




# SNAPSHOTS OF SCHOOL TURNAROUND

 **How Three Schools Used  
School Improvement Grants  
to Improve Student  
Learning Outcomes**

Scott Vince and Lenay Dunn

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The School Improvement Grant (SIG) program, first authorized in 2001, provides formula-based federal funds to states that competitively award these funds to districts to implement comprehensive reforms designed to improve the lowest performing elementary and secondary schools. In response to the unprecedented increase in SIG funding in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, the U.S. Department of Education issued regulations to ensure that SIG funds are used for rigorous interventions to turn around states' persistently lowest performing schools. The 2009 requirements initiated a national dialogue on school turnaround efforts and focused attention on the role of state education agencies in supporting local efforts to improve schools.



**<http://centeronschoolturnaround.org>**

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# Introduction

Since the dramatic increase in funding for the School Improvement Grant (SIG) program in 2009, school turnaround has dominated the national education conversation. Vast resources have been funneled to schools around the country in an effort to improve outcomes for students.

The Center on School Turnaround (CST) developed profiles of three schools that received Cohort 1 SIG funding in the 2009-10 school year. Each of these schools increased student outcomes by the end of the third year of its SIG funding. This document highlights findings from these successful turnaround cases to provide examples to state, district, and school-level educators working to strengthen struggling schools. At the same time, these examples further underscore how complicated turnaround work is. As President Barack Obama noted in 2009, “There is no silver bullet when it comes to turning [underperforming] schools around.”

In this collection of SIG success stories, we confirm the President’s general sentiment — the findings demonstrate that there are a wide range of turnaround strategies, not just one way to achieve success. Further, the examples demonstrate that context matters. Each school in this collection used findings from a pre-SIG needs assessment to focus strategies on its school community’s unique

needs rather than simply emulating strategies that worked somewhere else.

These cases represent the following strategies customized to fit each school’s context:

- Intentional staff recruitment
- Professional learning communities
- Data-informed instruction
- Community engagement
- Strategic professional development
- Student engagement
- Expanded learning time
- Schedule changes
- Increased academic focus
- Collaboration over compliance

In addition to highlighting these turnaround strategies, we also document the extremely important role that the district and state played in each turnaround. Although no silver bullet strategy exists, we found many similarities among the schools in terms of district and state support. For example, all three states helped develop each school’s initial SIG turnaround plan and provided effective monitoring throughout the grant period. Local stakeholders also reported that each state education agency was available for informal conversations whenever necessary. At the district level, autonomy and trust toward the school were cited as critical factors contributing to the turnaround.

## DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

We identified the three notable SIG schools through a nomination process with Regional Comprehensive Center staff from around the country. The schools — Emerson Elementary School in Kansas City, Kansas; New Underwood High School in New Underwood, South Dakota; and Fern Creek Traditional High School in Louisville, Kentucky — were selected based on student achievement gains. We first interviewed the state department of education representative for each school and then followed up with a district staff member and finally the school principal.

# Emerson Elementary School (Kansas City, Kansas)

## A Shining Example of Systemic Turnaround

### Perspectives:<sup>1</sup>

*Brett Bernard, Principal, Emerson Elementary School*

*Marcy Clay, Assistant Superintendent, Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools*

*Kelli Mather, Chief Financial Officer, Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools*

*Pat Hill, Education Consultant, Kansas Department of Education*

At Emerson Elementary School in Kansas City, school, district, and state leaders worked together to implement an effective turnaround strategy — serving as a “proof point” that the system can work toward change as an effective and cohesive unit. With the right strategies in place at the school, district, and state levels, the system as a whole leveraged those strategies to facilitate rapid improvement at Emerson. The SIG program provided the financial support necessary for systemwide action that took a failing school with the lowest scores in the state and turned it into a shining example for others to learn from and emulate.

### Life Before the Turnaround

Emerson Elementary, located in the Argentine neighborhood of Kansas City, serves a large population of Spanish-speaking families, with roughly 90 percent of its students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. In 2010, Emerson was identified as a persistently low-achieving elementary school, and as a result it became eligible for SIG funding. Emerson applied for and received a SIG award as part of the first

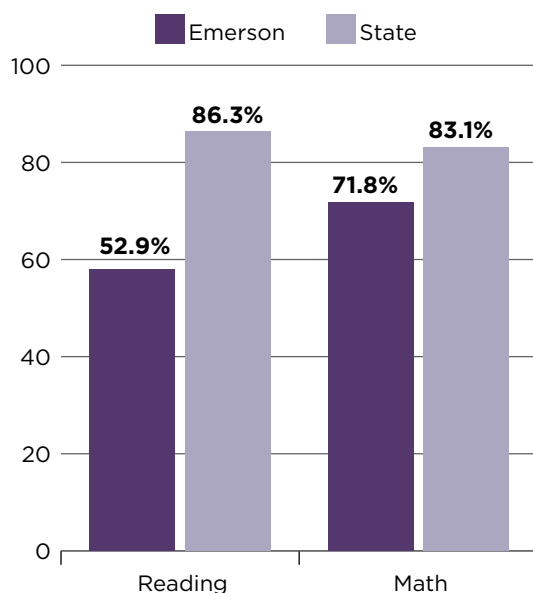
cohort of grantees. Emerson, one of only six schools in Kansas to receive the grant, received over \$4.7 million to implement the SIG turnaround model. This model called for the replacement of the principal and approximately 50 percent of the staff. Though SIG funding offered an opportunity for positive change at Emerson, it also attracted some negative attention in the community. This negative attention contributed to 100 children leaving the school, dropping enrollment from 220 to 120.

Three years ago, Emerson was also experiencing a number of related problems: low achievement on state reading and math tests, negative adult culture and climate (including negative parent relations), a highly mobile student body, and a lack of materials for students. The culmination of these issues caused new principal Brett Bernard to reflect that when the school began the SIG program, “We were absolutely starting from scratch. Absolutely.”

