

DELIVERY OF EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT SERVICES TO LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS IN NORTH CAROLINA

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SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Most schools received data use support from DPI. Specifically, **91 percent** of all identified schools received guidance on their SIP, while **84 percent** of schools had a CNA from DPI. In addition, **77 percent** of the schools reviewed and discussed the CNA findings with their coach by 2018.

Fewer coaching visits took place after the change in the service delivery model. Thousands of school transformation and instructional coaching visits were made to low-performing schools from Spring 2016 to Spring 2017; however, the number of coaching visits decreased significantly after the model of supports was restructured.

Principals viewed coaching as important to school improvement efforts. When school transformation coaching and instructional coaching were well-tailored to meet the school's needs and delivered with adequate intensity (e.g., delivered on a regular basis and sufficient to meet both individual and school needs), principals viewed coaching as contributing to their schools' capacity for improvement.

Continuity of school supports over time mattered. The survey findings show that the level of support decreased substantially after the change in the support delivery model. According to interviews with principals and teachers, the transition and reduced level of support made it difficult to continue with their school improvement work.

INTRODUCTION

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (DPI) has supported improvement efforts for the state's low-performing schools for a quarter century. At times, these efforts have been expansive. In recent years, for example, the federal Race to the Top fund was used to supplement state investments. Feedback on the implementation and impacts related to outcomes such as student achievement and graduation rates has been used to revise and improve the approach with each iteration.

In December 2015, DPI initiated a new effort to help the state's 75 lowest-performing schools improve their performance. Planned DPI supports included a comprehensive needs assessment (CNA), review and discussion of CNA findings with a coach (i.e., a CNA "unpacking"), and feedback on the resulting school improvement plan (SIP). In addition, coaches were assigned to districts and schools to help school leaders and teachers implement change. Throughout the process, DPI emphasized building staff capacity so that staff could continue the school performance continuous improvement work on their own.

Due to legislative budget cuts, DPI temporarily reduced supports from October 2017 to December 2017. Starting in January 2018, DPI redeployed a reduced level of supports under a new model designed to serve a smaller set of newly-identified schools. Under this restructured model, regional assistance teams reviewed school data to identify school needs, prioritized a limited set of school goals, and provided coaching through regional assistance teams rather than coaches assigned to each school.

This research brief summarizes key findings from a U.S. Department of Education-funded study of the implementation of DPI supports and their effects on students, teachers, and principals. We focus in particular on supports provided to help schools use data to inform planning as well as coaching for school leaders and teachers. The brief draws upon results of school leader surveys administered to the 75 schools in Spring 2017 and 2018¹ as well as interviews of principals and teacher focus groups conducted in Spring 2018.

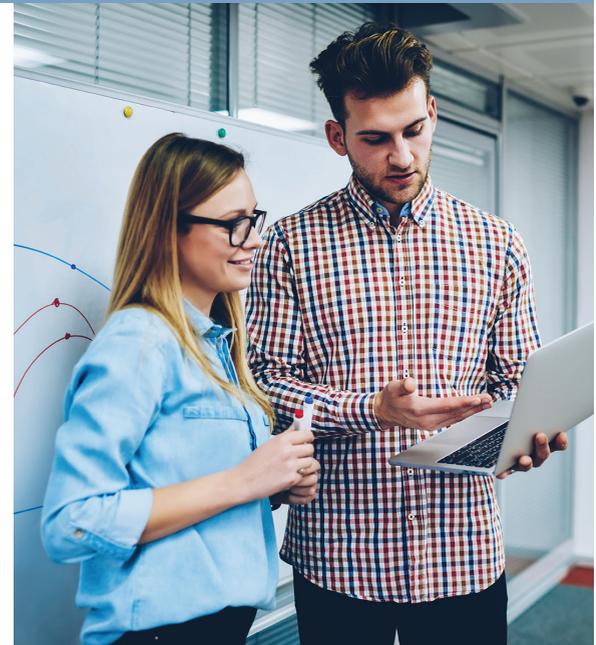
DPI PROVIDED SUBSTANTIAL SUPPORTS TO LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

GUIDANCE IN USING DATA TO INFORM PLANNING

DPI set out to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment (CNA) at each identified school that did not have a recent CNA so that both coaching supports and school-led improvement efforts could be informed by the assessment of each school’s needs. The CNA, conducted by Educator Support Services (ESS) staff, involved interviews and focus groups with teachers, principals, students, and parents, as well as classroom and school observations. Coaches were to review and discuss CNA findings with school leaders and staff to uncover the underlying causes of any challenges or concerns that surfaced during the assessment and to help schools create a SIP and formulate improvement activities to address those needs.

