



Windows of National Opportunity:

An Excerpt from the Center on School Turnaround's
Report on State Supports for Turnaround

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About Education Northwest

Founded as a nonprofit corporation in 1966, Education Northwest builds capacity in schools, families, and communities through applied research and development. Education Northwest has submitted this report as part of the ongoing formative evaluation of the Center on School Turnaround.

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Windows of National Opportunity: Introduction

In 2014, state and national leaders found many aspects of turning around America’s low-performing schools even more daunting than in the previous year. These views were revealed in the Center on School Turnaround’s (CST’s) 2014 February/March survey of school turnaround leaders in State Education Agencies (SEA) and directors of the nation’s technical assistance Comprehensive Centers (CCs). The federal government has defined several principles for supporting school turnaround; but several years into implementation, the survey still showed that states needed to increase their supports. While some state services are in place, leaders reported that influencing districts and schools can be challenging.

The key for SEAs is recognizing the windows of opportunity to influence each of the areas [important to school turnaround]. Keeping districts engaged and accountable for the schools is a key. (CC director)

Just as SEAs must find “windows of opportunity” to assist with school turnaround, national agencies must identify windows of opportunities to guide and enhance these state efforts.

Background and Purpose of this Document

This document is an excerpt of an annual CST report by their external evaluator, Education Northwest, a nonprofit research, evaluation, and technical assistance organization. The CST is one of seven national content centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education (ED). Launched in October 2012, the CST’s assists SEAs and CCs with school turnaround. Education Northwest has prepared this excerpt for ED’s Office of School Turnaround (OST). It focuses on state needs for assistance with federal turnaround principles that OST supports.

Survey Administration and Analysis

To conduct the survey, the CST provided Education Northwest with a list of SEA contacts and CC contacts. Ultimately, the sample included responses from at least one contact in all 50 states plus the District of Columbia, American Samoa, the Virgin Islands, and at least one contact in each CC, although not all SEA and CC leaders contacted actually responded. Therefore, 100 percent of states and 100 percent of CC are represented.

For items about school turnaround needs, practices, and policies, we limited the analysis to a single representative (i.e. average) response for each SEA and each CC, so that the survey would provide a national view with each state and region represented equally, regardless of the number of participants who responded to the survey.

Current State Needs, Practices and Policies

School Turnaround Needs Remain High Across the Nation

The CST focuses on 14 areas of school turnaround that CST leaders identified through research reviews and practical experience as important to successful implementation. The survey showed that SEAs and CCs believe their states need assistance in almost all of these areas. The highest need related to building capacity at all levels of the turnaround effort. Almost all (80% or more) SEAs and CCs reported their states needed assistance in these focus areas (Table 1). In only one area, promoting cooperative labor-management relations, did less than 50 percent of SEAs and CCs agree their states needed assistance. This finding was similar to findings in 2013.

In response to an open-ended survey, 26 participants listed additional needs. Of these, about a third reiterated the need for assistance in increasing capacity for school turnaround, especially among district and school leaders.

[My state needs assistance] building teacher and leadership capacity to support change at the building level. (SEA participant)

About a third reported their states needed assistance sustaining and scaling up current turnaround efforts, especially assistance with funding.

[My states need] suggestions for allocation of funds to support school turnaround post-SIG. (CC participant)

Finally, about a third said their states needed more guidance on specific, effective strategies for school turnaround.

[My state needs] access to research on the effectiveness of turnaround strategies and federal intervention models on sustainability of improvement efforts. (SEA participant)

Table 1
Percentages of SEAs and CCs Reporting State Needs for Assistance

	“Agreed” or “Strongly Agreed”	
	SEA	CC
<i>The majority, 80 percent or more, of SEAs and CCs reported their state(s) needed assistance with...</i>		
Developing SEA staff capacity to assist with school turnaround (e.g., improving SEA staff knowledge of existing school turnaround research)	96%	80%
Assisting districts and schools in sustaining the improvements in successful turnaround schools	93%	100%
Building district capacity to assist with school turnaround (e.g., improving district staff knowledge of existing school-turnaround research)	91%	87%
Ensuring the development of local turnaround leaders (e.g., principals and other administrators)	89%	100%
Supporting schools and districts in establishing a positive school climate	85%	93%
<i>A larger percentage of SEAs than CCs reported their state(s) needed assistance with...</i>		
Engaging families and communities	92%	67%
Promoting the use of expanded learning time (e.g., extending the school day, increasing the number of school days per year, or expanding instruction in core content areas)	90%	67%
Supporting social and emotional learning in schools and districts	90%	67%
Building political will for change	87%	73%
Improving capacity of local school boards to support turnarounds	87%	73%
Ensuring a pool of high-quality turnaround partners (e.g., agencies other than the state that can provide assistance with school turnaround)	83%	73%
<i>A larger percentage of CCs than SEAs reported their state(s) needed assistance with...</i>		
Ensuring the timely availability of useful data from SEA-level data systems	77%	87%
Monitoring and evaluating school turnaround efforts	74%	100%
<i>Less than half of SEAs and CCs felt their state(s) needed assistance with...</i>		
Promoting cooperative labor-management relations (e.g., help guiding and negotiating union contracts)	44%	47%

Note: This table was ordered by highest frequency of SEA responses for “agree” or “strongly agree.”

