suggest contributes to enhanced district-level capacity, fostering a shared sense of “ownership of the work” and also reinforcing building common knowledge and consistency of practices across the system.

* **More focused efforts and priorities, leading to improved alignment of resources and goal attainment.**

Through SRG, schools were encouraged to carefully manage the scope of their efforts and to focus on a specific set of efforts. Following suit, some *districts* developed district-wide, focused objectives and priorities. They, too, recognized the limits of a school’s capacity to effect change in multiple areas and employed a strategic approach to resource allocation. One district leader acknowledged the complexities involved in managing and implementing multiple initiatives by emphasizing the continual need to practice and learn: “You can’t just create alignment in Word.”

* **Shift toward strategic and data-driven processes: Some districts have modified their approaches to data management and use in order to support schools more effectively.**

Districts’ modified approaches to managing and using data include using data to assess schools’ needs, to facilitate conversations, and to challenge assumptions that were not evidence-based. A number of districts also focused on building school-level capacity around data use by offering job-embedded professional development opportunities designed to strengthen principals’ and educators’ skills in this area. Some district leaders also described a shift toward strategic, data-driven budgeting that focuses on student needs. In this process, district leaders use student data to assess the return on their investments, to evaluate various funding options, and to inform budgeting and contracting of partner services. Student data was also considered in the development of sustainability plans, including budgets for schools exiting Level 4 status that would no longer be receiving SRG funds. Those districts that have taken an aggressive approach toward identifying high-need schools also report taking student data into account as part of their funding and sustainability plans.

* **Targeted organizational change in response to continuing assessment of district ability to support turnaround schools; including creation of new positions, and in some districts, a focus on human resources with an eye toward getting the right people into roles in turnaround schools.**

Some districts reorganized in order to align resources with school needs and best utilize the expertise of district leaders. Others restructured their support to schools so that specific district staff (within various departments) were tasked with providing direct support to a small number of SRG and other Level 4 schools assigned to them. In this vein, a few districts created new departments such as a Data Management Office or a Partnerships Office. A renewed focus on human resources, with an eye toward recruiting and hiring for turnaround schools, was also described by some district leaders as a shift in approach.

In some districts, strategic hiring efforts necessitated more intensive recruitment practices in order to attract robust leadership. In others, leadership capacity was developed internally, and those newly trained individuals were then moved into different, sometimes newly created, senior leadership positions. In some cases, the individuals had served in key roles in redesign efforts and that experience was thought to have equipped them well for an expanded role. These newly transitioned senior district leaders now bring their expertise to positions where they can influence the district as a whole.

Some districts also described “pipeline” approaches to leadership development that extend beyond filling principals’ positions (e.g., investment in middle managers such as vice principals and department heads, with an eye toward shifting those managers to district offices). In one district, a principal of an Exited school implemented a process with teachers to identify the characteristics of **“**turnaround educators**”** and shared those characteristics with the district leader, who will disseminate the information to other schools.

* **Going beyond the Commonwealth’s Framework for District Accountability and Assistance, some districts have taken a proactive approach to identifying and supporting “at risk” schools.**

Some districts have developed their own coding or prioritization systems for early diagnosis of and differentiated support to schools at risk or showing signs of decline, including Level 3 schools. Some districts have identified whole sub–sets of “high–needs” or “high–support” schools and others have identified individual schools that merit close monitoring and support.

After initial categorization of schools, a few leaders noted that they use this information to: prioritize needs, align resources to meet school needs, and support school-level goal setting. Approaches used to support and monitor schools varied among these districts. For instance, one district reorganized some of its offices to ensure that designated staff within specific offices would have responsibility for certain school subgroups. The intent was to lessen the need for schools to navigate Central Office bureaucracy. In another district, a team-based approach was used to monitor progress and provide support. In both cases, these experiences contrast with accounts that some leaders and educators offered in the evaluation’s first year: while Level 4 designation was initially viewed by some as a shaming experience, more recently school and district leaders have framed the experience as a catalyst for district change.

### Data Use and Management, and the Role of Data in Tiered Instruction

**Overview of the section**: This section explores principals’ and educators’ views on data use and management strategies in their schools, including the role of data in educators’ instructional practice and the delivery of tiered instruction, specifically.

**Summary of findings**: There is consensus among Exited and Not Exited schools that data use and management strategies and practices are effective in leveraging academic returns. Reflecting on the experience of all SRG schools, principals’ perceptions of the role of data use and management in their schools were largely positive and improved over time, and in 2014 a majority of principals viewed data-informed instruction as an effective way to promote change in their schools (p. 20). A wide majority of educators described data as accessible and central to informing instructional practice, with the strongest indication of agreement coming from Exited schools. While several challenges to effective tiered instruction may be cited, concerns regarding the adequacy of data systems have decreased over time and there seems to be a strong consensus that data-informed tiered instruction shows real promise for promoting change in turnaround schools. Not Exited schools may benefit from additional PD relative to help staff understand tiered instruction and how to use of data to support to support this practice.

***SRG as a Catalyst for Increased Use of Data***

At first glance, there is little distinction between the Exited and Not Exited schools’ approaches to data use and management and its perceived association with improvement. Leaders and educators have consistently reported in interviews that SRG led them to develop school-level practices to collect, analyze, and use student data more effectively. Teacher collaborative structures such as grade-level meetings and professional learning communities have been created, with time allocated to review of student data; specialist, coach and teacher leader positions have been created or re-cast to ensure that instructional planning is informed by the results of ongoing assessment; and external partners with specific expertise in helping educators and principals develop skills and knowledge to analyze and utilize data have been engaged with a range of schools and districts. (See External Partnerships, later in this section.)

Principal survey data bear out the importance of data use and management as a key strategy that is effective in creating academic returns for schools pursuing redesign. Three-fourths of both Exited and Not Exited schools’ principals indicated that this is an effective practice and worth the investment (Table 7). Beyond principals, educators from both the Exited and Not Exited groups tend to report that they have access to the data they need and that their teaching practice is informed by student performance data.

Looking more closely, however, important distinctions arise: Exited schools differ from Not Exited schools in the extent to which their data practices have been perceived to have contributed to school improvement in terms of promoting school-wide change and contributing to educator growth and student learning. This suggests that the impact of their use of data may be greater within the Exited schools group. The following observations of data suggest that tiered instruction may have advanced more quickly as a support to both educator and student advancement within the Exited schools, though the precise reason why is not fully understood.

* All Exited principals reported that “tiered instruction: the use of benchmark, formative, and summative assessments to place students and continually inform instruction” has been effective in promoting change at their schools, compared to about half of those from Not Exited schools.
* More Exited principals perceived data use and management to have had an impact on educator growth, including over 75% of the Exited group compared with 38% of the Not Exited group.
* While Exited and Not Exited principals tended to view the association between data use/management and student learning similarly (about half of each group), educators saw much stronger relationships between data use and student learning, and the Exited group was more likely to perceive student-level impacts.[[10]](#footnote-10)

As reported through the Educator survey, overall levels of agreement with a series of statements relative to the accessibility of student data and the centrality of those data to their teaching practice was very high, with over 80% of respondents from both groups agreeing or strongly agreeing with each of the statements presented in Table 19. This is an encouraging development, even if these data stop short of measuring the effectiveness of these teachers’ use of those data. While overall levels of agreement were very similar, the overall distribution of responses to items in this table was significantly different. In fact, the *intensity* of agreement—those who chose “strongly agree”—was much greater among educators from Exited schools, as this table illustrates. These differences are consistent across items, though differences are larger in relation to educators’ opportunities to review student data with their colleagues.