DPI staff provided feedback to help schools refine their SIPs. Almost all schools received guidance on their SIP (**91 percent**), and **84 percent** of the schools had a CNA from DPI. In addition, **77 percent** reviewed and discussed the CNA findings with their coach by 2018.

There was variation across schools in the comprehensiveness of schools’ needs assessments. Specifically, 20 percent of CNAs included a diverse set of data (e.g., assessments of student work, teacher focus groups, class observations) across all grades and subjects and gathered information from three or more stakeholder groups. But in some schools, the CNA was less comprehensive: it included fewer stakeholder groups or focused only on certain grades or subjects. Regardless of the comprehensiveness of the CNA, most principals felt the SIP feedback they received from DPI was specific and useful (87 percent).



SCHOOLS RECEIVING DATA USE SUPPORT

91% received guidance on their improvement plan

84% received a DPI needs assessment

77% reviewed needs assessment data with DPI staff

TABLE 1: DPI-PROVIDED SUPPORT FOR DATA USE

	Comprehensive Needs Assessment	Review of Comprehensive Needs Assessment
Before January 2016	17	15
January 2016–June 2017	44	31
June 2017–June 2018	2	3
TOTAL	63	49

CNA rollout and SIP implementation timing were not fully synchronized.

The timeline for rolling out the CNA was somewhat different from anticipated and, as a result, some schools began developing and implementing their SIP before participating in the CNA. While more than half of the principals reported that they were able to review the needs assessment results in a useful timeframe (54 percent), some school staff noted in interviews that adjustments in the sequence and timing of supports could have made the CNA more effective.

COACHING FOR SCHOOL LEADERS AND TEACHERS



Coaching was provided at three levels: district transformation coaching for district leaders (in some districts), school transformation coaching for principals, and instructional coaching for teachers. DPI planned to hire and train experienced principals and teachers to provide coaching to school leaders on strategic planning, resource allocation, and distributed leadership, and instructional coaching to teachers. Coaching was designed to be tailored to the needs of the schools and their staff, as identified by the CNA and the principal, and to be intensive enough to change practices (e.g., to occur on a regular basis and be sufficient to meet principals' and teachers' needs).

School transformation and instructional coaching visits to low-performing schools decreased significantly after the model of supports was restructured. Between January 2016 and June 2017, DPI coaches conducted 5,928 coaching visits, covering an average of 71 schools each semester, and an average of 25 visits per school per semester. After DPI changed the service delivery model, fewer schools received coaching and those that did experienced fewer visits. In Fall 2017, during the transitional period between the old and new service delivery models, 60 schools received visits, with an average of nine visits per school that semester. In Spring 2018, after the new service delivery model came into effect, 13 schools received visits, with an average of 16 visits per school (see Figure 1 for the summary of these findings).

Most principals who received school transformation coaching considered it regular and well-tailored, but fewer schools received coaching after June 2017. Principals from the 75 low-performing schools reported receiving school transformation coaching during the first year and a half (January 2016 to June 2017). Of these principals, 74 percent reported that the amount of coaching they received was sufficient to meet both their individual and the school's needs, as specified in CNA. Principals from 61 percent of the 75 low-performing schools reported receiving school transformation coaching that was well-tailored to the needs of their schools.