Source: Education Northwest analysis of the Center on School Turnaround’s 2014 annual surveys of leaders of school turnaround in state education agencies and federal Comprehensive Centers

Smaller Percentages Report Full Implementation of Supports for Many Federal Turnaround Principles

ED has defined seven school “turnaround principles.” Each of these principles includes multiple elements, but can be summarized as follows:

1. Provide strong leadership
2. Ensure teachers are effective
3. Extend learning time
4. Use an effective curriculum
5. Use data to inform instruction
6. Establish a safe environment
7. Engage parents and community

Because these seven principles include multiple elements, we divided developed multiple survey items to address some principles. For example, the principle “provide strong leadership” includes three elements: (1) evaluating the current principal using student achievement data as one element of the evaluation, (2) replacing the principal if the evaluation suggests a change is necessary to ensure strong leadership, and (3) providing the principal with the operational flexibility needed to turnaround the school. To gather data about this principle, we developed three survey items that represented strong leadership.

We asked SEA and CC representatives to rate their state or region’s stage of implementation of a total of 16 survey items representing the seven turnaround principles. The rating scale was based on the work of the National Implementation Research Network, one of the partner organizations in the CST. The scale had four categories: (1) Exploration – participants assess options and consider readiness for implementation, (2) Installation – leaders plan and prepare for implementation, (3) Initial implementation – practitioners try out the changes and begin implementing, and (4) Full implementation – the changes are completely in place and implementation is routine.

To report the differing levels of implementation of turnaround supports, we grouped the turnaround principles into the topics: “principal leadership,” “teacher effectiveness,” and “general school operations.”

Supports for Principal Leadership Declined

According to SEA and CC leaders, few states had fully implemented supports for principal leadership of school turnaround. Furthermore, percentages reporting full implementation declined from 2013 to 2014 for all but one survey item (Figure 2). It may be that, based on monitoring of ESEA waiver implementation by ED in summer and fall 2014, leaders believed that their implementation was not as complete as they had thought before ED's monitoring.

In particular, percentages that said their states provided operational flexibility to principals, declined—down 26 percentage points for SEAs and down seven percentage points for CCs. It may be that capacity actually declined in states, but it also may be that the definition of “operational flexibility” changed in the past year, making supporting this principle more challenging.

Using an open-ended survey item on the CST survey, we also explored the types of flexibility typically offered principals to enhance leadership in schools working to turnaround. Of the 19 participants responding to this item, about two-thirds said the district provided flexibility with staffing.

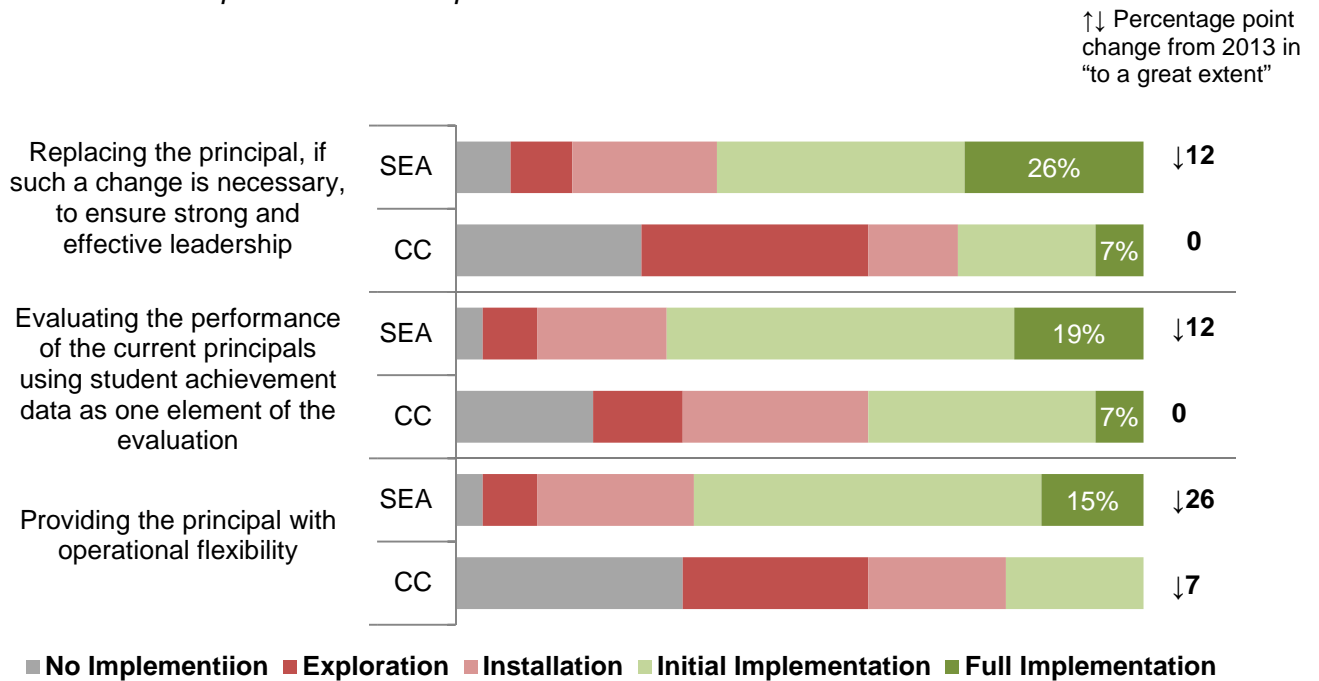
Districts may seek assistance in blocking teacher overage assignments [i.e. not allowing class size increase exceptions beyond the maximum specified in the contract] to identified priority and focus schools and/or re-assignment of teachers who are not proficient into identified priority and focus schools. We've used the turnaround principles to leverage flexibility on the districts' parts to make courageous decisions in spite of union contracts that may challenge it; we've been successful in negotiating some Memorandums of Understanding in some districts to address this. (SEA participant)

However, in some states this staffing flexibility was primarily around not replacing the principal if that principal could demonstrate some successes. Once the principal was retained, the survey responses did not indicate whether districts gave schools additional flexibility with other staffing decisions.

