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The Role of the School District in School Transformation: Findings from Transformation Network Districts in Colorado

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About CADRE

The Center for Assessment, Design, Research and Evaluation (CADRE) is housed in the School of Education at the University of Colorado Boulder. The mission of CADRE is to produce generalizable knowledge that improves the ability to assess student learning and to evaluate programs and methods that may have an effect on this learning. Projects undertaken by CADRE staff represent a collaboration with the ongoing activities in the School of Education, the University, and the broader national and international community of scholars and stakeholders involved in educational assessment and evaluation.

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Executive Summary

This report describes the role Colorado school districts play in supporting school improvement efforts through a state-sponsored turnaround program called the Transformation Network (TN). Two data sources inform the study: a survey of district personnel in each district that either currently or previously engaged with the TN, and interviews with district leaders involved in facilitating work with the TN. The report highlights the different roles that district leaders took in supporting turnaround work, district leader perspectives on working with a state-led school transformation program, and challenges that districts have encountered with school improvement work.

Key findings from this report include:

1. A majority of district leaders found the TN tools, supports, and professional development opportunities to be useful in providing the structure and training necessary to engage in meaningful school improvement work.

2. District leaders felt highly supported by School Transformation Specialists from the Colorado Department of Education. Leaders described the relationship as a collaborative partnership that fosters trust and provides a supportive context for transformation work.

3. Districts served as the link between the state TN team and school leaders. Participating in the TN helped district leaders develop a cohesive vision and build capacity to sustain improvement efforts after the end of TN participation. The specific role of the district in supporting improvement efforts did, however, differ across districts depending on district size and capacity.

4. Despite district leaders' positive perspectives on engagement with the TN, they noted ongoing challenges to engaging in this work including the large time investment, obtaining buy-in from school leaders and teachers, accessing TN supports when districts are distally located, and sustaining transformation efforts after the grant period ends.

Overall, results elucidate which of the TN supports district leaders perceive to be particularly effective and ineffective and showcase the roles that Colorado districts play in supporting low-performing schools engaged with the TN. The successes and challenges reported by districts captured in this report are intended to inform the Transformation Unit's commitment to continuously improving their support work to schools and districts. More broadly, the report provides an example of the role of school districts in school transformation that may be useful in guiding states and districts that are considering implementing or improving transformation practices.

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Introduction

For more than two decades, states have implemented a wide range of interventions and programs designed to "turnaround" or "transform" low-performing schools. Scholars in the field of school turnaround emphasize that district and state actors play essential roles in supporting these efforts (e.g., Burns et al., 2023; Glazer et al., 2020; Schueler, 2019). School transformation is most effective when, for example, school districts direct efforts with a clear vision for teaching and learning and establish dedicated roles or departments to aid schools in improving (Bryk, 2010; Meyers, 2020).

Despite the general consensus that successful school improvement work requires support from the district level, minimal research addresses the role of school districts in supporting turnaround efforts. In a recent literature review, the Center for Assessment, Design, Research, and Evaluation (CADRE) highlighted key elements of effective turnaround programs – including adopting a systems-level approach to school turnaround, maintaining sustained leadership and vision, and building capacity for turnaround work – but noted that many turnaround studies rely on a limited number of contexts and authors (Buchbinder & Diaz-Bilello, 2025). The literature review underscored the need for more research on the role of districts in facilitating turnaround efforts.

Given the scarcity of research exploring the role of districts in steering school turnaround efforts and based on interest from the Colorado Department of Education (CDE), CADRE conducted a study to understand the district's role and perspectives on state-sponsored school improvement work in Colorado. Colorado is a relevant context in which to explore the role of districts in school transformation as CDE has implemented and run a dedicated program to support the lowest performing schools since the 2014-15 academic year. The program is called the School Transformation Network (TN), whose core values include recognizing the importance of establishing a supportive ecosystem for engaging in turnaround work between a school, district, and state. The TN team hopes to better understand how different districts engage with school leaders and implement lessons from participating in the TN.

This study draws on two sources of data to shed light on how districts effectively engage their schools in school turnaround or transformation work: 1) a survey that was distributed to district personnel in all districts that currently or have previously engaged in work with the TN; and 2) interviews with district leaders from a purposive sample of districts with varying characteristics and levels of engagement with the TN. Based on these sources, we report on district perspectives on school transformation work, the district's role in assisting and working with low-performing schools, and challenges encountered by district staff with school improvement work. Additionally, we describe the challenges encountered by Colorado district leaders engaging in school improvement work.

