# The READI Framework: Closing Gaps by Addressing the Needs of Low-Performing Schools

## GTL Center Working Paper

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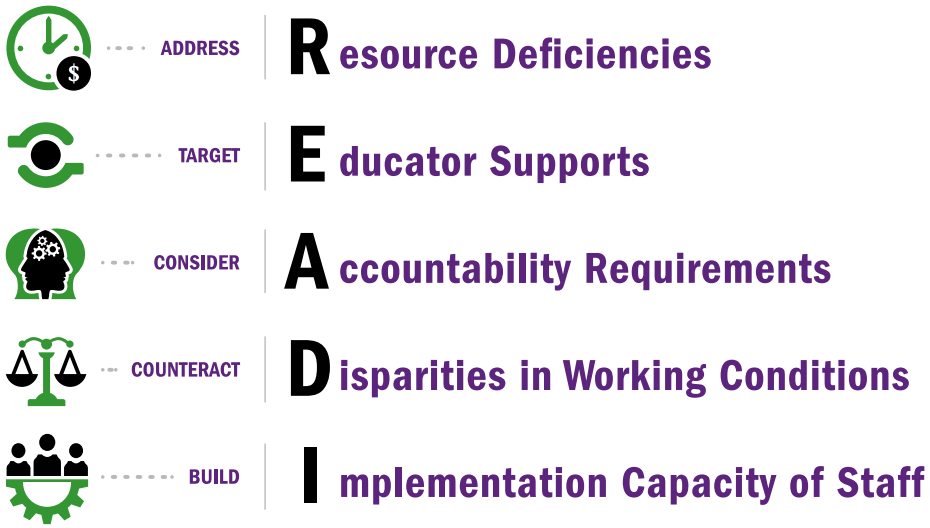
Across the country, states and districts are focused on educational equity. Education leaders are now, more than ever, laser-focused on closing achievement gaps among students and improving the lowest performing schools. Leaders are especially focused on high-need schools (i.e., low-performing schools, and schools with disproportionately high rates of minority and low-income students and English learners), which struggle to function in a faulty system because of a lack of leadership support, broken district policies, high leadership turnover, and poorer infrastructure. High-need schools face teacher turnover challenges, struggle with inadequate preparation of their teachers, experience the pressures of accountability that contribute to teacher attrition, and confront many other challenges with policy and politics (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Goldhaber, Lavery, & Theobald, 2015; Goldhaber, Quince, & Theobald, 2016; Isenberg et al., 2016; Sass, Hannaway, Xu, Figlio, & Feng, 2012). Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), these schools are designated for comprehensive school improvement (CSI) or targeted school improvement (TSI). In many state and district programs, these schools are often looked at as lacking readiness for state- or districtwide initiatives and therefore do not participate and benefit from them. For example, when choosing to launch a new initiative like a grow-your-own program, a state might seek eager participants to join the pilot program, all of which are high-performing schools, noting that the other schools lack readiness for the program at this time.

If we as educational leaders truly want to focus on equity, we must recognize that this perspective may result in widening gaps if schools only at the top of the pack adopt these programs. If we offer programs like new, innovative curriculum, teacher leadership opportunities, digital learning platforms, and others to all, but only the top performers join, we may be exacerbating the achievement gap rather than closing it. This lack of foresight can lead to investing more and more resources into affluent schools that are “ready” for programs instead of in the schools where the programs are needed the most. In this paper, we offer an

alternative definition for readiness—one that puts the onus of readiness on states and districts, not on schools, teachers, and students.

School systems can face multiple challenges, but two predominate: the ability to implement improvement programs related to (a) student achievement or (b) teacher quality. Initiatives such as innovative professional development programs that address teacher shortages, such as teaching conditions surveys or mentoring and induction programs, are often used by schools that are already doing well, not by the highest need schools that lack the resources and support they need to even consider them. School improvement grants may not receive applications from the schools that need these programs the most because schools (a) lack the capacity to write applications and (b) receive insufficient technical assistance to support the application and implementation process. This situation creates a "needs paradox": **The schools where improvement programs are needed most are least likely to implement these programs rigorously, if at all.**

We offer a new perspective and ask education practitioners to reconsider our "readiness paradigm" with a lens toward equity—we call this lens READI.