About a third of respondents also reported flexibility in scheduling. At times, this flexibility resulted in SIG, priority, and focus schools having schedules that differed from the other schools in the district, often extending the school day or year.

[Districts request flexibility for] scheduling (including extending the school day and/or expanding learning time within the existing school day schedule, expanding or implementing data team and/or common planning time.) (SEA participant)

Figure 2
Percentages of CC and SEA Leaders Reporting Implementation of Supports for Federal Turnaround Principles for Leadership

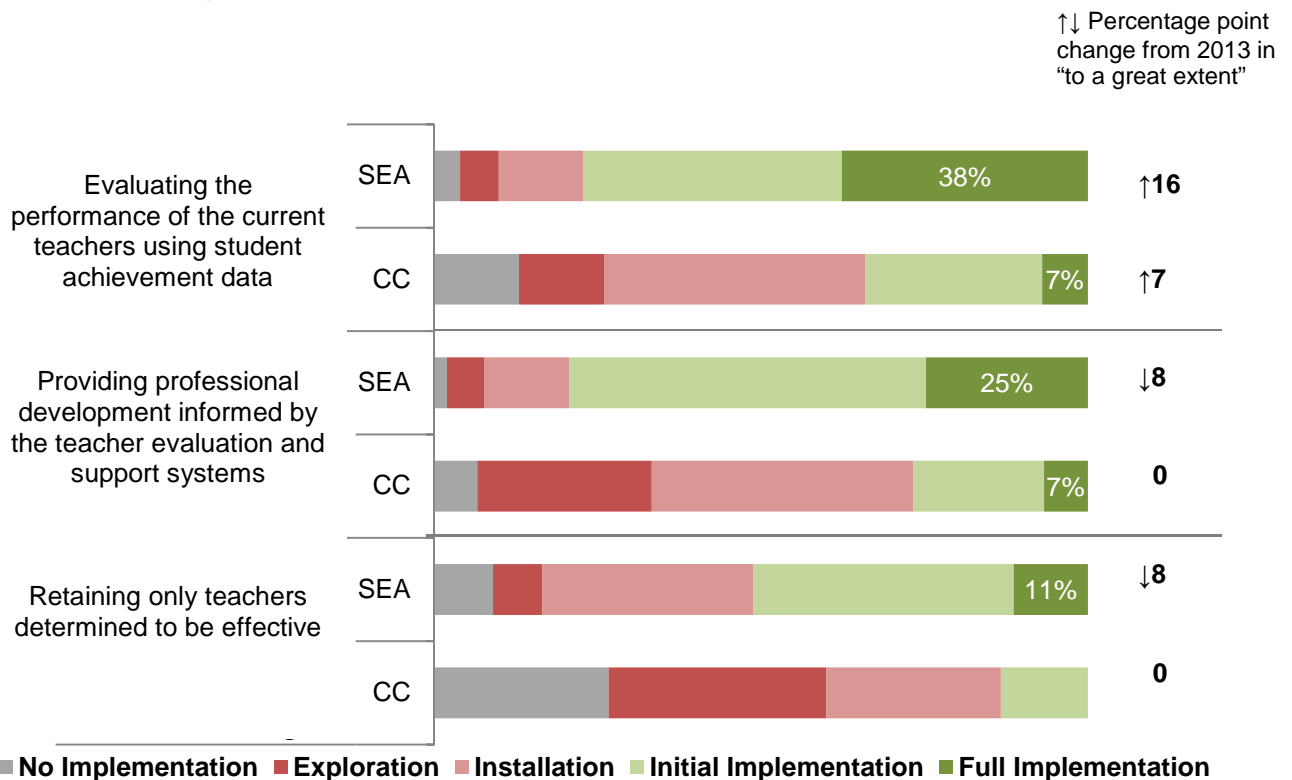


Note: This chart was ordered by highest frequency of SEA responses for "full implementation."
Source: Education Northwest analysis of the Center on School Turnaround's 2014 annual surveys of leaders of school turnaround in state education agencies and federal Comprehensive Centers

Supports for Evaluating Teacher Evaluation Increased

SEA and CC leaders had mixed views of school turnaround principles related to teacher effectiveness. According to both types of participants, notable increases occurred in the implementation of supports for evaluation systems tied to student achievement—an increase of 16 percentage points for SEAs and an increase of seven percentage points for CCs. Leaders varied in their perception of other survey items (Figure 3).

