



# REPORT

FINAL REPORT

## **Year One Report on the School District of Philadelphia's Renaissance Initiative**

May 15, 2018

---

Kristin Hallgren  
Kevin Kelly  
Ja'Dell Davis  
**Mathematica Policy Research**

Katrina Morrison  
**Research for Action**

---

**Submitted to:**  
School District of Philadelphia  
440 North Broad Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19130  
Project Officer: Joy Lesnick  
Contract Number: 0186/F18

---

**Submitted by:**  
Mathematica Policy Research  
P.O. Box 2393  
Princeton, NJ 08543-2393  
Telephone: (609) 799-3535  
Facsimile: (609) 799-0005  
Project Director: Kristin Hallgren  
Reference Number: 50490

---

## CONTENTS

---

INTRODUCTION.....	1
Year 1 Key Findings.....	1
Data sources.....	2
Structure of the report.....	2
IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS.....	3
A. Experiences entering the Renaissance Initiative.....	3
Substantial challenges led schools to enter the Renaissance Initiative and continue as barriers to successfully turning around the schools.....	3
Schools experienced high staff turnover and faced recruitment challenges.....	3
The designation as a “turnaround school” may have negative connotations.....	4
B. Cultivating turnaround principals.....	4
Principals needed more time and communication about their schools’ specific needs before opening their school.....	4
Principals meet regularly with their direct supervisor and district-level or CMO administrators.....	5
Staff at most schools had positive perceptions of their principal’s leadership, but a few raised concerns about their principal’s ability to encourage morale and provide instructional support.....	5
C. Teaching and learning continuous improvement.....	6
Instructional coaching contributed to teachers’ professional growth, especially when the coach’s role was clearly established.....	6
I-Ready holds promise as a resource to inform teachers’ instructional practices, but persistent challenges complicate its use.....	7
Staff at some schools believed they still lacked needed resources or the expertise to effectively use their new resources for improving instructional practices.....	7
D. Professional growth.....	8
Differentiated professional development opportunities, informed through data, promoted professional growth more than generic trainings.....	8
Staff from schools with consistent behavior routines reported greater engagement in professional growth opportunities.....	9
E. Health and safety.....	9
Staff across all schools expressed strong need for trauma-informed training for teachers and counseling for students and families.....	10
Supports for students and families seem most effective when based out of the school building, but lack of staff collaboration in some schools poses challenges to providing comprehensive supports.....	10

Although some schools exhibit features of well-functioning school climates, these features are often inconsistently implemented, concentrated in select classrooms, or are hindered by other pervasive challenges. .... 11

F. Community involvement ..... 11

Parents appreciated multiple opportunities for communication and outreach (e.g., in-person, written, email, text) that accommodate their schedules and needs. .... 11

Schools benefit from dedicated staff who serve as liaisons between the school, parents and the community, and who align the services provided by the school with demonstrated needs of the community. .... 12

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE REPORTS ..... 12

APPENDIX A: RENAISSANCE CHARTER SCHOOL PROFILES

Mastery at Wister .....A.2

Global Leadership Academy at Huey .....A.3

---

## INTRODUCTION

---

The School District of Philadelphia has embarked on a multiyear effort to improve the outcomes of students in low-performing schools. The Renaissance Initiative aims to improve student achievement by shifting school management to either external charter providers (Renaissance Charter schools) or designating schools as members of the Turnaround Network. In 2016, five district schools entered the Turnaround Network and two district schools became Renaissance Charter schools. The district has engaged an evaluation team, Mathematica Policy Research and its partners Research for Action and Concentric LLC, to better understand how reforms were implemented and the effectiveness of those reforms on student outcomes.

The three-year evaluation will document how the seven participating schools implement the Renaissance Initiative, describe lessons learned during the process, evaluate effectiveness of the Renaissance Initiative, and explore to what extent benefits exceed costs. Although the evaluation will span three years and culminate in a report with the overall results about the Renaissance Initiative, the first year focuses exclusively on implementation of the Initiative since 2016. This report describes schools' implementation of turnaround supports based on participants' reported experiences.

### Year 1 Key Findings

We identified the following key findings based on interviews with district staff, charter management organization (CMO) staff, school personnel, and parents in the seven participating schools.

- **School leaders who promote a shared vision of collaboration motivate staff.** Staff across schools recognized that leadership teams influence the operation and success of turnaround efforts. In some schools, staff reported that administrators regularly communicate a vision of collaboration and shared responsibility for the whole school's success. Staff expressed that certain actions of some school leaders, such as collaborating in planning meetings and working with individual students, facilitate the shared vision and motivate staff to work towards successfully turning around the school.
- **Some turnaround supports could be more effective with increased collaboration or differentiation.** Staff in most schools reported receiving adequate academic, instructional, and behavioral supports, but noted that these supports could be used more effectively. Some teachers expressed that instructional supports, including coaching and summer boot camps, did not allow for collaboration to address what teachers perceived as pressing needs. Staff reported that some supports, including I-Ready and ongoing professional development sessions, were more effective for certain teacher or student populations than for others, and that additional differentiated support was needed.
- **Addressing behavior and trauma remains paramount to improving student academic achievement.** Staff in several schools noted improvements in school climate, but, across schools, behavior and non-academic issues continue as major challenges to successful turnaround. Accordingly, almost all staff reported the need to prioritize health and safety over the other four areas of the Turnaround Network implementation guide.