Bernard stated that sharing the low student achievement information with the Emerson community often left parents “devastated.” By any numerical achievement measure, Emerson needed dramatic improvement.

<sup>1</sup> Position titles throughout this document were accurate at the time of the interviews.

**Reading and Math: 2009-10  
Percent Proficient**



Beyond the raw numbers, Bernard described the culture and climate at Emerson as “very toxic.” During the new principal’s first visit to the school, he sensed a lot of apprehension throughout the halls. With the impending SIG program, teachers were understandably anxious that some of their colleagues might not be present for the following year due to the turnaround model’s 50 percent staff replacement clause. In subsequent months, with new staff arriving to replace the 50 percent who were removed, Bernard discussed the tale of two staffs that developed — the existing staff and the replacement staff. Bernard described the first staff meeting as somewhat tense, “...you really saw a division even as you walked in the room. At that first meeting you could watch the two groups trying to figure out how this was going to work and how they would come together.”

The Emerson staff also struggled with effectively engaging with the community’s parents and families. Bernard reported hearing that the school had been particularly unfriendly to non-English speaking parents in prior years. According to Bernard, these kinds of actions had driven a wedge between the school and community stakeholders. Furthermore, due at least in part to

this wedge, according to Bernard, very few Emerson parents had any idea of what was occurring at the school and precisely how low achievement levels had become.

These issues were exacerbated because Emerson has a highly mobile group of students. Bernard suggested that as many as 20 to 25 percent of Emerson students live in a low-income housing project in the area. The principal pointed out that this creates a “revolving door of kids.” Children attend the school for a year, maybe a year and a half, and then they move on to a different location. New families enter the community, and the school must start over with new students.

## Turnaround Success

At the start of the SIG program, Emerson intended to focus on solutions to the problems within its control to raise student achievement in reading and math. This focus meant a dramatic overhaul of many school systems and practices and a massive amount of hard work.

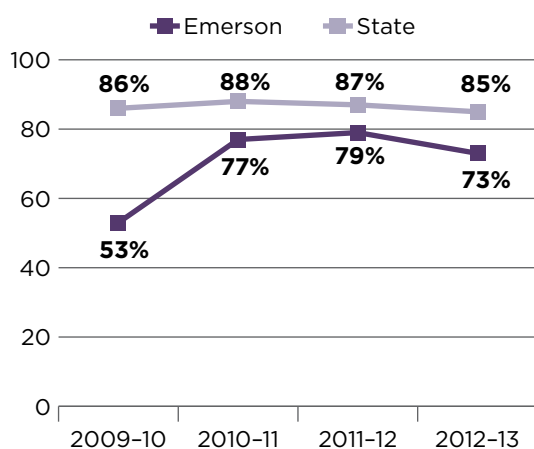
The overhaul was successful — over the three years of participating in the SIG program, Emerson raised student achievement in both reading and math, even surpassing the state average in math. In the words of Pat Hill, the school’s Education Consultant at the Kansas Department of Education, “I watched a school truly transform itself from a school with a history of low performance to one that is now an exemplar.”

The school also made substantial and meaningful gains in other areas: culture and climate among staff members improved, relations with the community became more open and positive, and children received plentiful access to appropriate reading materials.

## How Emerson Succeeded

Emerson Elementary achieved dramatic gains through a well-integrated approach at the school level, which leveraged continuous

### Reading Achievement — All Students Percent Proficient



improvement supports from the state and district levels.

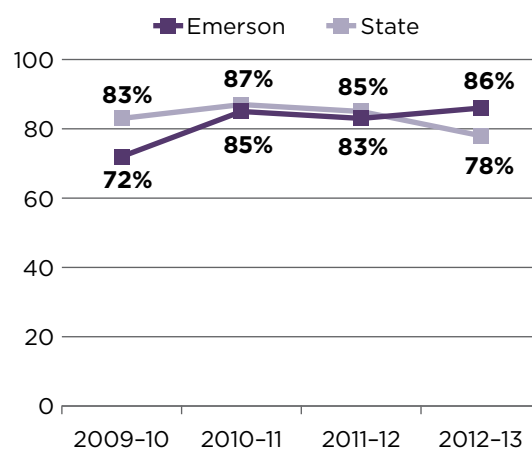
At the school level, the new principal and staff implemented a four-pronged approach to improvement: (1) focusing on literacy at the core of all activities; (2) rejuvenating community engagement efforts; (3) expanding learning time through after-school tutoring; and (4) creating a non-evaluative and collaborative focus on growth.

Beyond these four strategies, state and district stakeholders pointed out the supreme importance of bringing in a leader with the competencies of the new principal, Brett Bernard. Pat Hill noted “I’ve never met anybody quite like him...He’s a conductor. He’s able to orchestrate all of the initiatives that have to be moved forward, all simultaneously. That is very hard to do.”

### Literacy, Literacy, Literacy

Recognizing literacy as a serious weakness, Emerson stakeholders united around a rejuvenated focus on literacy at the core of every school action. Interactions with parents were centered on literacy, discussions with teachers regarding professional development were tied to literacy, and a literacy coach was hired to further assist teachers.

### Math Achievement — All Students Percent Proficient



This intense focus garnered results on local assessments after just a single month.

### Community Engagement

One of Bernard’s first acts was to hire a Family and Community Specialist and an English-Spanish bilingual school secretary to increase engagement between the school and community. The specialist was a parent from the school community who Bernard met on his first day at Emerson. Additionally, the district provided a space on campus for a parent and community center, stocked with a library and a small computer center.

### Expanded Learning Time

Expanded learning time focused on a well-coordinated, fully staffed, intervention-based, after-school tutoring program that included student transportation. A critical component of the tutoring was a dedicated after-school coordinator who coordinated the program (e.g., making sure the right students were in the right place); provided a small amount of professional development to the teachers involved; and ensured that communication (including the sharing of data) was consistent and strong between classroom teachers and after-school teachers.