Figure 3
Percentages of CC and SEA Leaders Reporting Implementation of Supports for Federal Turnaround Principles for Teacher Effectiveness



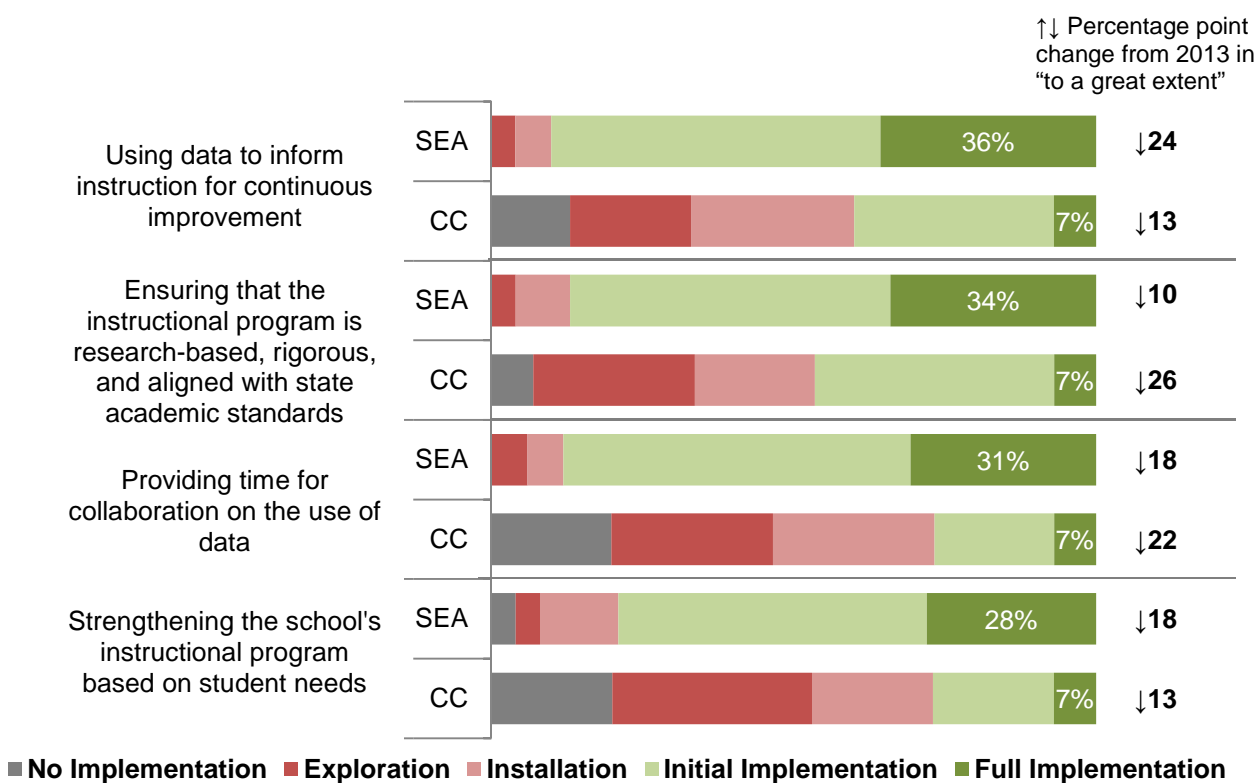
Note: This chart was ordered by highest frequency of SEA responses for “full implementation.”

Source: Education Northwest analysis of the Center on School Turnaround’s 2014 annual surveys of leaders of school turnaround in state education agencies and federal Comprehensive Centers

Supports for Some General School Operations Dropped

Compared to last year, in 2014, smaller percentages of SEA and CC leaders reported full implementation of some supports for principles related to some general school operations (Figure 4). As with the shrinking percentages for leadership, it may be that monitoring of ESEA waivers by ED revealed to leaders that these supports were not adequate or needed more work. We will report results for other general school operations later in this report.

Figure 4
Percentages of CC and SEA Leaders Reporting Implementation of Supports for Federal Turnaround Principles Related to General Operations (Items with Largest Percentage Point Decreases in 2014 Compared to 2013)



