



Partnership for Leaders in Education

Darden School of Business
Curry School of Education

District Readiness Assessment for UVA-School Turnaround Program

Purpose of the District Readiness Assessment (DRA):

The purpose of this process is to provide useful information to districts¹ and the PLE to determine the district's readiness to engage in a systemic school turnaround effort. This process is focused on analyzing to what extent the district has the capabilities, alignment, willingness and resources necessary for initiating a successful and sustainable school turnaround initiative. This determination is made by assessing the following:

- *Leadership.* Leadership has the capacity and willingness to do what is necessary to drive school turnaround work – and the bandwidth to do this work now.
- *Support and accountability.* District has the infrastructure to provide both necessary and differentiated support, accountability and flexibility to the turnaround schools.
- *Talent management.* District is establishing conditions to increase the number and impact of highly effective teachers in high needs schools and is willing to implement rigorous and prioritized hiring of school leaders in high needs schools.
- *Instructional infrastructure.* An effective instructional infrastructure exists or can be created, including valid assessments, effective curriculum and instructional strategies and responsive data systems.

The readiness assessment also:

- Identifies recommendations for how the district can address gaps in readiness.
- Provides the data necessary for mutual agreement between the school district and PLE as to whether the district should participate in the turnaround program at the current time and what commitments from each organization would increase the chances of success.
- Provides PLE with the context needed to better serve the district, including the district's greatest strengths and the district's greatest potential obstacles to making high performance a reality in lower performing schools.

Process Overview:

The PLE team developed the readiness assessment process based on our expertise culled from working with over 60 districts across the country on turnaround initiatives, as well as a thorough review of research regarding effective and sustainable turnaround. This will be a 1.5-to-2.5-day process depending on the size of your district. During this time, a PLE team will conduct interviews with senior district leadership and others central to a potential turnaround initiative as well as a few principals. The PLE team will wrap-up the process by facilitating a conversation with the Superintendent regarding the preparedness of the system's support, accountability,

¹ The PLE can also adapt this process for alternative "districts" such as school innovation zones or CMOs. We'll consider partnering with any school system committed to a bold and comprehensive approach to turnaround.

instructional, data, human capital and resource infrastructure to support transformative school-level improvement and discuss recommendations to address any gaps in readiness.

Deliverables:

1) District Readiness Report

Within two weeks of completing the interviews and debrief with the superintendent, the PLE will provide the district with a report outlining the findings regarding the district's greatest strengths and potential obstacles, addressing the following questions:

- Does the district demonstrate preparedness and willingness to engage in a systemic school turnaround effort?
- Is there a compelling strategy and direction for improving high priority schools?

The report will also include recommendations for next steps for initiating a district turnaround plan, including possibly the establishment of a turnaround office or team including a district shepherd to oversee the initiative.

2) Formal District and PLE Commitment Agreement

If both the district and the PLE (and in some cases the funder) express continued interest in a formal partnership, the PLE and district will collaborate to finalize expectations, determine a timeline for implementation of agreed upon recommendations and initiate a formal agreement regarding expectations and commitments moving forward in launching the initiative. Among other possible commitments developed based on each district's context, the PLE expects all of its partner districts to meet the non-negotiables listed in the appendix of this document. The PLE is of course eager to tailor our support to help our partner districts meet these non-negotiables and this will be part of the focus of the remainder of our planning year together.

Participants:

The intent of the DRA process is to gain insight quickly from the top leaders in the district. Therefore, interviews should be scheduled with the District Superintendent and key leaders for the district. This will include, but is not limited to, the Superintendent, direct reports to the Superintendent who have management oversight, individuals who will likely be intimately involved in the turnaround efforts, a few high-performing principals and other key leaders the Superintendent may wish to include for their perspective (e.g., a human resources administrator whose efforts may directly influence the turnaround initiative). ***The number of individuals interviewed will depend upon the size of the district and number of leaders considered central to the implementation of the turnaround initiative.*** As a rule of thumb, those accountable for key elements of the steady-state and turnaround efforts should participate in the interviews. Collectively, the interviewees must be able to answer strategic questions regarding leadership, differentiated support and accountability, talent management, and instructional infrastructure.

The PLE will also interview one member of the School Board, selected by the Superintendent, to start to get an understanding of the governance dynamics. Conversations with the entire Board or multiple members of the Board would be premature at this stage.

Each readiness assessment participant should be interviewed alone to provide sufficient time for sharing their unique insight – with the two exceptions:

- 1) Three high-performing principals will be interviewed together (to allow the interview team to discern where there is common understanding).
- 2) An interview focusing only on the district's assessment systems and strategy will be scheduled ahead of the process – and multiple individuals might participate in that interview.

The discussion with the Superintendent should ideally happen first, ensuring our team has appropriate understanding of the leader's desires and concerns prior to the remaining interviews. The conversation with the Superintendent is intended to be frank and include matters of leadership and talent management.

The entire PLE interview team will attend three interviews together:

- A 90-minute discussion with the Superintendent
- A 90-minute discussion with the principal focus group
- A 60-minute discussion with the individual who reports to the Superintendent most likely to be intimately involved in the turnaround effort (whether or not they will be “shepherd”). If the school system is unsure who to pick, the PLE team will choose.