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| Table 19. Educators’ Data Management and Use Practices | | |
|  | **Strongly Agree** | |
| **Exited** | **Not Exited** |
| I have ongoing access to student performance data from **formative** assessments\*\* | 43% | 30% |
| I have ongoing access to student performance data from **summative** assessments\*\* | 42% | 31% |
| Formative assessment is an integral component of my teaching practice\* | 40% | 31% |
| I use student data on an ongoing basis to identify students' needs for support or enrichment\* | 43% | 32% |
| I have opportunities to review student data in collaboration with other teachers in my school\*\* | 37% | 26% |
| \*\*statistically significant difference (p < .01); \*statistically significant difference (p < .05) | | |

It is notable that despite these overall positive findings, principals and educators have identified barriers to the use of data to inform instruction. Principals have tended to highlight a need for professional development. More of the responding principals from Not Exited schools identified insufficient PD as a barrier to tiered instruction and to the use of data to inform instruction (Table 20). Staying with the subject of tiered instruction, it is also notable that educators from Exited schools were more likely than their counterparts from Not Exited schools to cite another issue: scheduling is a barrier to the consistent implementation of tiered instruction (44% vs 31%, p < .05).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Table 20. Principals’ Perceptions of Barriers to Tiered Instruction | | |
|  | **Exited** | **Not Exited** |
| Insufficient PD to understand tiered instruction | 0% | 75% |
| Insufficient PD to use data to inform instruction | 22% | 63% |

Overall, principals and educators report that data use and management strategies are an integral component of their redesign efforts, associated with improvements in teaching and learning. It appears that Exited schools may be deriving somewhat more benefit from data-related practices as a result of the stronger alignment of overall redesign strategies in their schools, such as PD and scheduling, although scheduling appears still to constitute an important barrier for a number of schools statewide, particularly in relation to tiered instruction.

### External Partnerships

**Overview of the section**: Educators’ and leaders’ reflections on working with external partners in the redesign experience are examined in this section. Note that use of the term “external partners” in the SRG survey was not a reference to designated ESE priority partners or ESE’s Priority Partners for Turnaround initiative. Rather, it alludes to the wide and varying range of external resources that played a role in supporting improvement at each individual school.

**Summary of findings:** A wide majority of Exited principals and educators find that partners were effective in providing targeted supports in relation to data use, curriculum and instruction, and social-emotional support. This positive perspective was evident in only half of the Not Exited schools. Managing the potential for competing or misaligned agenda with and among cooperating external partners appears to be a key factor differentiating the success of partnerships. Clarity of vision and embedded structures that promote effective communication may support schools’ ability to work effectively with partners. ESE established a rigorous process for vetting certain key partners, but schools should also carefully consider other prospective partners’ credibility and suitability.

***Effectiveness of Partner Organizations***

This evaluation included a limited examination of the role of external partners in school turnaround. Most useful in consideration of partners’ effectiveness in rendering specific services is a set of survey questions posed to principals and educators regarding the effectiveness of partnerships to support curriculum and instruction, the use of data to inform instruction, and provision of social services and supports to students. As presented in Table 21, in 2014, principals and educators from Exited schools were substantially more likely than their counterparts from Not Exited schools to view these partnerships as effective or very effective. The differences observed by educators are statistically significant.

Overall, 80-90% of principals and over two-thirds of educators from Exited schools described partners’ support as effective in promoting change in these three vital areas. Only about half of surveyed principals and educators from Not Exited schools considered partnerships in these areas to be effective. Additional principal survey data offer insight into this finding. Half of principals from Not Exited schools reported that competing agendas were a barrier to effective use of partnerships, compared to 11% of those from Exited schools. Other survey data show that about one-third of principals from both groups experienced challenges associated with coordinating partners’ efforts and with partners’ lack of understanding of school redesign goals. These concerns were also evident during interviews conducted with district leaders, who cited the need for clear expectation-setting with respect to partners’ work and the need for that work to align with the needs, goals, and philosophies of each school.

The presence of school partners with competing agendas is undoubtedly a concern and a potential inhibitor of effective partnerships. However, a broad view of evidence suggests that the characteristics of the schools in the Exited and Not Exited groups may also play a role. In particular, the shared vision—and embedded practices and structures to support that vision—more common in Exited schools may help those schools to manage potentially competing agendas more effectively and thereby increase the likelihood of a positive and productive experience with external partners.

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| Table 21. Principal and Educator Perceptions of Partnerships’ Effectiveness Promoting Change  (Very Effective or Effective) | | | | |
| **Forming partnerships with providers that…** | **Principals** | | **Educators** | |
| **Exited** | **Not Exited** | **Exited** | **Not Exited** |
| Support curriculum and instruction\*\* | 80% | 50% | 66% | 45% |
| Support the use of data to inform instruction\*\* | 90% | 55% | 66% | 45% |
| Offer social services and supports to students\*\* | 80% | 50% | 71% | 47% |
| \*\*Statistically significant differences (p < .01) between **educators** of Exited schools and educators of Not Exited schools. | | | | |

The findings outlined in Table 21 suggest that partnerships that focused on these three very important areas of operation were effective in those schools that used them and were particularly effective among Exited schools. Another 2014 survey question asked principals to identify which of 13 strategies were “highly effective in achieving your redesign goals and/or gave you the best academic return on investment.” As previously detailed in Table 7, among that list of strategies, the use of external partnerships was least commonly identified as effective. The findings of Table 21, however, address how effective school leaders and educators found the work of partners with which they worked to be, with a focus on specific areas in which those partners provided support.

In fact, ESE received national recognition for its work in relation to the prequalification of approved partners to support district and school improvement. This included partners focused on social and emotional health, maximizing learning time, and effective use of data, as well as district systems of support.[[11]](#footnote-11) This would suggest that ESE established an effective process to help districts and schools identify appropriate and credible partners in areas that align with the questions in Table 21, which Exited schools *may* have leveraged to greater effect than Not Exited schools. In effect, even the best partners need to be managed effectively if they are to contribute to school success.

Two principals engaged through the Focal Inquiry conducted in 2014[[12]](#footnote-12) reinforced these findings and offered strategies from their own experience to minimize barriers to effective use of partnerships to support school improvement.[[13]](#footnote-13) Their strategies include explicit and increasingly formalized communication about goals and expectations, and the assignment of individuals to serve in a liaison role between the school and the partners. Additionally, one of the principals described a process of vetting through initial meetings and background research “with regard to the organization’s credibility and reliability.” They wrote, for example:

* “[It was important to be] transparent from the beginning as to what our goals and what the community partner’s goals were in working together. Setting clear expectations and having frequent communication is also key.”
* “The partner needs to come in realizing the top priority is the school’s goals, not the partner’s goals. They need to establish clear expectations of what they are willing to do and how they will do it with the school. The partner also needs to be willing to adapt their programing to fit the needs of the school.”
* “Going forward, more formal memorandums of understanding may be beneficial with select community partners.”

