

Florida Department of Education
Office of School Improvement
“Ride the Wave” to Success in the Classroom



Successful Strategies for
Turning Around Low-Performance

As we approach the 21st century, American public education is rising to meet a new challenge – high expectations and achievement for *all* students in *every* school. State and school districts are raising academic standards and making efforts to align curriculum, assessment, teacher training, and instruction with these challenging standards. (USDOE, 1998) In Florida we have implemented the challenging Sunshine State Standards aligned to new state assessment instruments, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Tests; aligned to teacher professional development, Connections; and aligned to school district student grade level benchmarks and curriculum.

The US Department of Education recently produced *Turning Around Low-Performing Schools*; a guide highlighting examples of successful state, district and school strategies that are changing what happens in the classroom, focusing on learning, and improving student achievement. Provided are some of the district and school level strategies found to be working. For a copy of the entire document, call 1-800-USA-LEARN or visit the USDOE website at <http://www.ed.gov/>.

District Level Priorities and Strategies

- ▲ Ensure strong leadership at the school. Districts must recruit principals who will serve as instructional leaders. Take extra steps to recruit, support, reward, and train outstanding principals and teachers and send them to schools in difficulty. If a principal is slow to get the message, find strength in a new leader with experience in similar schools.
- ▲ Promote policies that encourage teacher commitment to reform. Districts should hire teachers enthusiastic about change and willing to work in low-performing schools or with low-performing students and allow teachers a chance to leave if they prefer not to be part of the school reform process. If teachers are burned out or not engaged in needed improvements, counsel them to improve or leave the profession.

- ▲ Use resources strategically. Districts must help schools coordinate and concentrate their resources on classroom instruction.
- ▲ Help schools use performance data to drive improvement and to evaluate student performance to make sure that *all* students are making progress toward the state's high standards and are given opportunity to succeed. Using data is important for identifying patterns of failure, diagnosing problems, and matching concrete solutions to educational needs. Establish a districtwide data collection system that allows the evaluation of student and school progress across a set of expected standards of performance. Ensure that no student or group of students is left out of improvement efforts.
- ▲ Work in partnership with the community. Schools cannot do their jobs alone; districts can help foster partnerships with schools and parents, local businesses, colleges, teachers unions, and the community. Work with employers, teachers, principals, and religious and community groups to encourage greater family and community involvement in the school, after school, in the community, and at home.
- ▲ Provide incentives for change and support for innovation; thus supporting schools that are working to fundamentally change and improve. Districts can support school-level change through reward systems; incentives for improvement through school choice programs, and creating schools that operate under performance contracts. Give parents the opportunity to choose among public schools and choose the full set of core courses needed for their children to prepare for college and careers. Give school officials sufficient authority to act quickly, decisively, and creatively to improve schools – and then hold them accountable for results.

School Level Strategies for School Leaders – Principals, Teachers and Parents

- ▲ Create an orderly, disciplined environment. Students will do well and teachers will improve their teaching if they are in a safe, supportive culture of learning with firm, fair rules of discipline.
 - ▲ Recruit and hire the best teachers and principals. Provide high-quality professional development to keep them at your school and continuously improve their knowledge and skills.
 - ▲ Be open to fundamental change. Build a team with a relentless focus on improving instruction and achieving high academic standards.
 - ▲ Identify needs based on achievement results and group input. Analyze student achievement results at the student and classroom levels. Examine the school's budget, looking for what percent of resources is dedicated to improving teaching and learning.
 - ▲ Search out and visit research-based designs as a guide to choosing reforms. A number of these designs can be adapted to your school's needs. The whole school community should agree on the design for your school.
 - ▲ Work with top district administrators and staff as well as teachers, parents, and school staff to set concrete goals tied to high standards for student and school achievement. Choose an improvement strategy that targets the student needs revealed by your data analysis.
 - ▲ Concentrate professional development on improving teaching. Include time for professional development in the regular school schedule; staff development is not an extra-curricular activity.
- ▲ Reach out to parents and family members. Use new technologies – voice mail systems, homework hot lines, and the Internet – to link parents to the classroom. Make special accommodations to reach parents whose first language is not English.
 - ▲ Include all staff in the process of change; create a team. Everyone – including administrative, custodial, and other school staff – can help create a positive learning environment.
 - ▲ Make collaborative planning time available. Incorporate into the regular schedule time for teachers to plan, discuss, and set goals together.
 - ▲ Plan instructional time to meet student needs. Many schools have increased family support and education by offering safe havens for students before and after school.
 - ▲ Develop partnerships with business, civic groups, and institutions of higher education. These connections can provide monetary and material resources, volunteer time, and expertise about school reform and education research.
 - ▲ Reach out for assistance. Explore research-based approaches to see if they meet your school's needs. Ask other schools working on reforms nearby for assistance and advice.
 - ▲ Learn about charter schools and school reconstitution. Some schools have to start completely over to have a chance at success.
 - ▲ Continuously assess progress toward goals by including evaluation in your school improvement plan. Continuous evaluation provides an opportunity for everyone to reflect on the change process and make suggestions about ways to refine and improve it.

For more information contact the Florida Department of Education, Office of School Improvement (850) 487-1023, SC 277-1023. Information can also be obtained at: <http://osi.fsu.edu>

Resources and References are available on our Web Site <http://osi.fsu.edu> or call (850) 414-9892, SC 994-9892.

- ▲ **Bibliography**
- ▲ **Florida Blue Ribbon Schools**
- ▲ **Web Sites**
- ▲ **Florida School Recognition Awardee School Sites**

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