“I think my teachers would tell you that having leadership there to support them rather than always looking with an evaluative eye is a huge piece of this.”

*Brett Bernard, Principal*

### Non-Evaluative, Collaborative Focus

Bernard went out of his way to establish that Emerson would not be a principal-led building, but rather a building where the staff would figure things out together through shared leadership and collaboration.

With the district’s help (through use of the district’s evaluation process), Bernard also instituted an approach that did not focus on absolute performance, but instead on growth. Throughout the SIG’s first year, the district put in place checkpoint assessments each month for all schools in the district. Based on assessment results, Bernard’s staff would ask questions like: What do we need to do differently? What changes need to be made?

### District Support

In addition to the school-level improvement areas described earlier, the district also played a critical role in establishing an environment conducive to positive change. The district provided an opportunity for the incoming principal to build relationships with staff, gave the principal breathing room and encouraged risk, helped drive resource allocations based on priorities, and provided a continuous improvement plan to undergird the entire operation.

Principal Bernard pointed out that a vital political component of the overall turnaround plan was the district’s decision to separate him from the removal of 50 percent of the teaching staff. The district teamed with the teachers’ union to take on the responsibility of sharing with staff the

process that would be implemented to meet the turnaround model’s guidelines, which called for rehiring no more than 50 percent of staff. Bernard stated, “They wanted me to come in fresh without being the one that maybe sent a few of their friends away.” This strategy allowed Bernard to come into the school without the baggage associated with staff removals and freed him to focus on improvement strategies. The district assisted Bernard with hiring replacement staff, using an interview tool designed to select solid instructional teachers who were likely to remain in the school for the long term.

The district also provided Bernard with the freedom and flexibility to take a few risks. Bernard suggested that early success and growth reinforced this freedom and flexibility even further. The district certainly asked a lot of questions and offered support, but never intervened or interfered.

Perhaps the most significant district support for Emerson and other district schools was the district’s 5-Step Process — a theory of action that helped to ensure each student exited high school prepared for college and career. Essentially, the 5-Step Process laid out a continuous improvement plan to provide a guaranteed and viable standards-based curriculum, provide formative

“One of the things I believe helped the turnaround process was the ongoing analysis of data. We call this [analysis] post-assessment debriefings... We have these not only at grade levels but also one-on-one with teachers, [looking at] what their data are saying and what the next steps would be to improve things.”

*Marcy Clay, Assistant Superintendent*

and summative assessments, and use appropriate resources to fill gaps. According to Assistant Superintendent Marcy Clay, the district's continuous improvement plan "is a document that guides the work in our district. We felt that whatever targets were in that document, if Emerson could progress toward them, then it would be able to reach the SIG goals." As an ongoing process throughout the grant, Clay would meet with Bernard monthly to check in on the continuous improvement plan and any other concerns — a process that Bernard found very helpful.

"The district was very, very supportive of our efforts here and really let us have autonomy as they saw success. I don't think they interfered at all. They helped us to reflect on what we did and asked us questions."

*Brett Bernard, Principal*

### State Support

Emerson was also fortunate enough to find valuable support from the Kansas Department of Education through reflective SIG monitoring sessions. Monitoring visits would include general site visits, classroom visits, and debrief sessions. These visits occurred at least twice per year during the SIG period and were conducted by a team of two or three state personnel. According to Hill, visits would culminate in meetings with school and district stakeholders to provide "extensive feedback and a lot of resources and suggestions for professional learning." The state also used this opportunity to provide the school and district with any relevant U.S. Department of Education updates related to the SIG program.

Bernard pointed out that the state was involved from the very start of the SIG process — giving ideas and background information to help the school work toward an improvement plan. Once implementation of the SIG plan began, state personnel interacted with the teachers and gave a great deal of encouragement along the way. State representatives also made themselves available for questions at any time throughout the year. Conversely, the state would also reach out to the school at various times throughout the year to share relevant literature or new information. According to Bernard, "...the monitoring visits were fantastic. They were supportive and provided a lot of strategic ideas."

### Sustaining Change

Emerson stakeholders at every level feel cautiously confident that the school can maintain the advancements gained over the SIG period. They quickly point out that the one-time cost investments will stay in place (e.g., literacy materials) and will hopefully continue to pay dividends for years to come. Bernard also highlights the solid sense of community that exists throughout the school now, including the neighborhood community and the school staff. Since the SIG funding expired, the school has maintained 100 percent of its staff, and its family engagement program continues to be a major strength of the school.<sup>2</sup>

The district has also made every effort to sustain funding for the critical parent liaison position, along with the accompanying parent center. In addition, the district continues to fund the extended learning day as much as possible. Kelli Mather, the district's Chief Financial Officer, pointed out, "The district continues to provide as much support as possible to cover necessary expenses that sustain the positive growth."

<sup>2</sup> Updated student achievement data were not available at the time of this report, due to implementation of a new state assessment system.

Emerson stakeholders at every level helped to provide critical supports that enabled the school staff to move forward and ensure that all Emerson students were building toward college and career readiness. The collective efforts of school, district, and state staff worked in tandem to create an effective schooling system for Emerson students. District and state leaders reinforced the work of school leadership and allowed an environment of continuous improvement to flourish.

### Key Takeaways

- Selecting a committed staff is a crucial driver to implementing school improvement plans.
- Connections to the community matter. Effective parent and family engagement means not only providing opportunities for engagement, but also providing a welcoming atmosphere.
- Communication and coordination between layers of instruction (e.g., between core instruction and after-school opportunities) provide a strong learning environment for students.
- Developing collaborative and non-evaluative relationships across the system can aid improvement by creating trust between the district and school, and between administrators and teachers.
- Feedback from the state makes a difference. Thoughtful site visits and reflective feedback can provide valuable insight, help align education systems, and improve existing strategies.