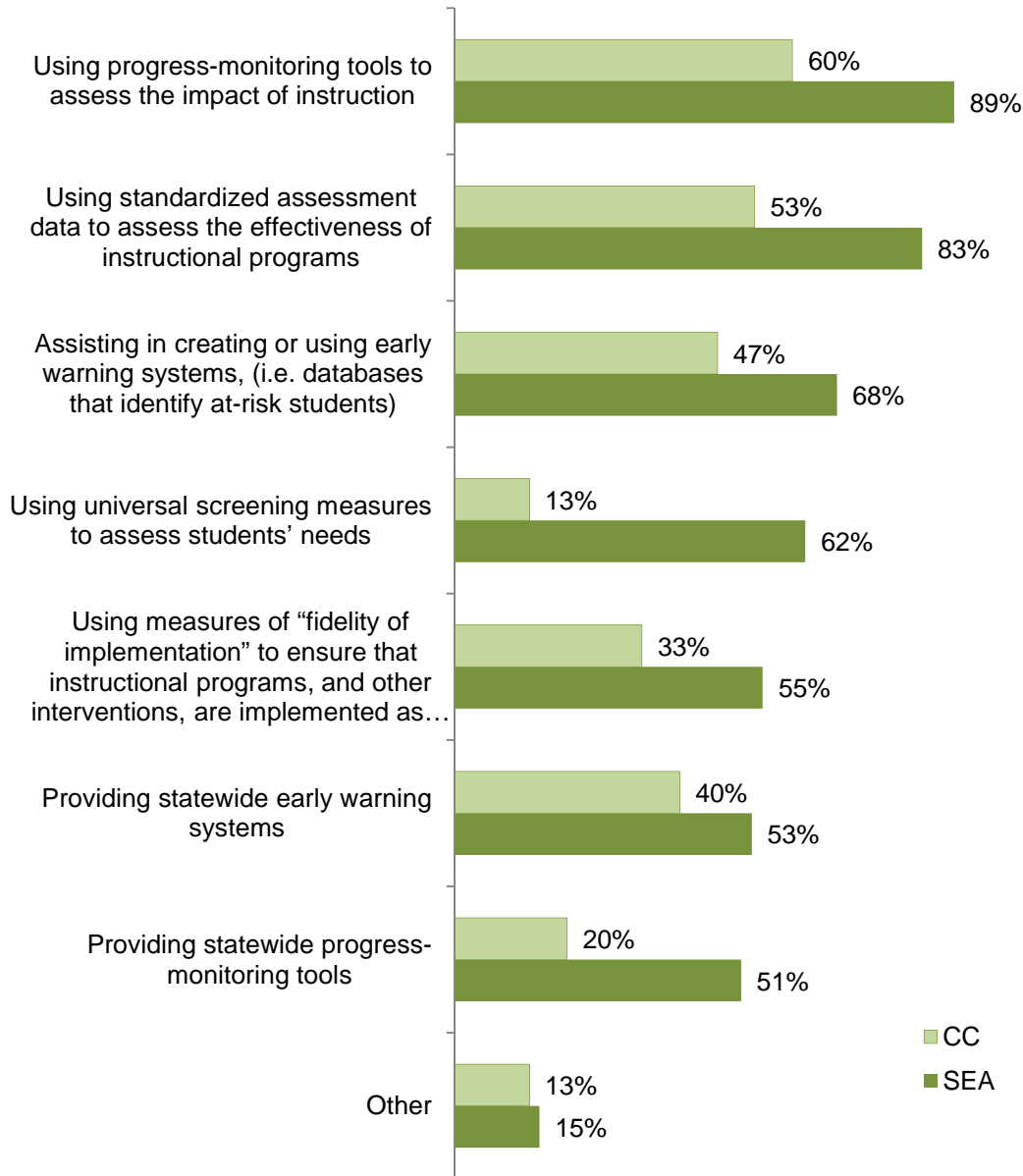
Note: This chart was ordered by highest frequency of SEA responses for "full implementation."

Source: Education Northwest analysis of the Center on School Turnaround's 2014 annual surveys of leaders of school turnaround in state education agencies and federal Comprehensive Centers

Support around data use. Because data use for improvement is such an important aspect of school turnaround, the 2014 survey delved more deeply into data use. First, to gauge SEA and CC activities around data use, the survey asked leaders to indicate whether their state or region convened groups to discuss, recommend, and/or sets data policies. Events were fairly common within states—79 percent of SEA leaders said their state convened these events. Regional events were less common—20 percent of CC directors said their CC hosted such events. It may be that CCs are less involved with convening data discussions, since data systems vary across states.

Next, we asked leaders to report all the different types of supports their states were providing around data use. The largest percentages of both SEA and CC leaders (89% of SEAs and 60% of CCs) reported supporting their states in the use of progress-monitoring tools to assess the impact of instruction (Figure 5). However, far fewer SEAs (51%) and CCs (20%) reported providing any progress-monitoring tools statewide.

*Figure 5
Percentages of SEA and CC Leaders Reporting Their States Provided Supports for Specific Activities Related to Data Use*