- Programming and resources that demonstrate a school’s mission to support students and families have largely resolved initial community resistance.** School staff and parents reported a negative perception of joining the Renaissance Initiative, and community members initially resisted the Turnaround Network or Renaissance Charter designation. Despite this initial resistance, staff in most schools reported significant improvements in community support and parental involvement over the past two academic years. Staff expressed that academic and family engagement programming alongside the provision of resources to community members facilitated community buy-in.

## Data sources

To prepare this report, we collected comprehensive, in-depth data through telephone interviews with district officials and on-site interviews with staff at each of the seven schools that began receiving Renaissance Initiative supports in the 2016-2017 school year. At each school, we conducted small-group and individual interviews with school leaders, school support staff, coaches and specialists, teachers, and parents.<sup>1</sup> Table 1 reflects the type and total number of respondents who participated in interviews for this report.

**Table 1. Interviews and focus groups conducted at seven Renaissance Initiative schools**

Respondent type	Total respondents
District or CMO officials	11
Principals	7
Assistant Principals	6
Instructional coaches	15
Student support staff	14
Teachers	
K-2	22
3-5	12
6-8	13
Special populations, including Special Education or ESL	9
Parents	21
<b>Total</b>	<b>130</b>

Source: March 2018 site visits.

CMO = charter management organization; ESL = English Second Language

## Structure of the report

This report includes six sections that contain findings about supports for low-performing schools. The report begins with contextual findings about experiences entering the Renaissance Initiative. The five sections that follow align with the district-designated turnaround plan: (1) cultivating turnaround principals, (2) teaching and learning continuous improvement, (3) professional growth, (4) health and safety, and (5) community involvement.

The Turnaround Network implements strategies and provides resources within each of these five areas. Interviews conducted in Turnaround Network schools asked questions about

<sup>1</sup> We interviewed parents from five of the seven participating schools.

respondents' experiences with strategies and supports in each of the five areas. Interviews in Renaissance Charter schools used the five areas as a framework to better understand the supports that schools were provided and staff perception of those supports. At the beginning of each section, we describe the specific supports provided to Turnaround Network schools and to Renaissance Charter schools. We then describe and synthesize respondents' reported experiences across the seven Renaissance Initiative schools. The report concludes with a synthesis of findings and plans for future reports. To more fully describe supports provided by Renaissance Charter schools, Appendix A includes a short profile of each Renaissance Charter school.

---

## **IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS**

---

### **A. Experiences entering the Renaissance Initiative**

Parents and staff consistently acknowledged the significant challenges, including low student achievement, chronic absences, and severe behavior issues, that prompted a school's entry into the Renaissance Initiative. These challenges and others, including staff recruitment and the stigma of the designation, marked difficulties for improving the schools. This section notes themes that emerged from respondents' answers to questions about what makes their school unique and what being a Renaissance Initiative school meant to them.

#### **Substantial challenges led schools to enter the Renaissance Initiative and continue as barriers to successfully turning around the schools.**

District and school-level respondents reported several challenges – including low student achievement rates, chronically absent students, highly transient populations, severe behavior issues, and large populations of students requiring special services – contributed to schools entering the Renaissance Initiative. School staff acknowledged that their schools received additional resources and supports to address the challenges when their schools entered the Renaissance Initiative. Individuals in several schools expressed seeing improvements in these areas over the past two academic years, but said that many hurdles still exist to fully transform the schools.

#### **Schools experienced high staff turnover and faced recruitment challenges.**

All but one of the Turnaround Network principals reported that at least 50 percent of the teaching staff was new to the school in the 2016-2017 academic year, including several new hires who were new to teaching. Some Turnaround Network schools also recruited new administrators. The teaching staff at one Renaissance Charter school included both individuals new to teaching and others with experience teaching at other schools in the CMO's network, and almost all staff at the other Renaissance Charter school were new to teaching. Most school administrators in the Renaissance Charter schools had previously worked in the administration at other schools in the respective CMO's network.

Across all Renaissance Initiative schools, principals expressed mixed opinions of the high staff turnover. Some principals saw bringing in new staff as an opportunity to create a new vision for the school. Others recognized that an abbreviated or delayed hiring period made it challenging to identify and recruit highly qualified staff. Staff in at least one school reported

difficulties in retaining highly effective staff because of the persistent academic and non-academic challenges present at the school.