# New Underwood High School (New Underwood, South Dakota)

## How an Increased Academic Emphasis Strengthened the School Community

### Perspectives:

*Jeff Marlette, Superintendent, New Underwood School District*

*Joel Hovland, Principal, New Underwood High School*

*Shawna Poitra, South Dakota Department of Education*

*Heather Hoak, North Central Comprehensive Center*

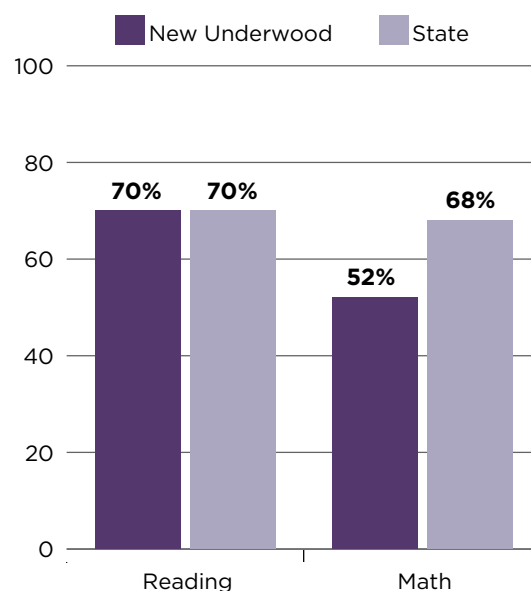
The New Underwood story demonstrates the power of the right leadership, with the right supports, making the right decisions. The small district's superintendent, by working collaboratively with the school principal and the state department of education, developed a school turnaround plan that addressed the unique needs of New Underwood High School. Together, school stakeholders built the capacity of teachers to engage and instruct their students while simultaneously changing students' mindsets to embrace more rigorous academics.

### Life Before the Turnaround

New Underwood High School is a small rural school, with approximately 100 students, in the western corner of South Dakota. Due to its rural location, New Underwood High School is housed in the same building as the district's elementary and middle schools (the building serves approximately 270 students in total). The district superintendent also is the elementary school principal, while the middle school and high school each have their own principals. The school operates with a four-day school week — implemented as a cost-cutting measure in 2005.

During the 2009–10 school year, New Underwood High School was designated as one of the state's persistently lowest achieving schools. The school suffered from low student achievement levels in reading and math. However, because of the very low number of students tested, achievement levels fluctuate a great deal at New Underwood. In 2009–2010, for example,

### Reading and Math: 2009–10 Percent Proficient



New Underwood's reading scores actually matched the state average, despite being 36 percentage points lower in 2008-2009.

Some of the deeper, long-term issues that contributed to lower student achievement at New Underwood included the absence of a college-going culture, low expectations, a lack of a strong academic emphasis, and poor communication with parents and the community.

According to Principal Joel Hovland, hired at the start of the School Improvement Grant, New Underwood was a school with "very little drive" prior to the beginning of the SIG program. Hovland reported that the school simply was not oriented around a college-going culture and that graduation was considered good enough. The new superintendent, Jeff Marlette, also felt this sentiment when he entered the building in 2010. Marlette recalled feeling that expectations for students were very low at the time, and that less than 50 percent of graduates were going on to attend college or vocational school.

"My first assessment of the district was that I didn't sense that there was a culture of excellence at the school. There was just kind of 'give me a D and set me free' mentality."

*Superintendent Jeff Marlette*

The principal and superintendent also pointed out that the school simply did not emphasize academics. Incomplete or late homework was routinely tolerated, extra opportunities for academic learning were not effectively leveraged, and basic frameworks (e.g., student handbooks and attendance policies) were not in place or consistently upheld.

## Turnaround Success

New Underwood High School has made steady increases in impacting student outcomes since the implementation of its SIG. The impact has been most notable in math proficiency scores and graduation rates.

In 2009-10, 52 percent of the students tested were categorized as proficient or advanced in math. Fast-forward to

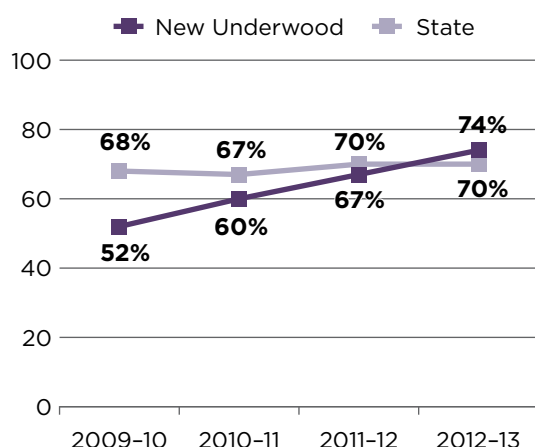
"The new superintendent and principal collaborated very well to look at big picture items for the district. So, leadership was huge."

*Shawna Poitra, South Dakota  
Department of Education*

2012-13, and 74 percent of students at New Underwood were categorized as proficient or advanced in math, an increase of 22 percentage points. This increase surpassed the percentage of students in the same category across the state (70 percent). Achievement levels in reading improved from 70 percent proficient or advanced in 2009-10 to 83 percent proficient in 2011-12, but then dropped to 52 percent in 2012-13. As described earlier, achievement levels (both increasing and decreasing) must be viewed within the context of the major fluctuations that occur with such a small student population.

New Underwood has also seen an increase in the number of students who have graduated from high school. The rate has been higher than the state average since 2012. In 2013, New Underwood High School had an 89 percent graduation rate, surpassing South Dakota's graduation rate of 83 percent, and 8 percentage points higher than in 2011.