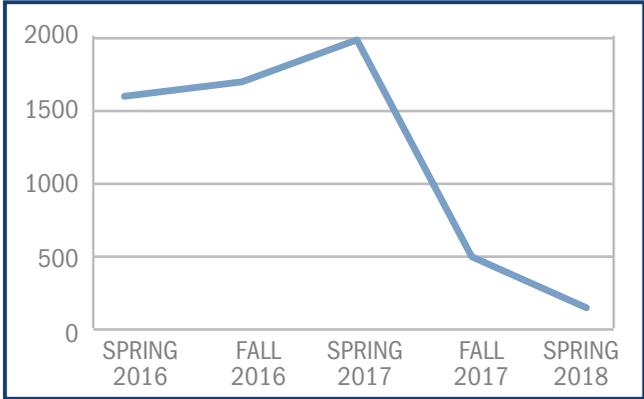
After the change in the service delivery model in June 2017, only 38 percent of principals of the 75 low-performing schools reported that the amount of coaching they received was sufficient, and only 22 percent of principals of the 75 low-performing schools received well-tailored coaching.

However, in both the early and later periods, more than 70 percent of principals *who received school transformation coaching* reported that their coaching was regular and ongoing, and more than 70 percent reported that the focus of coaching was relevant to their school’s needs. More than 80 percent of principals agreed that the coaches were responsive to what principals had identified as the schools’ needs.

Teacher instructional coaching was reported to be regular and ongoing, useful, and aligned with schools’ needs, but fewer schools received instructional coaching after June 2017. While not all 75 low-performing schools received instructional coaching in the period from January 2016 to June 2017, principals in 66 percent of the 75 low-performing schools reported that teachers received enough coaching to meet their needs. In addition, 75 percent of the principals from these schools reported that instructional coaching was regular and ongoing and 54 percent said that at least half of the teachers identified as needing support received instructional coaching from external coaches during that school year. Further, 77 percent of the principals from the 75 low-performing schools reported that the instructional coaching their teachers received was well aligned with the schools’ needs.

After the change in the service delivery model in June 2017, teachers in only 38 percent of the 75 low-performing schools received enough coaching to meet their needs. In addition, 29 percent of the principals from these schools reported that instructional coaching was regular and ongoing and only 24 percent of the principals reported at least half of teachers in need of instructional coaching received it. Further, only 32 percent of the principals from the 75 low-performing schools

FIGURE 1: Total number of coaching visits per semester



reported that the instructional coaching was well aligned with school needs.

However, it should be noted that in both the early and later periods, over 80 percent of the schools that received instructional coaching found it to be regular and ongoing. Further, over 90 percent of the schools that received instructional coaching reported that it was useful and well aligned with their school’s needs.