Each principal indicated that, over time, the relationship evolved such that the partners’ work was better adapted to the needs and conditions of the school (e.g., “[The organization] has evolved with us to provide services that would more fit our needs”).

In interviews and through open-ended survey responses, principals and district leaders have elaborated on these themes. One district leader recounted, for example, an experience of “revising and revisiting” multiple times the agenda for a proposed summer retreat, to ensure that it would meet the objectives that the district had identified. The leader gave the following advice regarding working with partners: “Be strong. Sit with them. They have multiple agendas.” Another district leader emphasized the importance of clarity, noting the role of the organization’s prior experience working in charter schools”:

* It’s complicated. Figure out what’s best for the kids. … [The organization] comes from the charter world, so they’re used to doing soup to nuts. We have learned what flexibilities they need … and we outline expectations for the school. … The clearer you can be, the better.

### School Culture and Climate

**Overview of the section:** Principals’ and other educators’ views on school culture and climate are explored in this section, considering both professional culture and beliefs about students’ experiences in school. The section concludes with consideration of the role of social-emotional strategies in creating a positive school climate.

**Summary of Findings:** While there reportedly are a number of positive changes in the culture and climate of SRG schools across the state, the Exited schools exhibit, overall, elements of a stronger professional climate than the Not Exited schools. Similarly, educators in the Exited schools perceive that their students feel safe and experience positive relationships with their peers more commonly than educators from the Not Exited schools. Specific efforts that appear to influence change in all schools include internal processes such as the establishment of safety and behavior expectations, and school-wide systems of support for students. Exited schools also differ from the Not Exited schools in the extent to which their staff perceive the effectiveness of external processes such as engaging with families, external partners, and service providers.

***Elements of Professional Culture***

Statewide, educators and principals alike reported a number of positive changes in the culture and climate of their schools, which they attributed to SRG redesign (pp. 21-22). In terms of professional culture, strong working relationships have reportedly been developed and trust levels among colleagues appear to be high. Educators also report that students’ experience in their school culture is generally more positive as a result of redesign, especially with respect to safety and staff’s efforts to build relationships with students and their family members. Examining differences among the Exited and Not Exited schools, principals, educators, and (through interviews) district leaders tended to describe the culture in the Exited and Not Exited groups of schools in very different terms. Overall, the prevailing theme is that the Exited schools were more commonly characterized by safety, collegiality and a sense of positive morale than Not Exited schools.

First, the two groups of educators demonstrate sharply different perspectives on the relative importance accorded to positive school culture: Educators from Exited schools were more likely to report that their school“prioritizes the development of a positive school culture” (71% versus 44%, p < .01) to a great extent. They also differed in more specific perceptions of school climate for students, in that Exited educators were more likely to agree that:

* “Students feel safe in our school” (95% versus 73%, p < .01), and
* “Students show greater concern for their classmates” (71% versus 42%, p < .01).

Regarding professional culture, educators from Exited schools were much more likely to express greater professional satisfaction[[14]](#footnote-14) and somewhat more comfortable discussing teaching and learning with their colleagues (93% versus 83%, p < .01). Educators from Exited schools were also more likely to be aware of the “big picture,” being more likely to be familiar with: the goals and strategies of their school’s redesign efforts (92% versus 80%, p < .01); and the goals that their schools must achieve to exit their current status (91% versus 79%, p < .01).

In broader terms, accounts from the Not Exited schools convey a certain sense of stress and being overwhelmed, while those from the Exited schools suggest comparatively greater calm and coherence. For example, Not Exited educators were twice as likely as Exited educators to report that they are “frequently aware that the ‘clock is running out for redesign efforts’” (34% versus 17%, p < .01). Proportional rates of feeling overwhelmed are conveyed in Table 22.

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| Table 22. Educators’ Sense of Being Overwhelmed | | |
|  | **Exited** | **Not Exited** |
| I sometimes feel overwhelmed because we are asked to effect change in students despite factors that are beyond our control\*\* | 32% | 52% |
| I feel overwhelmed by the adoption of too many different programs and practices in this school\* | 23% | 36% |
| \*\*statistically significant difference (p < .01)  \*statistically significant difference (p < .05) | | |

Like educators, principals and district leaders held perceptions of a positive climate and culture in the Exited schools, often drawing stark contrasts between the schools’ “look and feel” prior to SRG and after. Their reflections spanned a range of examples, including an improved physical environment (for example, a principal dedicated hours of summer vacation to clearing the school of years of clutter and having fresh paint applied, so as to establish an “order and cleanliness of learning environment”); a more focused learning environment, marked by fewer student disruptions; and increased professional collaboration and improved staff morale.

In interviews, the emergence of a culture of collaboration was identified as a significant change in some schools and districts. Interviewees described, for example, collaborative teacher structures such as productive common planning time, shared responsibility within and across teams, and a sense of collective efforts to build sustainable, successful schools. Some district leaders, for example, described the change in terms of school leaders’ (e.g., principals and assistant principals’) willingness to make themselves vulnerable professionally, through modeling lessons in class and otherwise “mak[ing] the school a safe place for risk-taking.” One principal, similarly, described efforts to encourage teacher leadership by telling the staff, “I need you” and “I don’t know all the answers.” The principal routinely recorded staff members’ thoughts on flip chart paper and posted those notes, in an effort to “let people experience the leadership.”

***Social-Emotional Support and Services***

A cross-section of educators and leaders suggested that social-emotional supports and strategies have contributed to positive change in their schools. Typically, district leaders (in interviews) and principals (through surveys) cast the importance of social and emotional supports in terms of common language and clear expectations with respect to safety and behavior, strengthened relationships with families, and the importance of meeting students’ needs so that they are ready to learn.[[15]](#footnote-15)

As previously presented in Table 7, approximately two-thirds of principals from each group believed social-emotional support and services were highly effective in creating academic returns. More specifically, as illustrated in Table 23, there is fairly broad consensus among principals from all schools that strategies addressing conditions and practices *within the school* have been effective in promoting change. These include the development of safety and behavioral expectations, and the implementation of school-wide systems of support. However, principals from Exited schools more frequently reported that strategies to engage external constituencies from *outside of school* were effective. These include systems and processes to allow the school to work with families, as well as forming partnerships with community partners and human service providers.

|  |  |  |
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| Table 23. Principals’ Perceived Effectiveness of Strategies in Promoting Change  (Very Effective or Effective) | | |
| Internal Processes | **Exited** | **Not Exited** |
| Develop explicit safety expectations for students | 100% | 88% |
| Develop explicit behavior expectations for students | 100% | 88% |
| Develop explicit safety expectations for staff | 100% | 88% |
| Develop explicit behavior expectations for staff | 89% | 88% |
| Implement a school-wide system of support for students (such as social services, student support teams, counseling, nutrition, dental services, etc.) | 100% | 85% |
| Table 23 (Continued). Principals’ Perceived Effectiveness of Strategies in Promoting Change  (Very Effective or Effective) | | |
| External Processes | **Exited** | **Not Exited** |
| Implement systems/processes that allow the school to work with families to address students’ social, emotional, and health needs | 77% | 63% |
| Forming relationships between community partners and the school | 89% | 51% |
| Forming partnerships with providers that offer social services and supports to students | 80% | 50% |

Mirroring principals’ perceptions, educators from Exited schools were more likely than those from Not Exited schools to believe that forming partnerships with providers that offer social services and supports to students is either effective or very effective (71% versus 47%, p < .01).