**The designation as a “turnaround school” may have negative connotations.**

Staff and parents in several schools mentioned the negative connotation or stigma of being a part of the Renaissance Initiative. Respondents recognized that the designation meant that the school was failing academically and new supports or strategies would be put into place. Some district officials and school staff remarked on the difficult process to identify and intervene in schools. For example, community resistance in several schools for converting district-operated schools to charter schools included concerns about losing a majority of the staff. One school administrator said that framing the transition process as an asset-building network could have mitigated negative connotations.

**B. Cultivating turnaround principals**

School leaders are typically well positioned to affect the overall ethos of a school. They hire and oversee the staff, as well as instill the culture to encourage teachers and students to perform to their highest potential. Principals of Renaissance Initiative schools received the following supports to enhance their leadership:

- Principals of Turnaround Network schools report directly to an assistant superintendent who oversees all district schools designated for turnaround. The district assigned each Turnaround Network school principal an additional assistant principal. Administrators also attended a summer boot camp training.
- Principals of Renaissance Charter schools meet regularly with supervisors who have experience leading schools within their respective CMOs. These schools have comprehensive school leadership teams that manage academic and behavioral programming and operations.

This section presents findings about efforts to support principals in their leadership of Renaissance Initiative schools.

**Principals needed more time and communication about their schools’ specific needs before opening their school.**

Principals of schools in the Turnaround Network received a binder that contained key information about the Turnaround Network and available supports. Principals of Renaissance Charter schools said they were familiar with the model of their respective CMO because they had worked at their CMOs before becoming principals. However, some principals reported needing more information about the schools they would lead. Even though at least two principals visited their school several times before joining the school, some principals did not have this opportunity. For example, although the principal of one school attended budget and planning meetings before being hired, that principal reported that the main communication that the district provided was about the supports principals receive rather than the unique needs of the school. This principal noted needing more preparation and information about the school.

Principals also reported needing more time before opening the school. For example, one principal reported having had too little time to hire staff, which resulted in the inability to hire highly qualified staff. Another principal described a delay in receiving student records, noting that “it was like we had to start all over again,” and still another principal reported needing time for pest control and construction to address major infrastructure issues in the building.

**Principals meet regularly with their direct supervisor and district-level or CMO administrators.**

All Turnaround Network principals reported receiving ongoing support from their district-level administrator. They explained that they meet with their assistant superintendent monthly or bi-monthly. Some reported they can easily call the assistant superintendent with quick questions. Principals described that their interactions with the district-level administrator included receiving real-time coaching during school walkthroughs, and having “glows and grows” conversations in which they discuss the principal’s strengths and opportunities for growth, along with next steps. Both Renaissance Charter principals reported meeting with supervisors from their CMOs at least weekly.

**Staff at most schools had positive perceptions of their principal’s leadership, but a few raised concerns about their principal’s ability to encourage morale and provide instructional support.**

Staff at five schools reported that their principal positively influenced school culture and climate. They described how their school leaders fostered collegial relationships among teachers, between teachers and students, and/or between the school and parents. For example, staff described how principals publicly recognized students’ accomplishments in academics, behavior, or attendance through events and announcements. At least two schools used wall displays or certificates to recognize students who excel in I-Ready. Staff at one school promoted positive behavior by announcing at weekly town hall events the names of students who demonstrated improved conduct. At another school, principals acknowledged student “heroes” who showed positive character and represented the values of their school through their good deeds.

Staff reported that principals recognized teachers’ dedication to and accomplishments of their school community. For example, one school gave teachers monetary rewards for perfect attendance, and staff at three schools reported recognizing teachers for their students’ progress in reading or math on I-Ready. Staff at one school reported students’ accomplishments to the community through Instagram, and another welcomed parents into the auditorium three times each year during report card conferences to showcase the school’s progress.

School staff underscored the principal’s critical role in establishing useful systems and allocating human and material resources well. Staff at four schools spoke about receiving support from the principal and other school leaders as both a school success and a helpful resource. School staff, including teachers and student support staff, suggested that features of supportive and effective leadership at their school included:

- Creating regular opportunities for teachers to express their needs and opinions without fear of sanctions
- Working to dispel the stigma staff initially perceived as a school in turnaround



- Implementing systems and norms that work well for their school context
- Cultivating buy-in for an expressed vision for the school, and
- Having flexibility to hire the most suitable staff to work within the established school culture.

Staff from some schools reported wanting leaders to improve the support they provided to staff and teachers. For example, staff at one school indicated that morale was low because teachers believed the principal did not value or support their efforts in a challenging context. At another school, teachers said that leaders did not observe or visit classrooms because they were in meetings. Staff in some schools remarked that school administrators did not recognize other staff members for their hard work. Teachers in one school said that although they were under demanding expectations, only administrators were recognized for successes and achievements.

