

Chapter 39

High School Turnaround: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

After implementing Response to Intervention (RTI), a high school in a rural Kentucky community made a dramatic turnaround within 2 years after establishing structures to support both teachers and students. The principal, special education director, other administrators, district personnel, school improvement specialists, teacher leaders, interventionists (i.e., a high school content area specialist), and school faculty implemented changes that were responsible for the turnaround. High expectations, a positive school culture, professional development, guided planning, student assessment, data analysis, research-based intervention programs, and a systems change approach are some of the contributions that led to widespread improvements at the school level and in individual student gains.

INTRODUCTION

High schools may face extensive challenges when attempting to implement Response to Intervention (RTI). A vast array of programs and services may be required that upset the entrenched routine that often typifies high schools across the country. However, one school was forced to make dramatic changes and implement RTI when students' test scores remained stagnant, and there were large gaps in performance for students who were African American, students with disabilities, and students qualifying for the federal free and reduced meal program. With the help of education recovery specialists, the high school developed sustainable RTI systems to support teachers and students. These changes led to a vast improvement in test scores and a system refined to promote teacher and student growth.

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BACKGROUND

Description of Site

During the timeframe in which the turnaround occurred, the case study high school was the only high school serving students in its county. The school was located in a rural area with a county population of approximately 16,000 community members. The school had around 900 students enrolled, and the ethnic diversity of the student population was as follows: 83% Caucasian, 13% African American, 1% Asian, 1% Hispanic, and 2% other ethnicities. Forty percent of the students qualified for free or reduced-cost lunches, and 13% were identified as having disabilities.

Test Scores

As shown in the Kentucky Department of Education (2012) School Report Cards, prior to the turnaround, the school's scores on state assessments revealed several areas of weakness in comparison to statewide averages. In the 2008-2009 school year, several key content areas showed deficient scores compared to high school averages across the state. On the state assessment, 37% of the school's students passed the science exam compared to 41% statewide. Similarly, in reading, 55% of the school's students passed, compared to 62% statewide.

During the 2009-2010 school year, there were similar disparities, with 25% of the school's students passing the state writing assessment compared to a 35% average for the state. In addition, data showed that 19% of the students were not successfully transitioning to an adult life of work, military, college, or other career options compared to the state average of 6%.

In Kentucky, schools that fail to meet the required criteria of annual yearly progress for 2 consecutive years are identified as being in need of improvement and placed in the "Needs Improvement" category. In 2010-2011, due to 2 years of not making annual yearly progress, the school was classified as "Needs Improvement—Year 1." Low-performing schools must improve to move out of the Needs Improvement category.

The parents were notified of the school's status, the students were given the option of attending a different high school, and the school plan was revised. Although efforts were made to improve, scores showed significant disparities between the high school and statewide averages on passing the content exams in three areas: math (30% school average; 40% state average), science (28% school average; 41% state average), and writing (25% school average; 35% state average). In addition, the school had significant gaps in the following areas: free and reduced lunch, disability, and minority students. Effectively addressing these gaps would positively impact the test scores.

The lowest-performing 5% of schools in the state are selected for intense, targeted interventions. In 2011, this particular high school was identified as one of the state schools in the bottom 5%. The state Department of Education designated the school as a persistently low-achieving school and thereafter supported the school with educational recovery specialists who were to assist the school's personnel in their turnaround efforts. Initially, three educational recovery specialists were assigned—one who specialized in leadership, one who specialized in literacy, and one who specialized in math.

The Kentucky Department of Education (2014) reported that after the first year of intervention, the school rose to the top third percentile of all high schools in the state. By the end of the second transfor-

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