All other interviews will be 60 minutes each and can be double- or triple-booked, as the PLE representatives will split into “teams”.

Finally, a “debrief” is scheduled on the final day and should generally be scheduled for 90 minutes. The Superintendent may invite up to one other key person to this discussion, assuming the Superintendent is comfortable discussing any challenges with another person present.

This process works best when the Superintendent encourages all who are to be interviewed to speak freely. The discussions are held in confidence, as PLE is looking for themes and alignment among the answers. Reflecting our commitment to confidentiality, the final report submitted to the Superintendent will highlight key findings but not identify specific sources.

APPENDIX: UVA-STP District Non-Negotiables

The PLE believes meeting these commitments will provide district, school and teacher leaders with the foundation, support and time necessary to initiate a bold and sustainably successful turnaround initiative. If we collectively determine to move forward with a partnership together, the PLE would assist district leadership efforts to meet these commitments during a planning year. With these commitments in place, leaders will be in better position to design a turnaround initiative around the context of their district. The PLE recognizes that there is no one formula for turning around a school and thus the purpose of our three-year partnership would be to build capacity of local leaders to identify key issues and strategies to address their unique challenges.

Lever 1: Leadership

District has leadership commitment and capacity to do this work now:

- District leadership, including superintendent, shows evidence they understand their central role in driving turnaround work and changing practice;
- District leadership ensures School Board awareness and support for turnaround initiative;
- District has the people and bandwidth to do this work now;
- District turnaround team develops plan to understand school needs during planning year and determines 2-3 key priority areas of focus for all turnaround schools.

Lever 2: Differentiated Support and Accountability

District demonstrates evidence of commitment to prioritizing schools and making initiative a top priority. This will be evidenced the following in place by the start of year one:

- Appoint or recruitment of district shepherd with time to drive turnaround effort, evaluative authority over turnaround principals and a direct line of communication to superintendent;
- Purposeful, weekly visits to each turnaround school ; visits aligned to universal expectations, school priorities, build on previous observations and help identify steps or solve problems;
- An office or team providing differentiated, aligned support and monitoring of efforts

Lever 3: Instructional Infrastructure

District ensures turnaround schools have the essential instruction infrastructure components in place. This will be evidenced by the implementation of the following by the start of year one:

- Common interim assessments in grade 2-12, or at least in the grades where we'll partner, will:
 - Be rigorous, aligned to clear standards, and given at least 3 times prior to summative
 - Be in place by the summer program with specific dates for all required assessments.
 - Provide the opportunity for deep item analysis & teacher action planning², including:
 - Participation of all core teachers in weekly, data-focused collaborative meetings for a minimum of 60 minutes in year one of turnaround, and a minimum of 90 minutes by year two of turnaround³
 - A clear process established by participating schools for each core teacher to produce individualized teacher action plans by the first semester of turnaround

² If test is adaptive and does not allow for item analysis, district provides complementary method for deep data dive

³ Best to move to 90 minutes in year one where a strong enough collaboration foundation exists to spend time well

- Established district curriculum aligned to the state curriculum with clearly defined expectations for learning outcomes by quarter (at least) that includes a scope, sequence, and pacing guides aligned to interim assessments

Lever 4: Talent Management

District is willing to implement intentional, rigorous, pre-approved and prioritized hiring of school leaders for high needs schools (in most cases, this will simply mean implementing an approved BEI process and being willing to make principal changes if necessary).

District demonstrates evidence it is willing to implement concrete steps toward meaningful strategy for addressing teacher underperformance and increasing the number of highly effective teachers.

Depending on district context, such bold steps normally would include at least one of the following:

- Strategic, data-informed efforts to recruit or prioritize placement (and possibly retention) of highly effective or high-potential staff in partner schools (beyond support in other schools)
- Commitment to provide new, intensive, data-informed and embedded development support to teachers in partner schools during the turnaround initiative
- Meaningful efforts during planning year to identify and address underperformance in partner schools that go above and beyond the system norm.

YEAR 2 Expectations: The non-negotiables listed below are also vital to achieving success. While the PLE recognizes the implementation of these expectations may be difficult to accomplish by the beginning of Year 1 of the turnaround program and thus do not assess these in the readiness assessment, it is expected that these requirements be fully implemented before the beginning of the program Year 2.

Lever 2: Differentiated Support and Accountability

District will ensure every visit results in specific feedback and/or the identification of next steps to help school leadership team improve practice or district leadership remove barriers.

Lever 3: Instructional Infrastructure

District ensures turnaround schools have the essential components of a district instructional, infrastructure in place. This will be evidenced by the implementation of:

- Individual and group data meetings with a clear purpose and outcomes focused on individual student progress, instructional improvement and data analysis.
- A reliable monitoring structure to facilitate and support the development of effective teacher action plans and student interventions
- Minimum of 90 minutes of teacher collaboration time per week
- District assessment calendar, includes clear purpose and expectations for each required assessment.

Lever 4: Talent Management

District willing to implement intentional, rigorous and prioritized hiring of school staff for schools participating in the UVA initiative.