Instead of considering readiness as a mechanism to sort out districts or schools from programs and initiatives they could benefit from, we define readiness by the extent to which the program accommodates the highest need setting. In this scenario, readiness becomes the responsibility of the program, not the students, teachers, and schools. When state and district leaders see these challenges and characteristics as opportunities for a more targeted and intentional focus, greater potential exists to improve outcomes and close achievement gaps.

# Creating READIness: Closing Gaps by Ensuring the Programs Are Ready for the Neediest Students

State- and district-supported school improvement and teacher quality programs can be designed and implemented in ways that promote the necessary readiness among high-need schools. To do so, programs must consider the characteristics of high-need schools to strengthen school readiness through additional, individualized, and targeted support and resources. Although the needs, characteristics, and challenges we outline in the following narrative are constant, readiness can vary substantially based on how state- and district-supported programs are designed and implemented to support high-need schools. Practitioners should assume that if the lowest performing schools are not using new, innovative school improvement programs, whether it is because of some presumption of their "readiness" or any other reason, they will not only fail to close achievement gaps, but also they may widen them.

## Addressing Resource Deficiencies

Despite additional public investments in schools that serve low-income students, such as the Title I program, high-need schools continue to suffer from a shortage of resources (including available funds, personnel, time, and materials), as compared with other schools. This is apparent when considering all of the resources that are available for some schools but not others. From Jonathon Kozal's 1991 book *Savage Inequalities* to the 2019 EdBuild report, education scholars consistently document how wealthier districts supplement state investment in schools, creating significant investment gaps among students in different districts (EdBuild, 2019). Wealthier schools also have greater access to funds from parent teacher associations (PTAs) that can significantly impact schools' budgets and alter public investment across schools (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987; Jazynka, 2018). This imbalance is critical, given what we know about the greater investment required to provide education for students at risk and students below grade level (Miles & Roza, 2006). This shortage of resources would make it difficult for high-need schools to implement new programs that may require dedicated resources for substitute teachers to accommodate new training, allocate time in the schedule for professional development, purchase new textbooks, and so on. How would a school without access to advanced technology implement a new computer-based mathematics program with fidelity? How can a school that is struggling to meet basic learning requirements (e.g., library books, whiteboards, laptops, math manipulatives, science lab kits) compete with other schools that meet the basic requirements and then have additional dollars from PTA funds to buy cellos and harps? These discrepancies often result in wealthier schools being the beneficiaries of new programs, which in turn can effectively widen achievement gaps.

Thus, in designing programs that would be "READI" for high-need schools, practitioners can consider how to bridge the resource gap. Ignoring this gap, even in designing programs that are seemingly unrelated to school budgeting (e.g., new reading curriculum, new teacher leadership program), would mean that these schools would be unlikely to identify a pathway for implementing these programs with rigor, if at all. But careful analysis of the resources that proper implementation of a new program would require, development of a plan for how to allocate those resources properly, and identification of special funds such as state and federal grants that can support high-need schools in implementation, could lead the way for schools that struggle the most to be the main beneficiaries. One example of this type of design is the Opportunity Culture teacher leadership program, which aims to create a teacher leadership cadre within a school and raise teachers' pay. In addition, in its resources and communications, the program includes guidance on how to implement this model with rigor, using the existing school budget without the need for additional resources (Hassel, Holly, & Locke, 2014). Considering the example of a computer-based mathematics program, providing the devices (or funding for them) as part of the program instead of relying on a school's functioning devices can be the difference between implementation that closes achievement gaps (by allowing high-need schools to participate) or widens them (by excluding high-needs schools) (e.g., Kozma, McGhee, Quellmalz, & Zalles, 2004).

These state and district practices can ensure that high-need schools are the beneficiaries of new programs and initiatives that effectively close achievement gaps.