SUPPORTS INCREASED CAPACITY FOR IMPROVEMENT, AS REPORTED BY PRINCIPALS

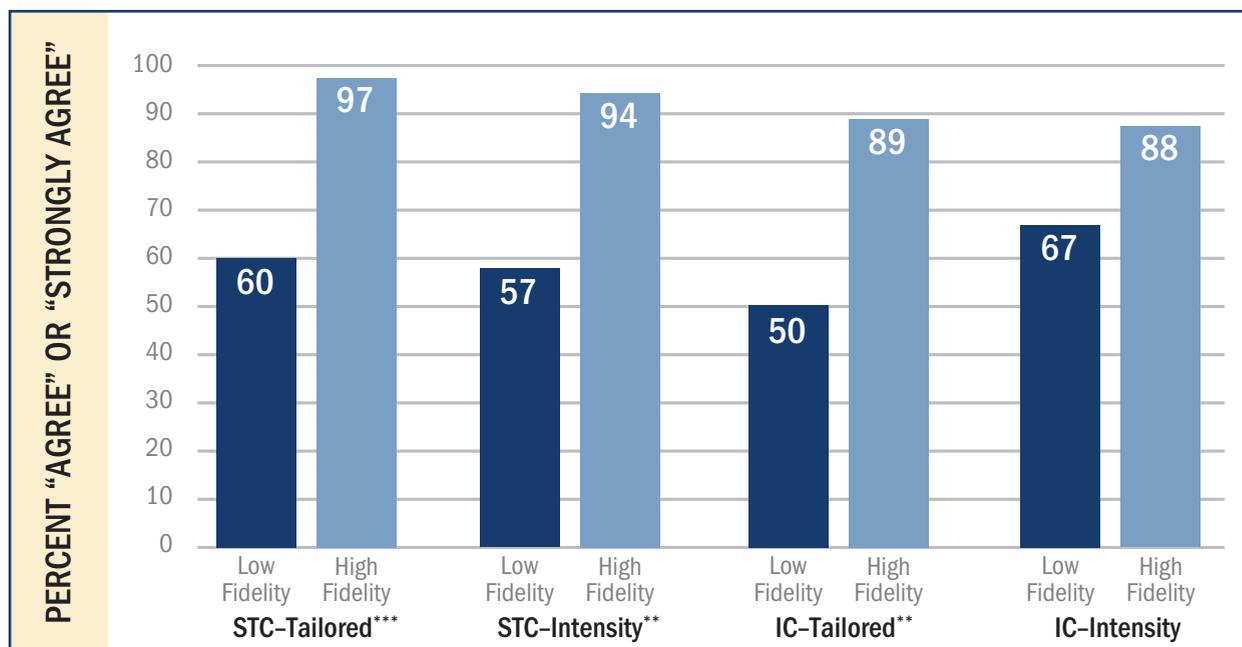


Principals of DPI-identified low-performing schools were more likely to report that coaching increased their school’s capacity for improvement compared to principals of similarly low-performing North Carolina schools.

More specifically, 73 percent of principals reported DPI school transformation coaching contributed to an increase in school capacity, and 84 percent reported that DPI instructional coaching contributed to school capacity. Principals from targeted schools were not, however, any more likely than principals of similarly low-performing schools to report that the CNAs or SIPs improved capacity for improvement, though in interviews they said they appreciated receiving detailed feedback on their school improvement plans.

The way the supports were implemented may have mattered for capacity for improvement. As shown in Figure 2, when DPI supports were delivered with high fidelity to the intended service delivery model (e.g., coaching tailored to school needs),³ principals were more likely to feel that the supports they received contributed to the school’s capacity for improvement.

FIGURE 2: Principals’ agreement that DPI supports increased capacity, by level of implementation fidelity*



* STC: school transformation coaching; IC: instructional coaching. Asterisks indicate a statistically significant difference in capacity ratings for principals in high vs. low implementation fidelity schools (***p<0.001, **p<0.01).

FUTURE DPI SUPPORTS MIGHT ADDRESS IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES



Lessons from this initiative may inform DPI's continued approaches to improve low-performing schools.

Principals reported that DPI delivered valuable services that were well-aligned with the schools' needs, as identified in CNA and outlined in the SIP. When school transformation coaching and instructional coaching were well-tailored to meet the school's needs and delivered with adequate intensity (e.g., delivered on a regular basis and sufficient to meet both individual and school needs), principals viewed coaching as contributing to their schools' capacity for improvement.

Principals did not consistently credit the CNA, review and "unpacking" of CNA findings, or feedback on the SIP with increases in their schools' capacity. However, principals appreciated receiving detailed feedback on their SIPs and recognized that CNA and SIP guided school transformation and instructional coaching, both of which were viewed as important contributors to the schools' increased capacity.

The findings indicate the importance of continuity in the delivery of school supports. The survey showed that the level of support decreased substantially after the change in the support delivery model and, according to interviews with principals and teachers, the transition and reduced level of support made it difficult to continue with their reform work. As DPI continues to provide support to low-performing schools in the future, the Department might consider stabilizing access to consistent coaching over time.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 The response rates of the 2017 and 2018 surveys were 75 percent and 57 percent, respectively.
- 2 Teacher and principal interview data provide some insight into how survey respondents interpreted the term "capacity". It appears that "capacity" encompasses the collective professional skills and abilities of staff. For example, interviewees noted that, "[t]he whole idea is to build the capacity within the district so that it would continue...Those people leave, so you have a totally different set of teachers in here." And "[b]ecause we have such [high] turnover and because we have such a high number of lateral entry people, then the teacher capacity is not at the same level".
- 3 Fidelity of implementation was assessed using responses to the principal survey at the end of high intensity supports (Spring 2017). For each area of implementation in Figure 2, multiple questions informed an index of fidelity, with high fidelity of implementation corresponding to certain responses across those questions. Principals reported impact on capacity a year later, Spring 2018.



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