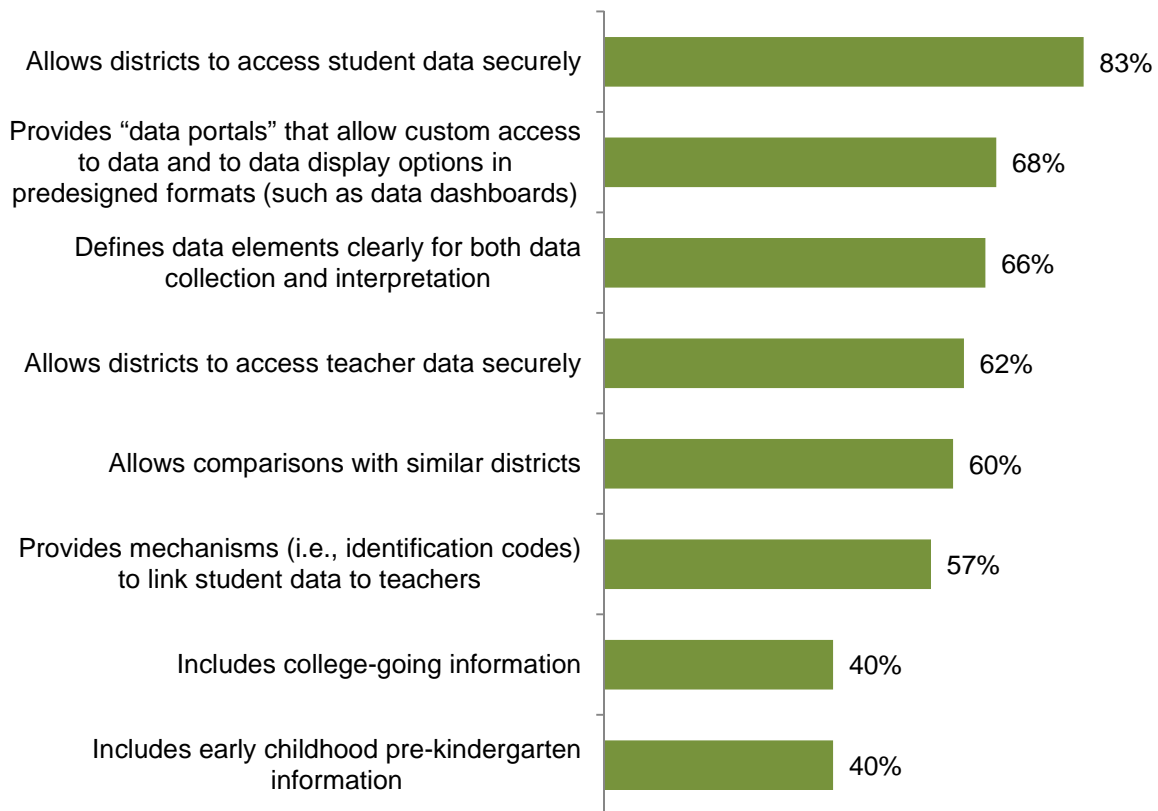


Note: This chart was ordered by highest frequency of SEA responses.
 Source: Education Northwest analysis of the Center on School Turnaround's 2014 annual surveys of leaders of school turnaround in state education agencies and federal Comprehensive Centers

Only a few SEA leaders mentioned other additional supports offered around data use for school improvement. Among these, some SEA leaders said their state provided data coaches, some said their state provided online school improvement planning tools, and some said their state vetted external providers of assistance on data use.

Third, we asked SEA leaders if their states maintained statewide longitudinal student databases that assisted with school turnaround efforts. Among SEA leaders, 85 percent responded positively. We then asked these SEA leaders about the functions of their database. Many (83%) reported the database allowed districts to access student data securely, perhaps the most basic and important function of such databases (Figure 6). Smaller percentages of states reported other functions.

Figure 6
Percentages of SEA Leaders Reporting Their State’s Longitudinal Student Database Included Specific Functions



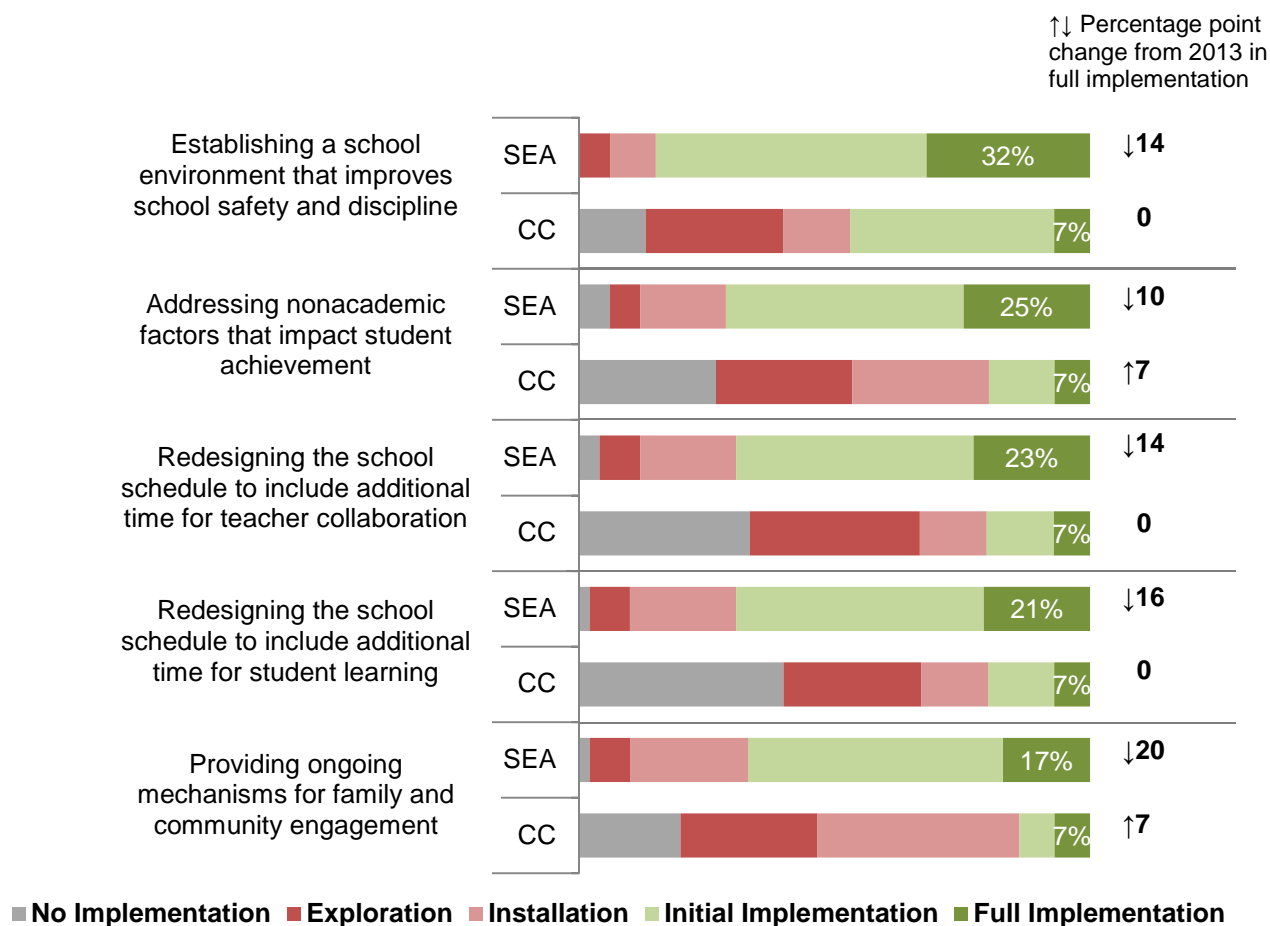
Note: This chart was ordered by highest frequency of SEA responses.
 Source: Education Northwest analysis of the Center on School Turnaround’s 2014 annual surveys of leaders of school turnaround in state education agencies and federal Comprehensive Centers