### **C. Teaching and learning continuous improvement**

Teachers deliver academic content, help students build skills, and foster productive relationships with students to promote their academic growth and engagement. Teaching and learning continuous improvement included the following supports:

- Turnaround Network schools had a reduction in class size for grades K–2 to 22 students per class, use of the supplemental I-Ready online math and reading program, additional instructional coaches, and access to district-level academic support for Turnaround Network schools.
- Both Renaissance Charter schools have instructional coaches who support instruction for specific grades, use small-group instruction informed by data, and provide individual support to under-performing students. In addition, one school takes students on global excursions and the other uses personalized learning software, such as IXL Math and Reading Eggs, to expand instruction.

The following section illustrates findings about these supports.

#### **Instructional coaching contributed to teachers’ professional growth, especially when the coach’s role was clearly established.**

School-based academic coaches reported conducting many activities to support teachers’ instruction, including observing teachers, providing observation-based feedback, offering instructional resources, guiding teachers’ review of students’ data, planning and modeling lessons, and leading professional development sessions. Coaches described trying to meet with all teachers regularly, but often focused on meeting with new teachers or teachers in grades in which student achievement data indicated a need for additional support.

Teachers’ perceptions of the usefulness of school-based academic coaches varied across schools. Staff at some schools described the coaching as supportive and productive, but staff at other schools did not. In schools where teachers found the coaching helpful, coaches and teachers reported frequent interactions and a team mentality to delivering and receiving feedback. In other schools, staff reported challenges that prevented successful coaching, such as coaches having to focus on addressing student behavior or difficulties in establishing trust. For

example, coaches and teachers in two schools reported ineffective coaching for some teachers because of concerns that the coach would notify administrators of teachers' shortcomings.

Teachers also described coaching as most helpful when both teachers and coaches knew the purpose and structure of the coaching, such as how often teachers could expect to work with coaches or which grades or subjects coaches would target. In one school where teachers reported effective coaching, both teachers and coaches separately articulated that the goal of coaching was to help teachers become better educators who better students. In another school, coaches reported that they primarily implement coaching cycles in grades 3 through 8 because students in those grades take Pennsylvania System of School Assessment exams. However, teachers of grades with younger students expressed frustration with not receiving regular feedback.

As a result of coaching supports, teachers reported improvements to their practice and relationships. For instance, both coaches and teachers believed teachers developed their capacity to analyze data. A few coaches reported the teachers appeared more confident as instructors. In several schools, teachers reported that regular meetings in which they collaborated with other teachers and coaches improved cohesion and relationships among staff members.

**I-Ready holds promise as a resource to inform teachers' instructional practices, but persistent challenges complicate its use.**

Respondents across schools reported using I-Ready 30 to 60 minutes per week. Staff from four schools noted that I-Ready helped student learning by giving students opportunities to practice skills and by differentiating activities according to students' levels. Staff from two schools commented on I-Ready's supplemental materials for instruction, expressing appreciation for printable resources, reports that indicated student growth, and information for teachers to consider when identifying what to re-teach and how to group students.

However, respondents from three schools expressed dissatisfaction with the ability of the I-Ready program and materials to engage students and facilitate effective instruction. In particular, teachers reported challenges in monitoring students because, instead of using the program, they visit Internet sites such as YouTube. Middle school teachers in one school reported engaging their students posed different challenges because older students perceived the graphics in I-Ready as "childish." Some teachers reported I-Ready conflicted with their students' learning goals. For instance, at one school, teachers believed that the mandated 30 to 60 minutes of I-Ready interfered with time needed for direct instruction, and teachers at another school reported believing the I-Ready-use goals were unrealistic. Coaches from this school reported that teachers tended to focus more on quantity than quality, or minutes spent using I-Ready rather than skills learned. At a different school, the principal said that teachers used I-Ready too often, used it to babysit some students while they worked with others, and often used it out of compliance rather than to enhance their teaching.

**Staff at some schools believed they still lacked needed resources or the expertise to effectively use their new resources for improving instructional practices.**

Respondents from two schools reported the need for resources to facilitate teachers' instructional differentiation. In particular, teachers sought additional "age-appropriate resources," and an administrator reported lacking supports for teachers of students with special

needs. Respondents from one school, though, perceived that they did not know how to effectively use the multitude of resources that they received. An administrator from the school explained that the influx of resources diminished teachers' creativity and encouraged over-reliance on scripts and prescribed tools. A coach at the same school commented that teachers did not always know how to use (or teach students how to use) some of the resources available to them, such as graphing calculators.

Staff also discussed support by the Turnaround Network for specific content. Specifically, they described monthly math and science professional development sessions led by a Turnaround Network coach. Administrators remarked that teachers found the sessions helpful, and teachers described the science coach as both effective and supportive. Some administrators acknowledged that teacher participation in these sessions was sometimes problematic because the support sessions are conducted off-site or afterschool.