### Summary of the Differences between Exited and Not Exited Schools

While the longitudinal analysis of all SRG schools showed encouraging results and few changes over time, the study revealed substantial differences between the Exited and Not Exited groups. Leaders and educators from Exited schools expressed markedly different perspectives on their redesign experiences than their counterparts from Not Exited schools. The Exited group of schools saw the work of turnaround differently and utilized the tools they had at their disposal differently than Not Exited schools.

The overarching difference, discussed in the preceding pages, is that school leaders in the Exited schools—more typically than the Not Exited schools—articulated a clear vision and plan for redesign and ensured that structures and other conditions were put in place to allow aligned and integrated efforts to realize that vision and implement that plan. They maintained focus on their redesign goals and aligned resources (e.g., supports, staff, initiatives, use of time) with those goals.

This critical difference was evident across multiple dimensions, most notably, perhaps, in the areas of curriculum and instruction, and leadership. There was a stronger sense, in the Exited schools, that resources were aligned with a shared vision and that educator growth was supported through an ongoing, embedded system of supports. School leaders were recognized for their deep understanding of educators’ work and their efforts to minimize distractions so that educators could focus on instruction. Overall, processes for decision-making and shared responsibility were reportedly more effective in Exited schools, ensuring that expertise was shared across the building and the overall quality of instruction continued to improve.

Turning now to broader considerations, the next two sections explore reflections on the sustainability of improvements achieved under the grant and ESE support for school redesign. The relative perspectives of Exited and Not Exited schools will still be examined, but will be set in the context of a broader discussion.

# Sustainability of Redesign Progress

This section presents an analysis of the perspectives of leaders and educators with regard to the sustainability of improvements achieved through SRG-supported turnaround strategies. It offers their reflections on the role of capacity building in sustainability and the perceived threats to sustainability.

Overall,principals and educators offer cautiously optimistic views of the sustainability of improvements achieved under redesign, although educators from Exited schools were more likely than their counterparts from Not Exited schools to report that their school has a plan to sustain the practices initiated under the grant. More broadly, leaders and educators suggested that the school- and district-level capacity building achieved under SRG may be the factor that is most likely to support the sustainability of improvement. Identified threats to sustainability include the perceived tenuousness of autonomies and union-negotiated agreements as well as limited capacity in the districts and at ESE.

**Reflections on Turnaround Strategies**

As discussed below, principals’ views of the sustainability of turnaround strategies differ somewhat from those of educators, as measured by a question appearing only on the 2014 survey. Turning first to principal data, Table 24 (which is continued on the next page) displays principals’ perceptions of the sustainability of each of the strategies that have been discussed throughout this report and which were previously listed in tables 6 and 7. The strategies are listed in the same sequence as they appeared in Table 7 (by strong, moderate, or mixed return). However, in this particular question, sustainability of each practice was assessed only by respondents who had indicated they considered the selected strategy to be highly effective.

Across the board, only a select few strategies are not expected to be sustainable “at all,” and none of those by more than 25% of respondents (all of whom were from Exited schools). These responses suggest that while principals acknowledge constraints on their schools’ abilities to sustain the strategies initiated under SRG, they also have some optimism that their efforts will continue beyond the grant funding period. Strategies in the strong return category were generally perceived as the most sustainable strategies, although principals from Exited schools were notably less optimistic (see PD, coaches, social emotional support) than those from Not Exited schools, perhaps due to then-current concerns among Exited schools regarding the end of SRG grant support.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Table 24. Principals’ Perceptions of Sustainability of Redesign Strategies by AROI Level | | | | | | |
|  | **Sustainable**  **To a great extent** | | **Sustainable**  **To some extent** | | **Not at all**  **Sustainable** | | |
| **Exited** | **Not Exited** | **Exited** | **Not Exited** | **Exited** | **Not Exited** | |
| **Strong Return** |  | |  | |  | | |
| Professional development | 44% | 100% | 44% | 0% | 11% | 0% | |
| Coaches | 56% | 75% | 33% | 25% | 11% | 0% | |
| Data use and management | 86% | 100% | 14% | 0% | 0% | 0% | |
| Common planning time | 83% | 71% | 17% | 29% | 0% | 0% | |
| Social emotional support | 67% | 80% | 17% | 20% | 17% | 0% | |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Table 24 (Continued). Principals’ Perceptions of Sustainability of Redesign Strategies by AROI Level | | | | | | |
| **Moderate Return** |  | |  | |  | | |
| District support and resources | 60% | 50% | 40% | 50% | 0% | 0% | |
| Distributed leadership | 75% | 75% | 25% | 25% | 0% | 0% | |
| Professional learning communities | 75% | 25% | 25% | 75% | 0% | 0% | |
| Extended school day | 25% | 68% | 50% | 33% | 25% | 0% | |
| Family and community outreach | 75% | 0% | 0% | 100% | 25% | 0% | |
| Union support of turnaround strategies | 50% | 0% | 50% | 0% | 0% | 0% | |
| **Mixed Return** |  | |  | |  | | |
| Specialists | 50% | 75% | 50% | 25% | 0% | 0% | |
| External partnerships | 0% | 0% | 0% | 100% | 0% | 0% | |

Generally speaking, strategies appearing in the moderate return range were regarded as at least somewhat sustainable, with principals from Exited most likely to indicate “to a great extent.” The caveat to this is in relation to extended school day programming, perhaps prompted by fear among principals from exited schools that grant resources would imminently be lost for what is described as a resource intensive strategy. It is notable that N sizes decrease as the table continues from top to bottom, owing the fact that only those who identified the strategy as highly effective in generating AROI were asked to rate the sustainability of each strategy.

Educators were also asked to provide their perspectives on sustainability and the planning process that accompanied it, through a group of questions described in Table 25. Acknowledging that educators may view sustainability through a different lens than principals (e.g., they may not be as versed in fiscal realities), it is nonetheless notable thateducators from Exited schools were more likely than their counterparts from Not Exited schools to believe that the gains achieved under redesign are sustainable. Overall, data suggest that most schools’ (and nearly all Exited schools’) leaders were focused on capacity building and sustainability. Optimism regarding sustainability was higher among principals of Exited schools, perhaps attributable to much higher rates of planning for sustainability. From educators’ vantage point, it appears that sustainability was on the minds of the Exited school leaders even as they managed the considerable day-to-day demands of redesign.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Table 25. Educators’ View of Sustainability | | |
|  | **Strongly Agree or Agree** | |
| **Exited** | **Not Exited** |
| My school has a plan for sustaining our new practices after the end of the SRG funding\*\* | 63% | 32% |
| I feel the initiatives we are implementing as part of our redesign efforts will be sustainable\*\* | 72% | 50% |
| School leadership is focused on building the capacity of the school to sustain redesign efforts beyond funding or Level 4 status\*\* | 95% | 67% |
| \*\*statistically significant difference (p < .01) | | |

**Capacity Building**

As previously described, district leaders and principals have tended, in interviews, to contrast SRG with previous reform initiatives. They noted that, in contrast to those prior efforts, SRG emphasized investments in people and processes rather than programs, technology and other consumables that are more vulnerable to funding shortages. Educators were exposed to substantial professional development, collaborative structures were encouraged and created to ensure development of a common language and consistency of approaches, and deep-seated cultural shifts reportedly were realized in many of the schools that demonstrated improvement.