### Math Achievement — All Students Percent Proficient



### How New Underwood Succeeded

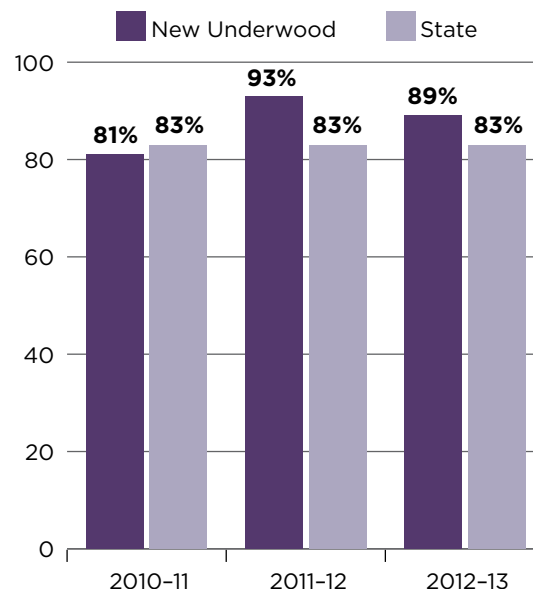
After receiving SIG funding in 2010, the district hired a new superintendent and a new high school principal to lead the turnaround efforts. The new superintendent, Jeff Marlette, immediately began revising the SIG plan in conjunction with the new principal and state personnel. The revisions were intended to more accurately match services and strategies with the school's needs.

The final SIG plan focused on implementing three key strategies: (1) increasing teacher support through coaching and professional development that would logically build on itself over time; (2) increasing the emphasis on rigorous academics; and (3) emphasizing student engagement.

### Coaching and Professional Development

New Underwood High School contracted with an external organization to provide teachers with coaches in technology, math, and reading. Coaches worked with staff each month throughout the SIG's duration to improve instructional practices and assist with evidence-based classroom strategies. Marlette pointed out that this approach fit his overall philosophy of leading and guiding teachers toward improvement versus purely evaluative strategies.

### Graduation Rates



In addition to coaching supports, teachers also had increased professional development opportunities. However, Marlette quickly pointed out that professional development opportunities were not random, and each offering built logically on the offerings that came before it. Professional development opportunities also included attending national conventions and receiving incentive pay and tuition reimbursement for teachers seeking master's degrees.

"I don't believe that you can evaluate teachers to become better teachers. You have to lead them, and mentor them, and guide them, and coach them to be better teachers."

*Jeff Marlette, Superintendent*

Another key strategy was establishing an environment where students' knowledge was assessed more than once per year. The school's improvement plan implemented a set of assessments that allowed academic scores throughout the school year to target

“This is a small school mentality. Our teachers know our kids. They know what their home life is like. They know the name of the students’ dogs, and why one kid got a speeding ticket on Friday night, even though we weren’t even here at school. We know about this stuff because it’s a very tight-knit group that we have here. Our kids know our teachers; our teachers know our kids. There’s a lot of trust involved.”

*Joel Hovland, Principal*

instruction to fit students’ needs. Teachers received training on these evaluations to better understand their students’ progress and better target instruction. Hovland pointed out, “The beauty of it is that the results of [these] tests are immediate. The next day the teacher can access the test and see the strengths and weaknesses of an individual or for the entire class.”

### Academic Emphasis

A “zero tolerance for failure” policy, which focused on increasing attendance rates and homework, was implemented across New Underwood High School. This policy increased student accountability by reinforcing strict consequences for not completing schoolwork and for having unexcused absences. Any student who did not submit daily schoolwork was assigned to after-school sessions to complete missing academic work. In addition, students who needed additional academic support were assigned a peer mentor. The student’s academic progress determined the duration of the peer mentoring. Consequences for missing 10 or more days of school included

receiving no credit for classes and, in some cases, a delay in graduation.

As an additional support for academics, the school also leveraged existing structures to build in extended learning time. Starting in 2005, the school transitioned to a four-day school week to save transportation costs. In this large, rural setting, busing costs can be exorbitant, and a Monday-Thursday schedule helped keep the costs lower. With the addition of the SIG funding, the school was able to offer a Friday school program for any student in danger of failing (or currently failing) a class. Friday school runs from 8:00 to 11:30 a.m. and is always staffed with at least two or three teachers. Although Friday school is mandated for struggling students, all students are welcome to attend. Both the superintendent and school principal credited this addition as being a big part of the turnaround success. As a measure of the program’s success, the number of students mandated to attend the program steadily decreased with each passing year.

### Student Engagement

The school administration wanted to get students more involved in the day-to-day operations and become more aware of the school climate that they helped to create. Toward this end, the administration started a Student Summit to give students an opportunity to voice their opinions about their school and

“We really built a good, collaborative working relationship with the school.”

*Shawna Poitra, South Dakota  
Department of Education*

their educational experiences. For example, past summits have included discussions that ultimately led to facility improvements, student leadership, and student handbooks. These summits have been highly successful



“The numbers can’t always tell the whole picture. It’s beyond the numbers. It’s the pieces that they put in place. It’s the coaches that they brought in to help train their staff; it’s these student summits and then making students realize that their education is valuable and important to them. So, it’s these types of things that show the success of the grant versus just the numbers it provided.”

*Shawna Poitra, South Dakota  
Department of Education*

and have provided meaningful insights to help move the school forward.

Students were also assigned a mentor teacher (starting in seventh grade) who understood their living environment and could help coach them through graduation. Every New Underwood teacher has approximately 12 students whom they mentor.

### State Support

In addition to working collaboratively with the school and district staff to craft the school’s SIG plan, the state assisted in other key areas. State personnel were on site two times a year, and they were available for regular phone and email conversations as needed. State personnel also made sure that school stakeholders understood the grant’s basic elements. State staff worked with the local staff to develop budgets and kept them apprised of relevant developments (such as best practices and new research), which the state staff saw or heard about at SIG conferences or through other channels. Marlette pointed out that it was just generally helpful to have a “big brother or big

sister” looking out for them and making sure they were going in the right direction.