#### **D. Professional growth**

Implementation of and receptivity to professional growth opportunities are key supports to teachers working in these schools. Under the Renaissance Initiative:

- Turnaround Network schools are allotted six hours of professional development for teachers each month, take part in summer boot camps, and offer Network-wide professional development sessions.
- Renaissance Charter schools implement weekly professional development sessions, provide professional development sessions for new and returning teachers throughout the summer, and offer ongoing coaching and feedback.

This section presents findings about these activities.

#### **Differentiated professional development opportunities, informed through data, promoted professional growth more than generic trainings.**

Most schools implement weekly school-based professional development sessions for teachers. School administrators select topics for the sessions, such as climate, data use, or instructional strategies, based on recognized needs in the school. Teachers expressed a preference for one-on-one coaching with frequent feedback over group-based coaching, recognizing that the coaching needs vary greatly among teachers. At some schools, administrators have implemented strategies to differentiate professional growth within fixed resources, such as offering multiple professional development sessions within a block of time and allowing teachers to select applicable sessions. Some school administrators noted that they use data to monitor teachers' instructional needs and then provide supports to meet those needs. For example, coaches in one school reported examining benchmark data by class and then working with teachers to restructure lessons around objectives that students had not mastered.

Teachers in several schools recalled that the Turnaround Network summer boot camp was not differentiated to address individual school- or grade-level challenges and did not cover strategies for teachers who work with ESL or special needs students. The summer 2016 training brought together all schools and covered Turnaround Network structure and procedures, I-Ready, small-group instruction, and other instructional practices. Some teachers perceived this

training as a networking opportunity that fostered collaboration among peers at other schools in the Turnaround Network. Others expressed that the training did not adequately build staff content knowledge or spent too much time on certain topics, such as how to transition students between classes. The summer 2017 training was primarily school-based, and administrators reported covering the individual needs of their school, including climate and literacy instruction. In general, teachers preferred the summer 2017 training over the summer 2016 training because it was shorter, more targeted to their needs, and facilitated collaboration within the team at each school. Some teachers remarked that the second year of training could have focused more on planning for the upcoming school year and that it was repetitive if they had attended the summer 2016 training.

### **Staff from schools with consistent behavior routines reported greater engagement in professional growth opportunities.**

Staff across schools recognized that students' behavior and non-academic needs could impede professional growth. At schools where staff reported consistent attention to students' behavior, teachers reported receiving adequate support and guidance to develop professionally. In one of these schools, teachers noted that coaches perform observations and walkthroughs multiple times a week and lead weekly professional development sessions to discuss challenges encountered.

In contrast, staff in several schools noted that instructional coaches were often unable to meet with teachers or provide feedback because they were occupied with addressing behavioral concerns, serving as substitute teachers in classrooms, or attending to other responsibilities. At a school in which staff reported the school climate needs had not been adequately addressed, teachers reported that professional development opportunities were scarce, infrequent, or cancelled with little notice. Administrators in that school noted that teachers do not attend weekly afterschool professional development sessions because they are not contractually obligated to stay after the school day ends. Staff also reported that emergency behavioral situations have distracted them from analyzing student data.

## **E. Health and safety**

Factors outside of teaching and instruction impact student learning, underscoring the importance of a healthy and safe learning environment to turnaround efforts. Schools support this objective in the following ways:

- Turnaround Network schools are assigned an advisory coach and receive additional per-student funding to finance school-specific staff or resources.
- One Renaissance Charter school designated a team of staff to manage school culture through developing behavioral systems and managing incentives for positive behavior. The other school uses positive reinforcement language coupled with daily affirmations and monthly events to promote positive behavior.

This section outlines key findings about these non-academic supports for health and safety.

**Staff across all schools expressed strong need for trauma-informed training for teachers and counseling for students and families.**

Support staff, particularly counselors and climate managers, reported extensively on the mental health needs of students and the connection between these in-school needs and their experiences within the surrounding community. These experiences include family instability, domestic and neighborhood violence, sexual assault, poverty, foster care, homelessness, and high drug trafficking and murder rates. Staff understanding of these needs extends to students' families and the wider community, and their responses reveal this broader view as they spoke of "needs of the community" and "community struggles." Respondents indicated that just as students struggle to cope with trauma, the families experiencing the same trauma require resources to cope.

Counselors identified barriers to addressing trauma that included access to information and targeted support within the referral process. Staff recognized that families often do not know about services or how to access them, that counselors must ensure that families can access the referred resources, and that even when parents receive referrals, they require additional assistance to properly and efficiently follow up with referrals (for example, travel to service offices, secure proper identification, complete specific forms). Many families have had negative experiences when attempting to access needed services in the past, adding yet another obstacle to the challenge of addressing family needs regarding mental health and trauma.

**Supports for students and families seem most effective when based out of the school building, but lack of staff collaboration in some schools poses challenges to providing comprehensive supports.**

Staff viewed community needs for comprehensive social services as under the purview of the school. Staff in four schools framed their schools as "permanent safe havens" or "for the community," and specified that supports for the whole family should come from the school. One school in particular illustrates how a school might mobilize resources. The administrator described how the school responds to its transient population, which has made truancy a major problem. The school has individual plans with each family to ensure the students' attendance at school that may include home visits, wake up calls, transportation, or coordinating social service needs of the whole family.

