
Thank you for your request to our REL Reference Desk regarding research on strategies for school improvement in low performing schools when teacher morale is low and funding is virtually non-existent. Ask A REL is a collaborative reference desk service provided by the ten regional educational laboratories (REL) that, by design, functions much in the same way as a technical reference library. It provides references, referrals, and brief responses in the form of citations on research based education questions.

The information below represents the most rigorous research available. Researchers consider the type of methodology and give priority to research reports that employ well described and thorough methods. The resources were also selected based on the date of the publication with a preference for research from the last ten years. Additional criteria for inclusion include the source and funder of the resource.

Question: *In low performing schools what are the best strategies for school improvement when teacher morale is low and funding is virtually non-existent?*

Key words and search strings used in the search: *school improvement; school improvement AND low funding; low performing school; turnaround school; school reform; teacher morale OR teacher motivation;*

Search databases and websites:

1. ERIC: <http://eric.ed.gov/>
2. JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/action/showAdvancedSearch>
3. Google Scholar: www.google.com/scholar
4. Institute of Education Sciences (IES) Resources: <http://ies.ed.gov/pubsearch/>
5. What Works Clearinghouse: <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>

Citations Retrieved: (NOTE: Abstracts and executive summaries are copied directly from the reports when possible to ensure accuracy):

Cucchiara, M. B., Rooney, E., & Robertson-Kraft, C. (2015). "I've never seen people work so hard!" teachers' working conditions in the early stages of school turnaround. *Urban Education*. 50(3), 259-287. <http://eric.ed.gov/EJ1053490>

Abstract/Summary: School turnaround—a reform strategy that strives for quick and dramatic transformation of low-performing schools—has gained prominence in recent years. This study uses interviews and focus groups conducted with 86 teachers in 13 schools during the early stages of school turnaround in a large urban district to examine teachers' perceptions of the social and organizational conditions within their schools. The study shows that some turnaround schools provided more positive working conditions than others, particularly with respect to organizational function and culture. It further finds a

strong association between teachers' perceptions of school-level working conditions and support for school turnaround.

Herman, R., Dawson, P., Dee, T., Greene, J., Maynard, R., Redding, S., & Darwin, M. (2008). *Turning around chronically low-performing schools: A practice guide* (NCEE #2008-4020). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.
<http://eric.ed.gov/EJ501241>

Abstract/Summary: This guide identifies practices that can improve the performance of chronically low-performing schools--a process commonly referred to as creating "turnaround schools." The four recommendations in this guide work together to help failing schools make adequate yearly progress. These recommendations are: (1) signal the need for dramatic change with strong leadership; (2) maintain a consistent focus on improving instruction; (3) provide visible improvements early in the turnaround process (quick wins); and (4) build a committed staff. The guide includes a checklist showing how each recommendation can be carried out. It uses examples from case studies which illustrate practices noted by schools as having had a positive impact on the school turnaround. The following are appended: (1) Postscript from the Institute of Education Sciences; (2) About the authors; (3) Disclosure of potential conflicts of interest; and (4) Technical information on the studies.

Kaniuka, T. S. (2012). Toward an understanding of how teachers change during school reform: Considerations for educational leadership and school improvement. *Journal of Educational Change*. 13(3), 327-346.
<http://eric.ed.gov/EJ972091>

Abstract/Summary: As the concept of distributed leadership and its concomitant organizational structures become more prevalent in schools, studying how teacher capacity can be enhanced and can be used as a catalyst for reform is important. This article documents the nature of how the implementation of a research-validated reform influenced what teachers thought about their own teaching, student achievement, and expectations. A case study approach documented the experiences of elementary school teachers in a high poverty, historically low-performing elementary school as they implemented a researched-validated instructional reform targeting the most at-risk students in the school. The teachers experienced significant professional growth that encompassed self-doubt, resistance, acceptance, and finally advocacy. Implications for the practices that define educational leadership and school improvement are discussed in light of how successful reform can improve teacher capacity.

Minckler, C. H. (2014). School leadership that builds teacher social capital. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 42(5), 657-679.
<http://eric.ed.gov/EJ1037452>

Abstract/Summary: This quantitative study explores the relationship between school leadership and the development and sustenance of teacher social capital. The literature review discusses aspects of leadership theory to elucidate understanding of how leadership influences teachers' working relationships. Quantitative methodology and analyses ascertain the correlation between Leithwood et al.'s dimensions of transformational leadership and the author's dimensions of teacher social capital. Study findings indicate significant, positive moderate to high moderate correlations between: (1) transformational leadership and the environmental conditions nurturing teacher social capital; (2) leadership and teacher social capital; and (3) leadership and teacher collective efficacy (TCE). An additional major finding is the perception of higher levels of transformational leadership among teachers in middle performing and high performing schools as compared to the perceptions of teachers in low performing schools. This study provides evidence of the importance of transformational leadership in the development of teacher social capital within a school. High levels of teacher social capital should result in positive outcomes of student achievement, teacher quality and teacher job satisfaction. The study findings, interpretations and conclusions contribute to both school leadership and school improvement literature and should inform discussions about leadership development and the impact of leadership on teacher working relationships.

Norman, S. W. (2010). Good help is hard to find: A study in retention and motivation. *Journals of Cases in Educational Leadership*, 12(3), 7-12.
<http://eric.ed.gov/EJ901133>

Abstract/Summary: This case study confronts the issues of staff motivation and teacher retention that face administrators in low-paying and/or low-performing small school settings when teacher pay is low and morale is lower, especially in communities having a lower economic base. It will present not only opportunities to try to keep good teachers but also opportunities to motivate and inspire them to a level of success that will turn school performance around and raise student achievement scores. It may be used in an introductory course in critical issues in leadership, especially in the areas of distributed leadership and team building methods.

Referrals

Organizations:

- The SEDL National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools: <http://www.sedl.org/connections/about.html>
- National Network of Partnership Schools: <http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/index.htm>

Federally Funded Resources:

- Institute of Education Sciences (IES), public search engine available at: <http://ies.ed.gov/pubsearch/>
- What Works Clearinghouse: <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>

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