Districts, in turn, were exposed to valuable learning opportunities simply because redesign brought them into closer contact with their schools, as reported earlier (p. 44). They began to reconceptualize their role and restructure their supports to schools in response to feedback from principals. Additionally, some school and district leaders expressed the view that they were encouraged to consider sustainability earlier in the grant cycle than in prior initiatives, although others commented that sustainability planning was not resourced accordingly. Overall, the study suggests that the capacity-building enacted under SRG—most specifically but not exclusively at the school level—may be among the greatest keys to the sustainability of improvements in teaching and learning.

As noted in the Curriculum and Instruction section, educators from Exited schools were more likely than their counterparts from Not Exited schools to report that that they have experienced important professional growth (Table 10). They “feel stronger” as professionals, are more likely to report having acquired increased knowledge of teaching strategies, and believe they are holding their students to higher expectations than their counterparts from Not Exited schools. It was suggested that this growth is arguably a result of the integrated professional development and coaching prevalent in Exited schools, in particular, and this would appear to bode well for these schools’ ability to sustain improvements for so long as the teaching corps that experienced SRG remains in place. Accordingly, staff turnover—the loss of that new capacity—is of concern moving forward.

**Threats to Sustainability**

A number of perceived threats to sustainability were surfaced through survey and interview data analysis. The most prevalent themes include staff and leadership turnover, the tenuous nature of autonomies, and overextended capacity within districts and ESE, as discussed below.

***Loss of Staff, Impermanence of Negotiated Agreements***

The study suggests that Exited schools tend to reflect a shared vision, have aligned curriculum and instruction, and encourage effective teacher collaboration. In this light**,** loss of staff and/or recurrent turnover—representing loss of investment and momentum—have consistently been named by leaders and educators as threats to the sustainability of improvement.For example, teachers who participated in professional development take with them the skills and knowledge they gained, and their departure also diminishes the corps of educators who are committed to the new vision.[[16]](#footnote-16) Additionally, in some schools, the original redesign vision may not survive the **transition from one leader** to another, as a new leader may bring a particular orientation to the work that does not fully support or include past reform efforts or participants. This may, in turn, result in lost time and/or a return to a pattern of repeated—but ineffectual—reform initiatives.

Beyond individual personnel turnover, union contracts that were negotiated to support structures such as extended day, and flexible hiring and placement decisions, were reportedly essential to some schools’ redesign work. The fear is that the expiration of these agreements will result in the loss of educators and support staff in whom these schools have made a significant investment or the flexible working conditions that facilitate extended day programming. By contrast, some district leaders have found that union negotiation processes have improved as a result of schools’ demonstrated positive results. In some cases, recently negotiated agreements exemplify the kind of mechanisms that are possible and that bode well for the sustainability of school improvement.

***Tenuous Nature of School-level Autonomies***

Some school leaders cited an ongoing need for the autonomies and flexibilities accorded to districts and schools under the grant. They asserted, in particular, that decision-making power in the areas of hiring/staffing, budgeting, scheduling, curriculum, and PD have been key to their progress, and they fear that a return to the previous system will limit their continued success. Like the union-negotiated agreements mentioned just above, these cautions bring to light the need to maintain system-wide processes and procedures that have been associated with improvement.

***Overextended District and ESE Capacity***

The question of limited district capacity looms large in any consideration of turnaround. Through SRG, districts have adopted, to varying degrees, thoughtful planning and innovative approaches to address the multiple, complex demands inherent in short- and long-term change. When possible, the creation of program offices (such as a Data Office or a Partnerships Office) may prove to be an effective strategy toward institutionalizing support to schools in ways that enhance interdepartmental collaboration and otherwise distribute responsibility, but establishment of such offices may not be tenable in all districts, and it remains to be seen whether new departments or positions will be sufficient to provide the targeted and intense services that school improvement requires. Further, the continuing identification of additional high-support schools introduces new challenges to already overextended systems.

The question of ESE capacity is yet another element of the sustainability discussion. Some district leaders expressed concerns about ESE’s capacity constraints, citing an ever-increasing workload and finite staffing resources. Mirroring the concern about turnover cited above, they noted, too, that transitions at the state level could well affect progress achieved in the districts and schools. Some noted the effects of prior transitions at the superintendent level (including loss of a consistent vision for turnaround) and expressed a concern that transitions at ESE could invoke similar changes. One superintendent articulated the need for stability and capacity at the Department in terms of protecting the valuable gains achieved thus far. This superintendent raised questions as to whether ESE is “addressing the larger questions around statewide instructional improvement,” and whether the processes are in place at ESE that will likely be necessary to sustain efforts after people and money leave.” The superintendent underlined the necessity to preserve the gains achieved in dramatic terms: “Large groups of students are vulnerable and we cannot go back to the days of abandoning them.”

# ESE Support for School Redesign

This section explores leaders’ and educators’ perceptions of ESE’s original strategy for school redesign, followed by an analysis of perspectives on specific elements of ESE support, including support to implementation of the redesign plan, sustainability planning, and requests for further support.

Among participating schools, the SRG initiative is widely perceived to have been well designed and implemented,yielding patterns of improvement and evidence of capacity building that is likely to foster continued positive trends in school performance. Likewise, it has earned some national acknowledgement as a source of emerging best practices.[[17]](#footnote-17) Perhaps more importantly, there is evidence of growth and improvement in many of the Commonwealth’s historically underperforming SRG schools, and particularly strong growth is evident within a subset of 2010 Decision Group schools that appear to have implemented reforms particularly well. Overall, evidence suggests that ESE’s original design for the grant was effective.

In contrast to many prior reform initiatives, SRG gave educators the time and tools to reflect on their own practice. Statewide, district and school leaders generally valued the resources, tools and processes that ESE employed to support their redesign efforts, with principals from Exited schools more commonly finding those supports to be valuable than their counterparts from Not Exited schools. Additionally and of tremendous importance, district leaders identified a positive shift in their working relationship with ESE, from a compliance-oriented state approach to a more collaborative state-district partnership. District leaders cited the collaborative relationship with ESE as a key support in continued progress, but also—notably—called for relief from multiple, competing initiatives and for continued implementation support.

**Perceptions of ESE’s SRG Strategy: Time and Tools for Districts to Examine their own Practices**

The discussion thus far has suggested that ESE has effectively led the SRG initiative, as evidenced by statewide patterns of improvement across many of the Commonwealth’s historically underperforming schools and particularly notable improvements achieved by many schools in the 2010 Decision Group. While redesign is a complex endeavor and a number of schools are situated somewhere along a continuum of improvement, data suggest that the initiative was designed and managed to support capacity-building across multiple dimensions and was generally successful in this regard.