## Targeting Educator Supports

High-need schools often present conditions that make instructional tasks more challenging and require skills specific to teaching in these conditions that are not acquired in training and subsequent professional learning opportunities. For example, teachers in high-need schools are more likely to experience chronic absenteeism, deal with trauma among their students, and encounter other difficulties related to severe poverty that their students may experience (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Kataoka et al., 2011; Romero & Lee, 2007). High-need schools also have higher rates of students with disabilities, whom teachers are expected to help grow in an inclusive classroom environment (Gamm, 2007). Along with these conditions, the burden on teachers in high-need schools is exacerbated: The system is currently not set up to prepare teachers for the challenges they face, develop them on the job, and acknowledge and reward their efforts. In fact, some teachers feel that a gross misalignment exists throughout the career continuum between the focus of preparation, mentoring, professional development, teacher evaluation, and teacher recognition and the reality of what teachers actually do (Daniels, Bradley, & Hays, 2007; Greenlee & Brown, 2009; Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012).

To be READI, new programs aimed at improving schools and closing gaps should address this problem, not add to it. New professional development offered to teachers in these schools should acknowledge not just the work teachers were envisioned to do, but the work that they are *actually* doing, by offering content specific to issues such as chronic absenteeism, trauma-informed care, and teaching in the context of severe poverty—issues that were missing from these teachers' initial trainings. New teacher evaluation systems should include innovative approaches to recognizing and rewarding teachers who are successful, for example, in improving the attendance and discipline of their students, teaching outcomes that are shown by researchers to be equally, if not more, important than academic achievement (Jackson, 2018). Even licensure and certification practices can be READI for building the right skills among educators, for example, by offering "micro-credentials" to teachers who demonstrate competencies in these deeper skills that are necessary in all schools, and particularly in high-need ones. Making certain that new programs are in touch with educators' day-to-day work and address the unique context of teachers in schools with the most challenging teaching assignments can ensure that these schools become the beneficiaries of innovation and that programs serve to close achievement gaps.

## Considering Accountability Requirements

Special designations or classification of low-performing schools, such as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) CSI and TSI designations, usually come with a package of requirements from the state or district that include the selection or implementation of evidence-based programs. These programs are meant to concentrate resources and action to support the lowest performing schools in their improvement efforts. Thus, their purpose is to improve the lowest performing schools and close achievement gaps. However, as these programs pile up, they can create "instructional dissonance"—programs are unintentionally working at cross purposes, adding to the burden on principals who already struggle to keep up and address the unique challenges of their role as improvement leaders. As a result, pressure on principals may be significant, and they may feel that they serve school improvement requirements and programs, rather than the other way around, and have little to no capacity to add additional programs on top of the required ones (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009; Mitani, 2018). In addition, several studies demonstrate how schools affected by pressures related to school accountability tend to narrow their curriculum around the tested subjects, including reading and mathematics (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Jennings & Sohn, 2014), and therefore may give less attention to innovative programs that do not specifically focus on these subjects. Finally, accountability pressures may drive teacher and principal attrition, reducing staff capacity (Ingersoll & May, 2011; Mitani, 2018). This topic is discussed at length later.

To be READI, practitioners designing new programs that are supposed to support high-need schools and leaders should not develop these programs in a vacuum, but rather consider their existing accountability-related requirements. Offices of professional learning should collaborate with offices of school improvement to ensure that new innovative programs are accepted and encouraged as part, rather than in addition to, activities required under school improvement plans. Theories of action for each program should be developed to articulate that the activities and outcomes of programs are aligned and working toward a common and coherent instructional framework. Discussions with leaders of low-performing schools can inform the development of new programs and their ultimate design, and communications on school improvement can be leveraged to ensure that opportunities the state or district offers are shared with the schools that need them most.

## Disparities in Working Conditions

Teachers in high-need schools experience poor working conditions, and research suggests that working conditions predict teachers' attrition from high-need schools (Johnson et al., 2012). The lack of administrator support, unsupportive school culture, and lack of instructionally focused conversations with colleagues and administrators often lead to teachers considering other options (Bettini & Park, 2017; Johnson et al., 2012; Schernoff, Mehta, Atkins, Torf, & Spencer, 2011). Poor working conditions are particularly salient for teachers of color, who are disproportionately assigned to teach in high-need schools compared with their White counterparts (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Personal isolation and inferior working conditions are highlighted by teachers of color as areas of dissatisfaction (Brockenbrough, 2015; Hansen & Quintero, 2018). Addressing these disparities for all teachers who work in high-need schools is critical, and addressing them for teachers of color is also essential, as studies show that they have significant positive effects on raising test scores and graduation rates, providing equitable disciplinary treatment for all students, reducing dropouts, and other positive outcomes (Villegas & Irvine, 2010).