### Sustaining Change

Although New Underwood stakeholders readily admit the challenge of losing the additional SIG funding, they are optimistic that good things will continue to unfold. Marlette reported that they were still seeing the same growth that occurred during SIG years and that “...we’re still seeing that student pride in their school, and I think those things will carry on as long as we don’t backslide and get lazy.” New Underwood’s graduation rate edged up to 93 percent in 2013–14.<sup>3</sup>

The efforts of new leadership, both at the superintendent and principal positions, provided a learning environment for teachers and students alike. Coaches and well-coordinated professional development, combined with effective student engagement strategies, established a highly rigorous academic environment at New Underwood High School.

“The state was extremely supportive . . . helping us understand the federal grants program, working with us on budgets, working with us as we would come up with new ideas, helping us to iron ideas out, and finding new opportunities.”

*Jeff Marlette, Superintendent*

<sup>3</sup> More recent student achievement data were not available at the time of this report due to implementation of a new state assessment system.



## Key Takeaways

- The plan matters; a plan that addresses the school's needs and is grounded in research-based practices is critical to improvement efforts.
- Professional development is effective when it builds on previous professional development and matches the needs identified in the plan.
- It is critical to train teachers to use data throughout the school year to assess student knowledge, monitor progress, and change instruction accordingly.
- Schools can take active steps to promote student engagement (e.g., opportunities for actionable student input) and a strong emphasis on academics.
- The state can play an effective role from the start (helping to develop the plan) and throughout implementation (through feedback loops).

# Fern Creek Traditional High School (Louisville, Kentucky)

## Restructuring for Success

### Perspectives:

*Nathan Meyer, Principal, Fern Creek Traditional High School*

*Kelly Foster, Associate Commissioner, Kentucky Department of Education*

*Donna Hargens, Superintendent, Jefferson County Public Schools*

*Dena Dossett, Director of Planning, Jefferson County Public Schools*

Fern Creek Traditional High School took dramatic steps to implement a school turnaround approach when it was identified in the bottom fifth percentile of Kentucky schools. After replacing nearly a third of the school's staff, Fern Creek leaders worked closely with the state department of education to institute a new system of differentiated supports for students. School stakeholders established effective professional learning communities (PLCs) focused on data discussions and decision-making while simultaneously restructuring the schedule and curriculum to optimize the learning environment for all students.

### Life Before the Turnaround

Fern Creek Traditional High School sits in Jefferson County, Kentucky's largest and most urban school district. The school currently serves over 1,500 students from diverse backgrounds. The student body is approximately 45 percent white, 37 percent African American, and eight percent Hispanic. About 10 percent of the students speak English as a second language — with students from all over the world.

In spring 2010, Fern Creek was identified as persistently low achieving with student achievement scores that placed it in the fifth

percentile of Kentucky schools. The school also faced a low graduation rate of 67 percent and a college and career readiness score of 19 percent.<sup>4</sup> Stakeholders pointed out that the school tended to focus more on issues of student behavior and dress

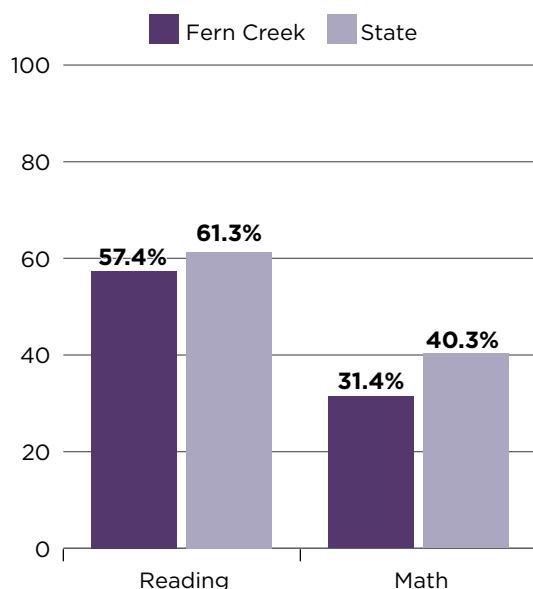
“We represent some of the poorest and toughest kids of the city of Louisville while also having upper-middle class kids. We have [advanced] kids; we have struggling kids. We have the full gamut and are a reflection of America in a lot of ways.”

*Nathan Meyer, Principal*

code than on building a culture of learning. According to Kelly Foster, Associate Commissioner at the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE), the school “...did

<sup>4</sup> Schools and districts in Kentucky provide information about how many students are ready for college and/or careers based on test scores and certifications earned. Read more [here](#).

### Reading and Math: 2009-10 Percent Proficient



not have an intentional focus on student achievement or schoolwide system of educating students based on individual needs.”

A 2010 KDE leadership assessment report found the school had deficiencies in several key areas, including providing effective curriculum, instruction, and assessment; addressing the needs of struggling learners; and addressing cultural and socioeconomic differences of students.

Due to these results, the school became eligible for a School Improvement Grant and help from the state’s Education Recovery Team.<sup>5</sup> In late 2010, Fern Creek was awarded just over \$1.3 million for a three-year period to implement the school turnaround SIG model and to replace up to 50 percent of the staff.

### Turnaround Results

Fern Creek’s leaders used the state’s assessment report as the blueprint for an overhaul

<sup>5</sup> Priority schools in Kentucky are supported through staffing from Education Recovery Leaders and Specialists. Leaders and Specialists focus on a systems approach aligned with the school leader’s mission and vision.

of key school systems, which meant they made some significant decisions regarding personnel, school schedules, and staff development.

The decisions paid off. In the three years following the SIG award and partnership with the state’s Education Recovery Team, Fern Creek increased student achievement and rose from the 5th to 73rd percentile of Kentucky schools in 2014. Student proficiency scores were on an upward trajectory beating state scores in 2011 (53 percent vs. 46 percent in math, and 67 percent vs. 66 percent in reading), until the implementation of Common Core State Standards lowered scores across the entire state in 2012. Meyer pointed out that the school “...looks and operates very differently today than it did a few years ago.”