In terms of the original strategy, it appears that certain elements of the design and structure of the grant were beneficial. As previously discussed, capacity-building at the district level has taken hold to varying degrees; and district leaders attribute this growth both to SRG tools and processes (e.g., monitoring site visits) and to the intensified contact with schools that redesign required. In interviews, some principals and district leaders described SRG as a good teaching and learning experience, noting that it gave districts the chance to reflect on their work: first, at the school level, through stakeholder meetings and required start-up conversations, then through the lens of Monitoring Site Visits, and later through re-application materials and continued exchanges with ESE.

In interviews, some district leaders contrasted SRG with prior reforms that were more prescriptive and characterized by discrete interventions. In SRG, they found an initiative that gave educators the time and tools to examine and adjust their own philosophies and practices. For example, one district leader characterized the SRG experience as follows: “SRG allowed us to experiment.” The leader described a process wherein the district identified “what worked” at the school level, and then applied that learning to the district:

What SRG allowed was the opportunity to try things at the school level, and then we thought about what’s working at the school level and what would support from the district look like. …What worked was that we looked at [redesign] as a three-year process and so we asked what, foundationally, do we need in Year One?So in Year One we worked on cultural and structural levels. … In Year Two we worked on a coherent instructional theory of action.

Against this backdrop, that district’s leadership team—comprised of at least seven senior leaders—used their meeting time to learn to work together, rather than as isolated individuals. One leader commented, “We grow as a team and figure out how to support this work twice a month.” In a similar vein, some leaders reflected that, in contrast to the discrete interventions offered through previous reforms, ESE’s SRG strategy allowed for integrated efforts, which were not only more effective but also sent a signal that redesign efforts would be institutionalized. One district leader commented, for example, “It helped people not think of this as just another initiative that’s going to go away.”

Also, ESE’s SRG strategy helped schools and districts focus on the “conditions surrounding the school and the extent to which the school is able to implement the plan,” which appears to have been effective. To varying degrees, schools have demonstrated growth as evidenced by their development of new systems and processes to support teaching and learning. Overall, professional culture is perceived to be stronger in SRG schools across the state, and educators and administrators are continually learning and working together to support the continuation of trends toward improvement.

**Perspectives on ESE Support for Implementation of Redesign Plans**

Survey responses mirror the broad themes described above, although differences are apparent in the perspectives of principals from Exited and Not Exited schools. Principals in the 2010 Decision Group found a number of ESE’s resources, tools and processes to be helpful. Specifically, principals were advised in the survey that “ESE is interested in hearing from you regarding their management of the SRG program to date.” They were then asked the following question: “Thinking about their direct involvement in the implementation of your school’s redesign plan, how useful is ESE’s support in terms of your school’s progress toward change?”

Considering, first, *resources and tools*, a strong majority of principals of Exited schools found *all* of ESE’s efforts to be helpful, while a notably smaller percentage of their counterparts from Not Exited schools shared this view (Table 26). It is interesting that somewhat greater differences appear between the two groups of principals with respect to aspects of support that relate to monitoring progress and acquiring feedback on progress: Measurable Annual Goals (MAGs), Implementation Timelines and Benchmarks (ITBs) and Monitoring site visits (MSVs).

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| Table 26. Principals’ Perspectives of ESE Support: Resources and Tools  (Very Useful or Useful) | | |
|  | **Exited** | **Not Exited** | |
| Measurable annual goals (MAGs) | 89% | 38% | |
| Implementation Timelines and Benchmarks (ITBs) | 89% | 38% | |
| SchoolWorks monitoring site visits (MSVs) | 77% | 25% | |
| Redesign application | 67% | 26% | |
| Redesign renewal application | 67% | 26% | |

Analysis of the perceived usefulness of ESE *processes* reflects a similar pattern (Table 27), to the extent that principals of Exited schools saw the greatest utility in the district liaison’s participation in MSV “report outs” and feedback on progress in response to MSV. These are elements of ESE support that most directly offer feedback on school progress and offer assistance in terms of prioritizing next steps toward continued improvement. It is reasonable to suggest that ESE’s support with union negotiations also reflects a focus on mechanisms necessary for continued progress. Again, principals from Exited schools more frequently valued these aspects of ESE support. As discussed previously (p. 49), Exited schools, characterized broadly by more effective processes and structures, and greater alignment of resources in support of the redesign mission than their counterparts from Not Exited schools, appear to have been better positioned to engage productively with partners and ultimately use the resources they provided to make progress toward goals.

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| Table 27. Principals’ Perspectives of ESE Support: Processes  (Very Useful or Useful) | | |
|  | **Exited** | **Not Exited** |
| Support with union negotiations necessary for implementation of the redesign plan | 67% | 13% |
| District liaison’s participation in MSV “report outs” | 66% | 26% |
| Feedback on progress in response to MSVs | 66% | 25% |
| Technical assistance and PD | 44% | 26% |
| District liaison’s participation in walkthroughs or learning walks | 44% | 38% |
| Support regarding student performance data | 44% | 38% |
| Support for sustainability planning | 44% | 25% |
| Support in carrying out the educator evaluation system | 44% | 38% |
| Support with renewal applications | 33% | 26% |
| Facilitation of community partnerships | 33% | 25% |

In interviews**,** some district leaders called for even more ESE support in the area of implementation. They suggested that in the future ESE focus more on assisting districts to better implement available ESE resources, tools, and processes. Some leaders observed, for example, that while the MSV is helpful in terms of *identifying* issues and action steps, more assistance with the *actual implementation* of next steps is needed. They suggested that the District section of the MSV tool could again be expanded (as it was in Year 2 of the initiative) to address district-level capacity building and sustainability planning with respect to “next steps.” They would also welcome more discussion of current progress, needs, and plans for change. Additionally, some district leaders suggested district-level MAGs and reciprocal support processes from ESE. One leader said, for example, “We need a continuum of how we’re doing, something that takes time into account. What would that look like?”

**ESE Support for Sustainability Planning**

A detailed look at the Exited and Not Exited schools’ perspectives on sustainability is presented in the next section**.** It is noted here that**,** statewide, district and school leaders valued ESE’s support to sustainability planning, but concerns regarding the sustainability of improvements associated with SRG persist**.** In response to district and school leader concerns, ESE has developed processes and tools to support schools in their Level 4 exit process. For example, as the first decision group approached its final year of funding (fall 2013), ESE engaged a contractor (the District Management Council) to introduce a planning process and tools to school and district leaders. In interviews, district and school leaders offered overall positive feedback on this experience. While a few districts had already developed transition plans, they nonetheless spoke of the value of ESE’s meetings in terms of the tools provided as well as the opportunity to think and collaborate with peers regarding sustainability issues. Reinforcing a theme noted above, some leaders valued that sustainability support precisely because it focused on matters of implementation, including detailed examination of budgets and assessments of return on investments within the district.

Despite progress, district leaders have consistently expressed concerns about sustainability after grant funding ends**.** Most commonly, leaders recommended a gradual weaning off or phasing out of funds, the addition of a “trail-off grant” and/or additional time to incorporate a phasing-out process. It is notable that these recommendations were adopted to varying degrees: some schools/districts received sustainability grants from ESE to support continued redesign efforts after the funding cycle, and new federal guidelines will extend the anticipated timeline for school improvement from three to five years.