Additional State Supports for General School Operations

For the remaining federal turnaround principles, smaller percentages of SEAs reported full implementation of supports in 2014 compared to the previous year. In contrast, percentages of CC directors reporting that full implementation of supports was the same or slightly larger than in 2013 (Figure 7). It is beyond the scope of this study to determine why leaders of SEAs and CCs differed in their views. However, these turnaround principles, in general, did not have large percentages of leaders reporting that supports were fully implemented.

Figure 7

Percentages of CC and SEA Leaders Reporting Implementation of Federal Turnaround Principles Related to General Operations (Mixed Responses)



Note: This chart was ordered by highest frequency of SEA responses for “full implementation.”

Source: Education Northwest analysis of the Center on School Turnaround’s 2014 annual surveys of leaders of school turnaround in state education agencies and federal Comprehensive Centers

Through the survey, we took a closer look at multiple aspects of these general principles of school turnaround. In particular, we examined state policies related to school improvement and:

1. Expanded learning time for students, for which small percentages of SEA leaders reported implementing supports in 2013
2. School turnaround efforts related to student well-being and success, which is of growing interest to the CST
3. Supports for English language learners
4. Supports for students with disabilities

Support for expanded learning time. The majority of SEA and CC leaders reported no state policies or guidance either helped or hindered districts in expanding learning time.

Nothing from the state level is a hindrance. Indeed, many schools in the state fail to meet minimum requirements for contact hours let alone add additional time. (SEA participant)

Of the SEA and CC leaders who did provide examples of state policies or guidance, about half gave examples of technical assistance provided by the state. This assistance varied a great deal.

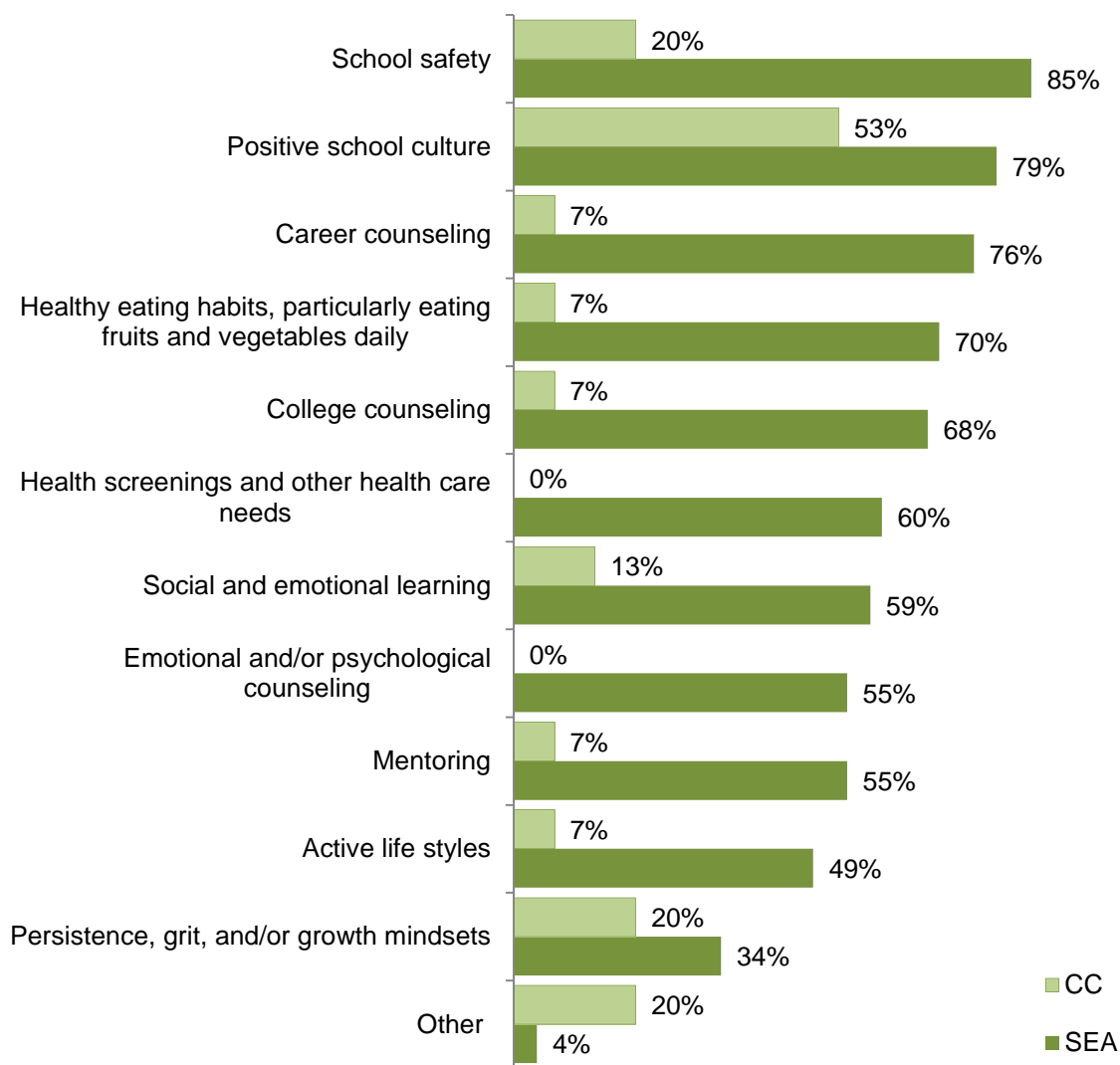
We have developed district-level "Expected Indicators" with Indistar [an online school improvement planning tool] that align to the spirit/intent of the federal turnaround principles. We provide technical assistance to districts as they address these performance indicators related to policies, practices, and resource allocation to schools in improvement. (SEA participant)