In addition to improving its state rank, Fern Creek also boosted graduation rates from 67 percent in 2010 to 89 percent in 2014. College and career readiness increased from 19 percent in 2010 to nearly 73 percent in 2014. These indicators easily met the improvement goals that the state department of education established.

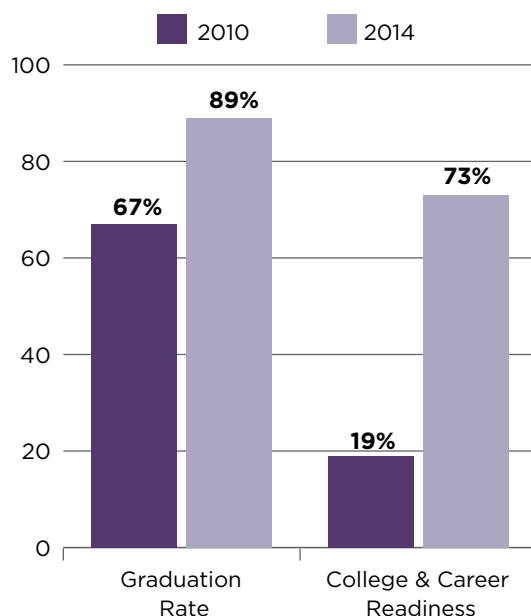
“It’s all about the learning culture and meeting the needs of students now. It was a change in teacher mindset, the way teachers instruct, focusing on the Common Core and using data to analyze next steps.”

*Kelly Foster, Associate Commissioner, KDE*

### The Turnaround Strategies

According to current Fern Creek principal, Nathan Meyer, the school focused on drafting a SIG plan that addressed the weaknesses identified in the school’s 2010 leadership assessment. Meyer was a critical

### Fern Creek Graduation and College & Career Readiness



part of this process as he was the assistant principal at that time. After the SIG award, the state played a critical role in helping Fern Creek school leaders implement their plan by appointing Kelly Foster as their Education Recovery Leader. According to Meyer, Foster helped the school leadership to “ground” a lot of the initiatives that composed their vision for success. This approach meant ensuring that initiatives used solid, research-based practices as their foundation.

Fern Creek eventually settled on a plan that incorporated four key strategies: (1) recruiting staff intentionally to build a committed, quality teaching staff; (2) revising and rejuvenating the system of PLCs; (3) focusing heavily on effectively using student data; and (4) reorienting the master schedule to better support student learning. Throughout the implementation of these strategies, the state (through the Education Recovery Leader) and district played critical roles in supporting school leaders.

### Intentional Staff Recruitment

During early SIG implementation, Fern Creek interviewed each of its 85 teachers

to determine their fit with the school's new direction. By the end of the process, the school let 35 teachers leave and faced the challenge of bringing in 35 new teachers. Principal Meyer pointed out that, although difficult, filling the open positions with the right people was a critical component of the SIG's success. The search for the right people included looking within and outside district boundaries and hiring 18 first-year teachers.

In addition to bringing in a large number of new teachers, school leaders also established their own Office of Teacher Support to provide development for new staff members. This office, composed of two teachers, also played a large role in supporting PLCs, using data, and optimizing the master schedule.

### Professional Learning Communities

The Office of Teacher Support worked with the school leadership team to develop high-functioning professional learning communities. In Fern Creek, PLCs are a way to help teachers come together and be very creative in how they differentiate instruction based on student data. According to Meyer, this collaboration is crucial in Fern Creek, as the student body's diversity eliminates the idea of using a “cookie-cutter model.” He also pointed out that PLCs are prioritized over other kinds of school meetings; the school has very few all-staff faculty meetings.

A key component of this approach was establishing an Instructional Leadership Team PLC, which was responsible for monitoring school PLCs, ensuring appropriate PLC focus, and promoting data-driven discussions and decisions. The leadership PLC oversees all aspects of PLCs and works to make changes if it sees issues. Meyer pointed out that this led to a system that ensured “...if there was a struggle within a PLC or [for an] individual teacher, there was a way of helping that process.” The team's membership includes four

“I think the restaffing in general [was a factor in the school’s turnaround]... the ability to have everyone recommit to the school. Through that process, the principal was able to really make sure everyone in the building was on the same page.”

*Dena Dossett, Director of Planning*

assistant principals, the principal, and a coach from the district office.

### Data-Informed Instruction

As a key component driving effective PLCs, Fern Creek instituted a strong focus on data-informed decisions throughout the school. To develop the teachers’ capacity to use data, the leadership team instituted “data days” for teachers in core subject areas once every six weeks. Using SIG funding, teachers had a full release day to learn and talk about data. During these sessions, they would identify whole school trends to inform future core instruction throughout the school. In addition, data analysis gave teachers a foundation to develop differentiated lessons. Throughout this process, the Office of Teacher Support provided guidance and ensured that teachers focused on the correct areas.

The increased effectiveness of data use in Fern Creek also enabled the school to establish a successful extended learning time (ELT) program. Associate Commissioner Foster explained that “...they have a great data system in place that helps them determine which students need interventions [during ELT] and in which specific areas.” The ELT at Fern Creek is open to all students, and Principal Meyer reported that from 150 to 250 students per week take advantage of this extra time.

### Master Schedule Optimization

Although the preceding factors were crucial, Meyer suggested that the changes made to the school’s master schedule were equally important and sometimes overlooked. Fern Creek uses a trimester system with 70-minute classes that meet five periods per day. Prior to the SIG program, the school’s master schedule sometimes meant that students could finish math in February and not have another math course until November — creating a big learning gap where students would forget math concepts. Fern Creek modified the master schedule to eliminate the gap and ensure that math and English instruction occurs every day.