**Changing the Relationship between ESE and Districts**

Over the course of the study, district leaders observed a notable and very positive shift in their working relationship with ESE—from a more directive, detached, compliance-oriented state approach to a more supportive, collaborative state-district partnership. Specifically, they valued helpful and responsive communication, guidance, and support from ESE leaders and staff. It is reasonable to suggest that ESE’s original strategy, in designing the grant, to limit the number of schools to be awarded grants and to institute a principle of “reciprocal accountability” has been effective. Districts have had access to their ESE representatives, and reports of interactions with those staff have largely been positive. Additionally, leaders cited ESE’s willingness to simplify work processes as further evidence of a supportive rather than compliance-oriented partnership. Reflecting specifically on modifications to the grant over time, leaders consistently reported that their state turnaround plan and redesign plan applications were better aligned as a result of SRG. Redundancies were eliminated and greater coherence between the two sets of processes and tools was evident.

While district leaders expressed appreciation for the renewed relationship, they nonetheless cited “mandate fatigue” as a persistent obstacle to progress: multiple initiatives emanating from the state distract from districts’ focus on schools and stretch human resources beyond capacity. Leaders cited the Educator Evaluation system, Common Core and PARCC assessments, and RETELL in particular. Ultimately, they asserted, the effect of rolling out so many initiatives so quickly is to limit the district’s ability to learn from experience, make suggested changes, and enhance sustainability. One district leader observed, “Ideally, the district would take an initiative like this [SRG] and learn from it and use it to inform changes in our everyday work, but in reality, the district is too busy responding to the next mandate and learning to ‘buffer’ the urgent demand.” In several districts, interviewees expressed a continued desire for increased ESE sensitivity to timelines and the general need for sufficient time to plan and implement initiatives.

**Rethinking Equity and the Distribution of Resources**

Leaders of districts in which SRG schools, in particular, have demonstrated progress now face new challenges in their work to support struggling schools: rethinking equity and the distribution of resources. One leader said, for example, “The challenge is that adding resources to one school or area inevitably means taking from another.” At the start of the initiative, some district leaders were called on to justify their decisions to add resources to some schools and not others. In recent years, they have faced the same questions but the difference now is that they are, in many cases, attempting to serve a greater number of “at risk” schools, applying new capacity as well as strategies and processes used in their SRG schools to others that are on the cusp of improvement or decline. Some leaders reflected that these new demands require them to think and plan in new ways and that ESE support could be valuable in this area.

# Conclusion

The study has presented an analysis of efforts to leverage the SRG initiative and realize turnaround in persistently underperforming schools and to foster the sustainability of improvement. While educators and leaders concur that turnaround is a complex process, the study presents an overall picture of improvement and suggests that the School Redesign Grant initiative was effectively designed and implemented. Schools are situated on a continuum and full accomplishment of redesign goals has not yet been achieved, but strong positive patterns are nonetheless evident across the Commonwealth. Further, the study suggests that capacity-building in districts and schools was an important outgrowth of the initiative, which is a factor that bodes well for the sustainability of change.

Consistently, leaders and educators affirmed that the initiative signaled a departure from prior reform efforts, in which multiple and often misaligned, short-term strategies were proposed but yielded little evidence of success. Rather, SRG is acknowledged by participating district and school leaders and educators to have provided the tools and mechanisms necessary for schools and districts to think strategically about the barriers to improvement in their specific contexts and to institute processes to address them. More broadly, reports from the field identified an increasingly effective model of interaction between ESE and the districts. Typically, leaders described a shift from a compliance-oriented state approach to a more productive working relationship between districts and ESE that is based on partnership and collaboration.

Taking a closer view of schools’ experience with redesign, the analysis of all SRG schools shows that the initiative has succeeded in moving many schools forward on a path to improvement. Overall, the statewide analysis reveals a strong focus on curriculum and instruction. Educator survey responses suggest that a majority of schools—which represent a variety of strengths and challenges and all of which submitted unique plans to address their individual needs--have well-defined plans for instructional improvement and benefit from a common vision for learning. Teaching practice within and across grades is reportedly consistent at most schools, though vertical integration lags horizontal. Additionally, schools appear to have experienced a positive shift in teacher readiness and ability to work effectively with students. Educators largely reported that their knowledge of teaching strategies and how to work with varied student populations has been expanded through SRG. Further, a majority of educators in SRG schools across the Commonwealth reportedly have access to student data and feel confident in their ability to analyze those data and apply findings to instruction. Principals expressed similar positive views of the use of data in their schools, associating the use of data with educators’ professional growth and student learning.

Statewide, positive trends were also notable across other dimensions of school redesign. In terms of leadership, a majority of educators offered positive reviews of the quality, inclusiveness and efficacy of leadership practices in their schools. Overall, these educators suggested that, in their schools, principals effectively align school improvement practice with redesign goals and student needs, maintain school focus on those goals, and ensure the sustainability of redesign efforts. Digging deeper, distributed leadership appears to be a critical element of redesign within all SRG schools, with a majority of educators serving on leadership teams. Having articulated a clear vision for improvement and developed a plan for achieving it, school leaders and educators appear to be sharing responsibility for the work, and most principals consider distributed leadership to be a highly effective redesign element, as well as a protection against principals’ feelings of burnout.

Positive shifts are also notable in school culture and climate across the state. Schools largely reflect enhanced collegial relationships, as well as increased trust and comfort discussing teaching and learning among educators. Students are widely believed to feel safe in school, and educators largely find that staff make an extra effort to build personal relationships with students and parents. Across the schools, clear and agreed upon standards for safety and behavior appear to be in place, as further evidence of unified school vision and practice.

Across all schools, principals and educators largely concur that certain aspects of their redesign work were associated with academic return on investment. In particular, strategies focused on developing and supporting educator capacity such as common planning time, professional development and coaching were widely cited as effective elements of redesign, and the vast majority of principals consider formal structures for teacher collaboration to be effective in promoting school-level change. Tools that enable educators to better understand and work with their students, such as data use and management strategies and social emotional support services for students, were also perceived to be highly effective by a substantial portion of principals.

Analysis of the 2010 Decision Group—the first set of schools in Massachusetts to receive the Level 4, or most in need of improvement, categorization—reflects a similar picture of improvement, if not full accomplishment of redesign goals. Of the 31 Decision Group schools that received SRG funds, over half of the schools (18 schools, or 58%) demonstrated improvement or evidence of a positive trajectory, regardless of whether they had been granted SRG funding for three years, two years, or one year.[[18]](#footnote-18) Given a growing recognition nationally that turnaround requires time—as indicated by recent revisions to the federal guidelines such that the timeline for turnaround grants will be expanded from three to five years—these first round results may be considered promising.

The study compared and contrasted elements of redesign among the 2010 Decision Group, revealing numerous and substantial differences between the schools that were able to exit Level 4 status (“Exited”) and those that were not (“Not Exited”). Leaders and educators from Exited schools expressed markedly different reflections on their redesign experiences than their counterparts from Not Exited schools. The Exited group of schools saw the work of turnaround differently and utilized the tools they had at their disposal differently than Not Exited schools. The overarching difference is that consistently, across dimensions, the Exited schools showed greater focus on their redesign goals and evidence of integrated approaches to reaching them. Ultimately, no singular path to success was identified. Schools that exited Level 4 status were able to do so because they implemented distinct and multi-faceted turnaround strategies in particular ways, in particular combinations, and under particular conditions.