School-based supports for families and the broader community feature relationships with outside organizational partnerships cultivated by administrative staff. These supports include individual and family mental health services, gendered groups, food and clothing programs, clubs, mentoring, afterschool programming, parenting classes, and university partnerships. Staff at five schools reported that these cultivated partnerships were beneficial and functioned well. These schools employ community liaisons in addition to the school improvement support liaison (SISL); the staff share responsibility for coordinating needed supports for students and families.

Staff from two schools reported providing family supports but expressed the desire to provide more. As staff from at these schools explained, staff often work in silos and do not collaborate, which makes providing more comprehensive supports to families difficult. Staff at these schools reported they typically do not use multiple modes of communication to contact families about available services. Although staff at these schools reported having adequate

resources and personnel, they described struggling to maximize the use of these resources to support students and families.

**Although some schools exhibit features of well-functioning school climates, these features are often inconsistently implemented, concentrated in select classrooms, or are hindered by other pervasive challenges.**

Schools with staff who reported a well-functioning school climate utilize systems that have the following features: are proactive and school-wide; have systems and expectations in place at the beginning of the year; focus on relationships between adults and children; involve teams of staff who lead training and implementation; employ restorative and progressive behavioral practices; and turn to classroom and teaching team intervention plans before escalating to administrative interventions.

Staff in five schools with these features reported school-wide and grade-level systems to address discipline and behavior. These systems include specified zones within each classroom that allow students to regroup and remove themselves from whatever frustration they are experiencing without being sent to the principal's office, being suspended, or otherwise sanctioned.

Staff in schools that struggle to consistently manage behavioral and disciplinary systems reported an overarching challenge emerging from state and district policies regarding suspensions. Respondents described a particular policy that prevents school suspensions and hinders other disciplinary actions, such as extended removal of a child from the classroom. Support staff and teachers noted that, in their opinion, the policy creates an unsafe environment and begets more violations from students who witness lacking responses to their peers' behavioral infractions.

## **F. Community involvement**

Collaboration between schools, families, and community stakeholders can be key to the social, emotional, and academic growth of students. Supports for this collaboration include the following features:

- In Turnaround Network schools, additional staff are provided, including a social worker, a SISL, and a counselor.
- In Renaissance Charters, regular community events are held, ample resources are provided, and designated staff members work to address student and community needs.

This section presents findings about these efforts and the management of resources for family outreach and community building.

**Parents appreciated multiple opportunities for communication and outreach (e.g., in-person, written, email, text) that accommodate their schedules and needs.**

Parents of students at four schools reported daily or otherwise consistent outreach from the school. Parents at two of these schools reported that the school engages them daily through a parent greeter at the school entrance during drop-off and pick-up times. Parents at another school

reported receiving frequent robo-calls and paper-based updates. At another school, the principal outlined teacher requirements to contact parents three times per month – one written and two verbal. Contact methods varied, and specific tools reported for communication included ClassDojo, internal electronic systems, and the district’s parent portal. Parents of students at these schools expressed their appreciation for daily engagement with school staff and indicated they had positive relationships with parent liaisons and greeters. Likewise, parents at these schools indicated that verbal contacts, timely and cordial responses to parent communication, and open-door policies with the school encouraged them to engage. School staff reported that parents are less responsive to written notices and phone calls.

**Schools benefit from dedicated staff who serve as liaisons between the school, parents and the community, and who align the services provided by the school with demonstrated needs of the community.**

While the SISL’s role does not necessarily extend to the entire community, some school staff explained that they use a hired employee or a volunteer at the school to focus on connecting the school and the surrounding community. Four schools reported their staff included a person who works within a team of other administrative staff. Although these family and community involvement staff members distinguish their role from the other support staff, such as climate managers, counselors, and SISLs, they deliberately work together and collaborate with those staff. A counselor in a school that did not have a position dedicated to family and community involvement indicated that, although additional human resources were available, support staff were not being used efficiently. The counselor noted that support staff members work independently rather than collaboratively. In one case, a staff member hosted a parenting program but did not inform other support staff members, which resulted in some parents missing out on the opportunity.

---

## **CONCLUSION AND FUTURE REPORTS**

---

Respondents consistently reported that turning around the schools requires extensive ongoing work and is a demanding process for staff. However, staff and parents in some schools acknowledged noticeable improvements since joining the Renaissance Initiative. Individuals in these schools reported improvements in culture and climate, often attributed to a sense of cohesion and collaboration among the staff, which allows for professional development and academic growth. Other schools, though, continue to face substantial challenges, despite two years of receiving supports. Findings indicate the necessity for recruiting, developing, and maintaining a school workforce that shares a vision for and drives to effectively transform the schools.