To address disparities in working conditions, state and district leaders can conduct surveys on working conditions, assessing the degree to which teachers feel supported on factors such as time, facilities and resources, community support and involvement, student conduct, teacher leadership, professional development, instructional development and support, and support for new teachers. The results of these surveys can be used to inform conversations at the state, district, and school levels and ideally address the working conditions for all teachers more effectively. For example, if a survey points to issues such as school climate and safety, the content of programs such as training teacher leaders and mentors could focus on strategies related to school climate and be relevant to the issues that these schools face. In other schools, teacher time may be highlighted as a concern, and staff will work collaboratively with school

leaders to find solutions to reorient the school schedule toward collaborative planning time with fewer interruptions to the academic schedule.

## Building Implementation Capacity of Staff

High-need schools experience significantly higher teacher turnover than other schools. Turnover in these schools is also significantly higher among school leaders (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2008; Loeb & Darling-Hammond, 2013; Simon & Johnson, 2015). This creates a working environment where many or even most teachers are in their first or second year. The lack of a cadre of teacher leaders in a building can immediately exclude schools from the successful implementation of improvement programs—ironically, those meant to address this problem. For example, teacher mentoring and induction programs are designed to support new staff, increase retention, and reduce turnover (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Yet, many mentoring programs, as well as published materials and standards for mentoring, require identifying experienced, effective teachers in the school who can serve as mentors, without offering solutions for schools with more beginning teachers than experienced ones.

To be READI, programs should not shy away from these problems, but address them directly. If a mentoring program cannot work at a school that does not have a sufficient pool of mentors to choose from, then it cannot work in the schools with the highest turnover—the schools that need that program the most. Instead, mentoring programs can be designed to bring mentors from different schools, use retired teachers as mentors, and use technology (we discuss recommendations for implementation of mentoring programs with the READI framework in this 2019 Center on Great Teachers and Leaders [GTL Center] report). The same is true for other school improvement programs. A new curriculum in mathematics should be adequate for schools where instructional leadership in mathematics may not be as strong. To close gaps, programs should not count on the capacity of staff, but rather be designed to create it.

## Supporting the Implementation of the READI Framework in State Education Agencies

Aside from using the READI framework to support states on different teacher quality issues that the GTL Center leads, the center also offers state education agencies (SEAs) a robust consultation package that results in adapting state programs to make them READI for the highest need schools and close achievement gaps. The consultation would follow the different stages of our evidence-based technical assistance action cycle (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Evidence-Based Technical Assistance Action Cycle**


The GTL Center READI team is prepared to support state and district teams in the following aspects of the work:

**Assess, Plan, and Prepare:**

- Thought partnering to support assessing the context in the SEA's lowest performing school.
- Conducting interviews and data analyses to identify gaps regarding the types of schools or districts that are using current SEA programs to adapt the READI framework to the specific context of the state or district.
- Support for designing new programs or redesigning existing ones, making them READI for all schools and districts with evidence-based interventions. This support can include:
  - codeveloping workplans and logic models,
  - developing monitoring and evaluation plans, and
  - aligning the work with related initiatives.

**Implement, Monitor, and Improve:**

- Support in implementing the new programs in high-need contexts (e.g., mentoring, coaching, training).
- Ongoing monitoring and data analysis for assessing the implementation of continuous improvement as well as reporting changes in outcomes and impacts among intended beneficiaries.
- Operationalizing plans and setting programs in motion.

**Sustain and Scale-Up**

- Building capacity (human, organizational, resources, and policy) to prepare for scale-up.

- Strategic collaboration to sustain and scale up READI programs to additional programs in the district or state, including:
  - facilitating stakeholder engagement throughout the change process,
  - providing support for the scale-up of evidence-based practices in more schools, and
  - conducting fidelity and impact evaluations.

This work requires the diligent attention of education leaders to look honestly at their programs to see the trends and gaps and to focus the energy and resources in schools where those gaps are overlooked. With such attention, education programs can better address these gaps, bringing effective instruction to all schools and students. We are eager to learn more about your needs and welcome the opportunity to talk more about building READIness in your context.

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