Data suggest that within the Exited schools, leadership decisions were designed to keep the focus on redesign goals and school practices were aligned accordingly. For example, distributed leadership mechanisms such as instructional leadership teams were employed across a range of schools, but Exited schools appear to have established more effective structures and processes for shared responsibility and decision making. Similarly, formal structures for teacher collaboration—key elements in the all schools’ redesign trajectories—were used to ensure consistency of instruction among teachers in the same grade and across grade levels. In these schools, professional learning communities typically functioned as embedded professional development opportunities, and common planning time was organized so that work accomplished during those periods aligned with schools’ redesign goals. Educator growth was similarly targeted in the Exited schools. In particular, professional development was more likely to be differentiated and relevant to school improvement goals and coaching was more likely to be integrated into an overall professional development strategy.

Taken in whole, data suggest that the Exited schools have greater internal coherence than their Not Exited counterparts. One apparent effect of this coherence is that Exited schools have been better equipped to engage with and derive benefits from services and supports available from external resources including their district offices, service providers, and community-based partners. Benefitting from a widely shared vision and deeply embedded practices to support it, these schools were better able to communicate their expectations and to structure time and other processes, which seems to have allowed them to maximize the value of available expertise. As an example, it stands to reason that Exited schools, which are more likely to have regularly scheduled and well organized grade-level team meetings, were better positioned to interact with and effectively integrate the resources embodied by district coaches.

Looking ahead, the study clearly identifies formidable threats to sustainability—particularly in the face of multiple competing initiatives ongoing within the Commonwealth—including the potential for loss of important autonomies afforded school leaders under the grant and the impermanence of negotiated union agreements governing educator work rules. The potential loss of turnaround capacity represented among current leaders and educators who—through participation in SRG—received training and gained shared expertise and understanding that contributed to school turnaround is also of primary concern. However, the statewide principals expressed cautious optimism about their ability to sustain the efforts that they believe have most contributed to the achievement of their redesign goals.

While it remains to be seen whether the gains achieved through the grant will withstand the considerable challenges that lie ahead, the study suggests that one of the strongest factors in support of an optimistic view of sustainability is the capacity building that was achieved through the initiative. In contrast to some prior initiatives, SRG encouraged investment in people and processes rather than programs, technology and other consumables that are more vulnerable to funding shortages. Educators were exposed to substantial professional development (including implementation support in the Exited schools), collaborative structures were created to ensure the building of a common language and consistency of approaches, and cultural shifts reportedly took hold in many of the schools that demonstrated improvement. There is evidence of increased professional dialogue in schools, leadership is shared so that staff members with relevant expertise are empowered to make decisions, and leaders and educators hold themselves accountable to one another as they work toward helping students meet their high expectations.

In summary, the SRG initiative appears to have set most, if not all, of the grantee schools on a pathway to improvement marked by coherence, distributed leadership, and a focus on building capacity to effectively deliver an aligned curriculum. The most successful schools display more consistent focus on their redesign goals, with greater integration in their approaches to reaching them. The results are a credit to the SRG initiative’s design and to an acknowledged shift within ESE from a compliance and accountability focus to a more balanced approach that also emphasizes targeted assistance to support school improvement.

1. SchoolWorks Inc. was engaged to design and conduct Monitoring Site Visit protocols, which were typically implemented twice per year in each school and included interviews and focus groups, classroom observations, a debriefing session, and action planning. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Note that although Level 4 schools were given priority, especially in the first two years of SRG implementation, one Level 3 school was funded in Cohort 1 (Chelsea High School) and another in Cohort 2 (Gavin Middle School—now UP Academy in Boston). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ESE engaged the District Management Council to support sustainability planning in the districts, largely through workshops and limited consulting services, with an emphasis on the Academic Return on Investment framework. Broadly, the goal of this approach to sustainability planning is to help school and district leaders think strategically about investments and return so that they can identify high impact expenditures and allocate resources to effective inputs. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Note that Brockton was eliminated from SY 2012–13 evaluation activities (district interviews and surveys). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Note that use of the term “external partners” in this survey was not intended to be a reference to designated ESE priority partners or ESE’s Priority Partners for Turnaround initiative. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Table 21 for perceived effectiveness of partners in the following areas: curriculum and instruction, the use of data to inform instruction, and social services and supports to students. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Two Level 3 schools were funded as part of SRG Cohort 1 (Chelsea High School) and Cohort 2 (UP Academy Boston). While not included in statistical analyses, reflections on these schools’ experiences inform elements of discussion found in this section. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Methodology. Analysis of survey items revealed that this principal, in contrast to many of his/her colleagues, perceived the use of district coaches to be notably effective and so follow-up questions were posed in order to flesh out reasons why and further explore the principal’s reflections. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This was cited by about two-thirds of principals in 2012 and 2013 and more than three-fourths of principals in 2014, including 67% of those from the Exited group and all principals from the Not Exited group. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “I have seen evidence that my use of data has had a positive impact on my students’ academic performance” (38% versus 27% strongly agree, p ≤ .01). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Corbett, J. (2014). Navigating the Market: How State Education Agencies Help Districts Develop Productive Relationships with External Providers. In L. Morando Rhim & S. Redding (Eds.), The State Role in School Turnaround: Emerging Best Practices, pp. 179-194. San Francisco, CA: WestEd. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Methodology, Focal Inquiry: Analysis of survey items revealed that these principals, in contrast to many of their colleagues, perceived the use of partners to be notably effective and so follow-up questions were posed in order to flesh out reasons why and further explore the principals’ reflections. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Describing initial struggles to establish a common understanding of the work and strategies to implement it, one principal wrote, for example, *“In the beginning … it was a struggle to mesh our school philosophy with [the organization’s]. …There was a lack of understanding of the school setting and our school’s goals when we were first partnered …. We did not agree with the amount of time the assessments took …. It was very difficult to define this relationship and … very time consuming.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. “I would not want to work in any other school”: 61% versus 38%, p < .01; “My professional relationships are stronger than they have ever been” (77% versus 58%, p < .01). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Illustrative survey comments include: “PBIS has given staff, students, and families a set of common understandings and common language.” (Exited principal) “The school benefits because we are able to focus more on teaching the student.” (Cohort 3 principal) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. An initial analysis of the 2010 Decision Group suggests, for example, that the schools that showed the largest teacher turnover rate in 2011 and the lowest rate of turnover in succeeding years outperformed their peers who either effected a high rate of change in 2012 and/or experienced higher turnover rates in succeeding years. These results are not surprising and in fact adhere to the intent of the federal turnaround models. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Rhim, L. M., & Redding, S. (Eds). (2014). *The state role in turnaround: Emerging best practices*. San Francisco, CA: WestEd. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Specifically, 13 SRG schools (42%)exited Level 4 status (moving up to Level 3, 2, or 1); 5 SRG schools (16%) were determined to be on a relatively promising trajectory, but remained in Level 4 status for at least one more year; 10 SRG schools (32%) were determined to be on a flat or declining trajectory; and three SRG schools (10%) were assigned Level 5 status, moving into state receivership [↑](#footnote-ref-18)