The evaluation team will release a second report after the 2018–2019 academic year that will include estimates of the impact of the Renaissance Initiative. That report will use SDP survey data and student achievement data to examine changes in outcomes since schools joined the initiative. The team will deliver a final report after the 2019–2020 academic year that will include estimates of the impact of the Initiative after an additional year, another round of implementation analyses, and estimates of the cost-effectiveness of the Turnaround Network and Renaissance Charter strategies.

**APPENDIX A: RENAISSANCE CHARTER SCHOOL PROFILES**



To provide additional information on the Renaissance Charter schools, this appendix includes abbreviated school profiles for each school. We describe in greater detail the implementation of and experience with supports the two CMOs, Mastery Schools and Global Leadership Academy (GLA), provided to their respective school. We organized our description of supports according to the five areas that the district provides to Turnaround Network schools.

### **Mastery at Wister**

Mastery Schools converted Wister Elementary to a Mastery campus with support from several community members. Despite initial challenges, including a delay in receiving student records and poor building conditions, school and central office staff reported a relatively smooth transition and substantial academic and climate improvements. Staff consistently recognized that the vision of the school (“love and positivity”) and the largely Mastery-veteran workforce make the school unique and contribute to its success.

**Cultivate principals.** A principal, two assistant principals of instruction who manage academic programming for grades K–2 and 3–5, respectively, an assistant principal of school culture who manages climate and behavioral programming, an assistant principal of special education, and an assistant principal of operations who manages facilities and attendance concerns comprise the leadership team at Wister. Administrators appreciated having autonomy over a certain domain within a larger team. Some recognized that this approach could pose a challenge to building a shared vision, but all expressed that the team collaborated well. Administrators also reported feeling prepared and supported in their roles. Most administrators served on leadership teams at other Mastery charters before moving to Wister, and the team works extensively with individuals in the Mastery central office. For example, the Wister Elementary principal meets weekly with a regional superintendent, who provides feedback and acts as thought partner when the school encounters challenges.

**Teaching and continuous improvement.** The Mastery Campus program implements a common math and reading curriculum across all schools, and Wister staff reported maintaining high academic expectations for their students while implementing academic programming that meets students’ individual needs. Wister uses personalized learning software, including IXL for math in grades 3–5 and Reading Eggs for reading in grades K–2, and small-group literacy instruction that groups together students according to fluency data. Low-performing students work with specialists, and some high-achieving students attend lessons in higher grade levels. Following quarterly benchmarks, the school holds a “data day” to examine how well students comprehended learning objectives, and then spends the following week re-teaching concepts that students have not mastered. School staff appreciated the academic programming, and teachers reported their perceptions were taken into account when determining curriculum. For example, when teachers shared their frustrations with the math curriculum on staff surveys, administrators changed the curriculum.

**Professional growth.** Staff new to Mastery participate in a weeklong summer training that introduces them to the structure and programming of the organization. Also, all staff participate in a weeklong school-based training focused on instructional content, the vision of the school, and building collaboration among team members. Throughout the year, students are dismissed early on Wednesdays to allow for two hours of staff professional development. Sessions may be

school-wide, grade-specific, or subject-specific, and are led by a member of the school leadership team, an individual from the Mastery central office, or teachers. All teachers also receive at least one 3- to 8-week coaching cycle on a topic determined by the teacher and school leadership team. The coaching may be led by an assistant principal of instruction or a representative from the Mastery central office and involves frequent observations and feedback. Teachers expressed feeling highly supported to grow professionally. Some teachers noted that there remains a need for additional professional development on trauma-informed care.

**Health and safety.** Wister staff reported considerable trauma in the school community. The school uses discipline and reward systems to foster a healthy and safe environment. A color chart is used to monitor behavior for younger students, and students' final color is reported to parents each day. Older students have demerit and merit cards to track behavior. A four-person school culture team responds to behavior incidents that disrupt instruction. Students receive rewards for good behavior including treats and opportunities to "dress down." The school recognizes student leaders who demonstrate positive behavior by allowing them to go on special field trips. While staff members acknowledged improvements in behavior and school culture, most also identified addressing behavior as the primary challenge for the school. Almost all staff remarked that the school needed to prioritize health and safety.

**Community involvement.** Mastery's conversion of Wister received strong community support. Parents and teachers reported frequent collaboration via phone calls, emails, and mobile applications. Parents sign out their students directly from the classroom each day, which provides a daily opportunity for parent-teacher communication. The school has a parent resource center with computers for crafting resumes and applying for jobs. Several staff members, including a social worker, therapists, and a family and community liaison, support the community. The school has hosted events, such as a community barbeque, to foster community buy-in. Because of ongoing community involvement, almost all staff reported that the school could focus least on this area compared to the other areas.