Another key modification to the master schedule involved a curricular change. Prior to SIG funding, the school had a number of tracks (comprehensive, honors, and AP) that resulted in lower expectations and rigor for students falling into the lowest comprehensive track. School leaders altered the track system to ensure rigor at every level and encourage more students to enter AP classes. As Meyer pointed out, “...there was a lot of intentional focus in terms of how we scheduled kids.”

“We helped them focus on areas that needed to be improved, as far as making sure the strategies were research-based and that there was a solid plan, budget, and vision for the three-year process.”

*Kelly Foster, Associate Commissioner, KDE*

### State Support

The state played a key role in Fern Creek’s success through the efforts of Kelly Foster, the school’s on-the-ground Education Recovery Leader. In Principal Meyer’s words, “Our largest support in terms of how we

changed the paradigm of our school was probably working with Kelly Foster. She made us look at accountability in a more systemic way than we had in the past.” Meyer went on to say that the state and district were in sync with their support. The district provided the critical autonomy to trust Fern Creek to select appropriate improvement programs and strategies. The state then helped set those programs in motion, according to Meyer, by “...getting down to the nitty-gritty and being in our building on a daily basis, focusing on what we needed to do.”

The state provided support from the very beginning with its help in grounding the school’s SIG plan and continued its support with the school’s PLCs, sharing best practices and monitoring visits. In addition to Foster’s daily assistance, a separate state team performed monitoring visits (as part of SIG compliance) that helped ensure SIG funds were spent appropriately and were focused on increasing student achievement.

Foster believes that the relationships she built with the school leaders and faculty were critical to Fern Creek’s overall improvement. She pointed out that the state’s approach was never a “gotcha” approach, but rather an intentional, continuous improvement approach — focused on developing the capacity of school leaders and teachers.

### District Support

In addition to the aforementioned autonomy provided to Fern Creek, the district took several concrete actions to help the school’s turnaround efforts. Jefferson County Public Schools, led by Superintendent Donna Hargens, began helping from the very beginning by working with the teachers’ union to ensure that school leaders could bring in the right teachers for the turnaround. Principal Meyer pointed out that the human resources department was very supportive in the actual process of personnel changes throughout the school — moving people in and out.

The district also provided the school with a Goal Clarity Coach — a person charged with helping teachers with their content area and instructional strategies. The Fern Creek Goal Clarity Coach was a key member of the aforementioned Instructional Leadership Team PLC. The district provided professional development for the coaches and, whenever possible, also invited Education Recovery Leaders from the state to help ensure that everyone was on the same page.

“The teachers’ association and Superintendent Hargens have worked well in terms of assessing what schools need to do to support our kids.”

*Nathan Meyer, Principal*

After the SIG award, the district went through a major reorganization that established a more regional approach to support schools. This approach meant that additional district contacts were made available to differentiate support for schools as well as to spend more time in priority schools. Also, for the 2013–14 school year, the district provided an additional \$5 million for ELT at all priority schools, including Fern Creek.

### Sustaining Change

Fern Creek continued its upward momentum in the time since the SIG funding, and became a “Proficient” school in 2013–14 (i.e., the school is in the 70th to 89th percentile in the state). Fern Creek is currently the only formerly persistently low-achieving high school in the district to reach “Proficient” status. In addition, Fern Creek posted gains in all six accountability measures during 2013–14 (Program Review, Achievement, Gap, Growth, College and Career Readiness, and Graduation Rate). Math proficiency increased from 30 to 33 percent, and reading proficiency increased from 43 to 45 percent during 2013–14.

## Key Takeaways

- The state can contribute effective feedback early and often. This feedback includes help during the initial planning stages and continues throughout implementation.
- Intentional staff recruitment can lead to a committed staff that acts as a critical driver throughout the improvement process.
- Data-driven instructional decisions within well-supported professional learning communities are critical components of school improvement.
- All existing systems and practices may potentially be ripe for improvement; in this case, the master schedule was changed to facilitate improvement.
- School improvement efforts are aided when the district and state synchronize their efforts and communicate with each other.

# Turnaround Considerations for States, Districts, and Schools

In addition to the key takeaways identified in the individual school turnaround profiles, three clear considerations emerged that cut across each of the profiles. These considerations may be applicable to general school turnaround efforts.

## **Ensure State Involvement Throughout the School Turnaround Process**

The three case studies clearly indicate that state education agencies can play a critical role during all stages of a school turnaround. State personnel may want to actively seek out opportunities at critical junctures, including: (1) helping schools and districts to ground their vision for school improvement in research and evidence-based practices that are coherent and sustainable; (2) providing consistent staff availability (to the district and school) throughout the implementation stage to help address challenges; and (3) providing timely and helpful feedback through regular onsite monitoring. State agencies may also seek to ensure that their efforts are in sync with the district office to provide consistent support.

## **Plan Contextual Improvement Strategies Based on a School's Unique Needs**

School, district, and state stakeholders can all play a role in ensuring that selected improvement strategies match the school's needs. The district may want to assist the school in conducting a thorough needs assessment prior to deciding a turnaround model and accompanying strategies. The state can then play a role by helping to ensure the selected strategies are grounded in research and evidence.

## **Provide Schools an Environment of Defined Autonomy and Trust with Strategic and Targeted District Supports as Needed**

Districts should play an active role in ensuring a committed staff is in place and prepared to implement an appropriate school improvement plan. As school improvement efforts proceed, districts may want to consider defining parameters of accountability and providing flexibility, as appropriate, for school leaders to work within those parameters. District personnel should be available to help during implementation (as well as ongoing monitoring), but may want to give a fair amount of freedom and flexibility while offering support and guidance as needed.







# SNAPSHOTS OF SCHOOL TURNAROUND



**How Three Schools Used  
School Improvement Grants  
to Improve Student  
Learning Outcomes**

Scott Vince and Lenay Dunn