



CREATING READIness | Closing Achievement Gaps by Ensuring That School Improvement Programs Are Designed to Succeed in the Highest Need Schools

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Introduction

Despite decades of education reform intended to close the achievement gap, states and districts continue to struggle to improve outcomes in their lowest performing schools. One key challenge with education reform initiatives is that underserved schools often have fewer resources and less capacity to rigorously implement improvement strategies such as new teacher mentoring and induction supports, teacher leadership programs, or Grow Your Own teacher pipeline initiatives. As a result, the districts and schools that most need support programs are often least likely to adopt and implement them successfully—a phenomenon that we call the “**needs paradox**.”

Often, the needs paradox is most acutely experienced in schools such as those designated as Comprehensive School Improvement (CSI) or Targeted School Improvement (TSI) schools under the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015. In many cases, CSI/TSI schools face challenges with working conditions and infrastructure, teacher turnover, accountability pressures, and inadequate preparation of their teachers, among other hurdles (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Goldhaber, Lavery, & Theobald, 2015; Goldhaber, Quince, & Theobald, 2015; Isenberg et al., 2016; Sass, Hannaway, Xu, Figlio, & Feng, 2012). Ideally, CSI/TSI schools should be targeted for school improvement initiatives due to their status; but their ability to seek out or successfully implement such initiatives may be limited due to the struggles they must confront.

These capacity challenges are amplified when states or districts overlook their high-need schools for targeted outreach and implementation of district or state-wide improvement initiatives because of their perceived lack of “readiness.” As a result, programs that are intended to close achievement gaps may have the unintended and contrary effect of widening gaps, as higher performing, higher capacity schools—rather than schools that most need such programs—adopt and implement the improvement initiative.

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To address this vexing needs paradox, AIR envisions a readiness paradigm with a clear focus on equity. Instead of viewing “readiness” as a mechanism that narrows the pool of eligible schools for implementation, we place the responsibility on states and districts to create programs that are designed to succeed in the highest need settings. That is, readiness becomes the responsibility of the program, not of the students, teachers, or schools.

The READI framework (see Figure 1) describes the considerations states and districts should bear in mind as they design programs and related supports that will succeed in the highest need schools. These design considerations will help education leaders tailor programs in ways that surface and accommodate the unique characteristics of high-need schools and have the potential to positively impact achievement gaps.

Figure 1.



ADDRESS

Resource Deficiencies

Tailor supports to address the limited financial and time resources of underserved schools while leveraging the unique strengths of participating schools.



TARGET

Educator Supports

Provide the supports needed by novice, ineffective, or underprepared teachers to engage more effectively in their work.



CONSIDER

Accountability Requirements

Assess how program design can align with current accountability and school improvement requirements to streamline efforts.



COUNTERACT

Disparities in Working Conditions

Actively mitigate disparities in working conditions that have disproportionately impacted teachers in underserved schools for decades.



BUILD

Implementation Capacity of Staff

Create and persistently engage in supports and capacity building services to construct sustainability plans for school and district teams that are consistently stretched thin.

Worksheet

1 | What are the intended outcomes of the program?



Example 1: Address teacher shortages by implementing a new Grow Your Own program pilot for high school students.



Example 2: Reduce teacher attrition in high-need schools by implementing a new program to strengthen mentoring.

2 | Who are the most important beneficiaries of the program?



Example 1: Schools in district X in which teacher shortages are most severe; schools designated for Comprehensive and Targeted support; schools with high rates of “ineffective teachers.”



Example 2: Low-performing schools in which teachers responding to the last working conditions teacher survey reported that they did not feel supported professionally.

3 | Who is most likely to use the program and to benefit from it?



Example 1: Applications will likely be received from schools in more affluent districts with nearby colleges of education that can partner with them and can offer dual credit for future teachers.



Example 2: Schools that do not experience severe attrition and that enjoy strong cultures.

4 | Is there a difference between who you identified as the most important beneficiaries and who you identified as mostly likely to use the program? If so, why? What prevents your most important beneficiaries from using the program? (Consider the READI framework.)



Example 1: Schools in district X never respond to state invitations to participate in pilot programs. This may be because they have fewer resources, cannot employ application writers, and are preoccupied with required programs related to school improvement and accountability.



Example 2: These low-performing schools do not have a sufficient number of experienced teachers who can serve as mentors, or potential mentor-teachers do not have sufficient free time in their schedules to allow for mentoring activities.

5 | Relative to the program’s design, what modifications, additions, and accommodations should we consider to ensure that the program benefits the schools that need it most and fulfills intended outcomes?



Example 1: Conduct intentional outreach in the highest need schools; offer guided workshops for preparing an application for and participating in the pilot; prioritize schools for pilot participation by the significance of their need.



Example 2: Add a cross-school (and possibly virtual) mentoring component to the program that will allow schools without experienced potential mentors to benefit from it. Develop a scheduling model to allow for more collaboration time, and make the model an integral part of the mentoring program to accommodate high-need schools’ scheduling challenges.

References

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