### **Global Leadership Academy at Huey**

When Global Leadership Academy (GLA) converted Huey Elementary into the GLA Southwest campus, they faced substantial challenges, including a delay in receiving a signed charter agreement, community resistance, and neglected facilities. Despite these challenges, GLA staff and parents reported improvements in school climate, academics, and parental support and involvement. They attributed success to the shared vision facilitated by the school's leadership team and initiatives that targeted student growth and community buy-in.

**Cultivate principals.** GLA has a two-campus network with a management team that supports the operations and leadership teams of each campus. A principal and CEO; an assistant principal; a director of curriculum, instruction, and assessments; and three academy leaders who manage academic, climate, and behavioral programming for grades K–2, 3–5, and 6–8, respectively, comprise the leadership team at GLA Southwest. The school administrators previously worked at the other GLA campus (formerly a turnaround school) and brought experience and familiarity with the vision and programming of the organization to GLA Southwest. Teachers reported the leadership team values their opinions. Members of the leadership team ask teachers to provide frequent feedback, including how the leadership team

can better support them. Although teachers expressed satisfaction with GLA, GLA staff remarked that limited initial and ongoing collaboration with SDP has created a financial and operational burden for administrators. As GLA staff explained, they expected the district would act as a partner with Renaissance charters, but administrators noted that the district provided little support for issues at the school and did not visit the campus during its first year of operation.

**Teaching continuous improvement.** GLA Southwest staff reported focusing on climate and culture during the first year of operation and currently focusing on academic rigor. The school uses a scripted curriculum and other strategies, including small-group instruction based on literacy data, partnering low-performing students with high-performing peers, and providing additional pull-out support to facilitate academic growth. Parents reported improvements in their students' academic abilities and recognized unique opportunities that contributes to students' overall growth, such as traveling abroad on the global excursions offered by the school or dissecting frogs. Because of a delayed charter contract, the school did not have materials or curriculum for the first half of the 2016–2017 academic year. School staff acknowledged this as an initial challenge that may have stalled students' academic growth.

**Professional growth.** The school could not hire staff until August 2016, so the majority of teachers have limited teaching experience. New staff participated in a three-day orientation followed by two weeks of professional development for all staff. The school offers ongoing professional development through weekly sessions that are school-wide or divided by academies (K–2, 3–5, and 6–8) as well as monthly full-day sessions. Topics include curriculum, data use, and trauma-informed care. School administrators, academy leaders, or teachers lead these sessions. Grade-level teams meet weekly with academy leaders to analyze data and plan upcoming lessons. Academy leaders reported observing and providing feedback to each teacher every one to three weeks. Teachers reported they had experienced substantial professional growth at the school, but expressed challenges associated with limited individual coaching and a lack of differentiated professional development by experience level. School administrators recognized that a limited salary budget made attracting and retaining talent a challenge.

**Health and safety.** GLA Southwest staff reported a whole-school effort to address students' nonacademic needs. Administrators, teachers, and parents recognized that staff care for the students in the building and work as a team to address nonacademic challenges. The school implements Harambe, or “come together,” each day to recognize accomplishments and share affirmations. The school has designated safe spaces inside each classroom for students to pause when they are having a difficult time, and there are staff available in locations outside of the classroom who provide additional support. GLA uses positive reinforcement vocabulary, such as referring to students as “scholars,” “kings,” and “queens.” Parents expressed appreciation for improvements to the school climate and recognized that policies, such as putting up security cameras and strictly enforcing daily check-outs, have improved safety at the school. Staff reported improvement in climate and reductions in behavior incidents, but suggested that health and safety should remain the top priority at the school. Some teachers expressed the belief that the school could benefit from a more consistent response to extreme behavioral challenges.

**Community involvement.** Staff and parents reported that community members initially expressed strong objections to Huey Elementary being converted to a charter school, but school

leadership has implemented strategies to build community buy-in and trust. The school hosted several events, including ongoing family fun nights in Malcolm X Park, monthly breakfasts with the principal, and neighborhood walks to engage community members. The school also provides resources to families. For example, the school and a partner organization distribute approximately 150 bags of groceries to families each Tuesday. Parents recognized that initially resistant community members have largely come to support the school after seeing the good intentions of the school. The GLA model holds families as central to students' development; the model includes the expectation that parents will engage in school-family collaboration. For the 2017–2018 academic year, the school expects parents to attend at least one report card conference, one monthly breakfast with the principal, and one family event or fundraiser, such as a daddy-daughter dance.

[www.mathematica-mpr.com](http://www.mathematica-mpr.com)

---

**Improving public well-being by conducting high quality,  
objective research and data collection**

---

PRINCETON, NJ ■ ANN ARBOR, MI ■ CAMBRIDGE, MA ■ CHICAGO, IL ■ OAKLAND, CA ■  
SEATTLE, WA ■ TUCSON, AZ ■ WASHINGTON, DC ■ WOODLAWN, MD



**MATHEMATICA**  
Policy Research

Mathematica® is a registered trademark  
of Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.