[The state] instructs priority schools to work through the School Time Analysis Tool (STAT) provided by the National Center for Time and Learning. (SEA Participant)

Of the 34 SEA and CC leaders who provided examples of state policies or guidance that hindered expanded learning time, about two-thirds mentioned things that were beyond the control of the state, including teacher union contracts, lack of local funds, lack of time locally, and the rural nature of some schools. A few mentioned state policies. Of these, some said the state's policy of allowing local control hindered expanded learning time, and others mentioned a state law or policy that allowed district to shorten their school day or hours.

Support for student well-being and success. Compared to CC leaders, larger percentages of SEA leaders than CC leaders reported state supports for student well-being and academic success. (Figure 8). However, a relatively small percentage of SEAs (34%) reported supports for student "persistence, grit, or growth-mindsets," a new focus of the CST. Similarly, just 20 percent of CC leaders reported this support.

Figure 8
Percentages of SEA and CC Leaders Reporting Their Organizations Assisted with Specific Strategies Related to Students' Well-Being and Success



Note: This chart was ordered by highest frequency of SEA responses.
Source: Education Northwest analysis of the Center on School Turnaround's 2014 annual surveys of leaders of school turnaround in state education departments and federal Comprehensive Centers

An open-ended item asked SEA and CC leaders to explain what they meant when they responded “other” to the survey item about supports for student well-being and success. The few who responded primarily mentioned supports to decrease students’ problem behaviors, such as bullying and absenteeism.

Support for English language learners (ELLs). More than a third of the 63 SEA and CC leaders, responding to the open-ended item about supports for ELLs, said they did not know of anything their states were doing to support ELLs in turnaround schools specifically. Some expressed a desire to add these supports. Others said that because their states' lowest achieving schools have, historically, always had large percentages of ELLs, supports for these students were already embedded in their work.

Addressing ELLs' needs is a constant in the work. No state guidance is given. It is always an integral part of what we do. (CC director)

From the two-thirds of respondents that identified specific supports for ELL and school turnaround, almost a third mentioned various professional development or technical assistance efforts related to ELL issues that were offered to SIG, priority, and focus schools. Sometimes this assistance was offered through external providers.

We offer job-embedded professional development and technical assistance, monitoring regarding compliance, and other resources. (SEA participant)

[Our] waiver identifies that Professional Service Providers (i.e., assigned improvement support staff) receive training related to mathematics instruction for English learners. (SEA participant)

About a fourth of respondents noted that their state offices collaborated to provide ELL support in SIG, priority, and/or focus schools.

School Improvement collaborates with our State ESOL and Title III Office to provide SIG and/or Priority schools with guidance and support. (SEA participant)

Support for special education students. As with ELLs, many (more than half) of the 55 SEA and CC leaders responding to the open-ended item about supports for special education students said they did not know of anything their states were doing, specifically in turnaround schools, to support special education students. Often they said this was something that the state supported in all schools rather than specifically in schools working on turnaround.

Of the 26 respondents who provided specific examples of supports for working with special education students in SIG, priority, and focus schools, more than half said the supports and assistance were provided in collaboration with the state offices focused on special education.

We are working in a coordinated effort with our Students with Disabilities staff to provide ongoing support and technical assistance for the field. (SEA participant)

In addition, about a third of respondents said their state offered specific supports for assisting students with disabilities in schools working on turnaround. These supports included things like "technical assistance meetings, PowerPoint presentations, and data analysis assistance."

Summary of State Needs, Practices, and Policies for School Turnaround

The 2014 annual CST survey of SEA and CC leaders showed that states still need considerable assistance in order to provide required supports for school turnaround, particularly supports building local capacity for turning around schools. Furthermore, the percentages of SEA and CC leaders who reported full implementation of many of these principles declined, compared to the past year. It may be that SEA and CC leaders' perceptions of full implementation are changing—what they considered full implementation last year might be considered only initial implementation in 2014. These perceptual changes may be due to recent ED monitoring of state implementation of SEA waivers, which revealed that many states were not implementing waivers fully. These survey results suggest that the CST and other agencies, like the OST, have a unique window of opportunity to increase and deepen their assistance to states during this time when a large percentage of SEA and CC leaders report needs and a small percentage report full implementation of supports for federal turnaround principles.