We begin by presenting results from a comprehensive survey of all districts that ever participated in the TN network. Then, we report findings from interviews with six case study districts. These findings are intended to provide information on which TN supports appear to be working, and to identify areas where districts could use more support from the state to facilitate school transformation work. More broadly, the findings from this report contribute to the literature about district turnaround work and may also inform the work of other states and districts intending to implement or improve district transformation practices using a similar partnership model to drive the work.

Background

The Colorado Department of Education launched what is now known as the Transformation Network (TN) during the 2014-15 school year (Colorado Department of Education, 2025). The goal of the TN is to "accelerate student achievement for select schools through targeted support, resources, and flexibility," and was developed as part of a series of programs funded through Colorado's Empowering Action for School Improvement (EASI) grant application. The EASI grant application was put in place to streamline how funds are awarded to districts through a single "needs-based" application. Any school identified as low performing through the state or federal accountability system is eligible to apply for funds through the process. The TN is one of several possible EASI programs to which schools can apply and be awarded funds.

Originally called the Turnaround Network, the TN evolved over time to support struggling schools and is known for using a collaborative model to define customized interventions and strategies. The TN program emphasizes that being part of the Network requires collaboration between CDE and local schools and their districts. The theory of action underlying the TN is that by supporting both districts and schools, the lowest performing schools will experience lasting and sustained improvements. The underlying principles guiding the collaborative activities are the "Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement" framework (Colorado Department of Education, 2022). The framework emphasizes the following four domains as essential in facilitating rapid improvement in schools:

- Domain 1: Leadership for Rapid Improvement: Leaders at the state, district, and school levels facilitate rapid, significant, and sustainable improvement efforts. Leaders organize the coordinated work of staff centered around a shared vision of success.
- Domain 2: Talent Management: Rapid improvement requires competent and committed leaders and teachers. Policies and procedures successfully select, place, and retain teachers.
- Domain 3: Instructional Transformation: Effective instructional practice must be supported across the school, district, and broader system level. This includes standards-based instruction, data-based planning, differentiation, culturally relevant and evidence-based pedagogical approaches, and classroom management.
- Domain 4: Culture and Climate Shift: Achieving equitable results requires a culture shift towards high academic and behavioral expectations, and teaching and learning conditions that meet the needs of all students and their families.

All schools in the Network are assigned a School Transformation Specialist. The Transformation Specialist works in the School & District Transformation Unit at CDE and serves as a resource and partner to the district and the school. Similarly, for a school to serve in the Network, an individual from the district must be identified as a "district partner". The district partner must be a senior-level district staff member who is required to attend all Network professional development opportunities with the school team. Therefore, TN participation requires vertically coordinated supports between the school, the district, and the CDE TN team.

Supports Provided by the TN

While the exact supports provided by the TN vary based on school and/or district needs, there are some program supports provided to all participating schools and districts. We describe each of the key supports below.

Diagnostic Review

At the beginning of a school's participation in the TN, the School Transformation Specialist, the district partner, and school leader jointly conduct a diagnostic review and walkthrough of the school. This process involves both a physical school walkthrough, as well as a review of school data. This process is intended to help the school and district leaders identify key priority areas that will best support school improvement efforts and the development of a plan for future progress and performance monitoring.

Funding

As part of participation in the TN, schools have access to up to three years of EASI funds. In the year in which a school applies and is accepted to the TN, schools can access up to $20,000. In the two subsequent years they can access up to $80,000 each year. The School Transformation Specialist works with each participating school to develop a budget and identify areas in need of support based on the diagnostic review. The funding may be used to provide professional development, facilitate teacher planning time, or to purchase curricular resources and materials, among others. Schools can also elect to use the funds to attend training provided by third-party groups such as RELAY, Teach Like a Champion, or the Standards Institute.

Performance Management Routines

Schools that participate in the TN agree to several components of ongoing evaluation, reporting and progress monitoring. These include engaging in performance management routines by using the Performance Management (PM) tool. The PM tool is a spreadsheet that requires schools to monitor progress toward meeting annual goals, as well as enter key improvement data such as school improvement plan implementation, daily attendance rates, student suspension data and student achievement on interim assessments.

Professional Development (PD)

The TN hosts a series of professional development sessions each year in which school leaders may participate. All current TN schools, TN alumni, and friends of the Network (schools in TN districts that do not directly participate in the TN) are invited to attend the sessions. While topics vary each year, some professional learning sessions remain consistent. For example, the TN consistently offers yearly PD on the observation and feedback cycle, where school leaders learn how to coach teachers and provide them feedback. Other PD session in 2024-25 included "Weekly Data Meetings 1.0", "Effective Leadership Teams", and "Strategic Planning for Second Semester."

One additional PD opportunity provided by the TN is what they call "Bright Spot Visits." Each year, the School Transformation Specialists facilitate a "field trip" for current school and district leaders in the Network to visit schools that have made important leaps in performance to identify and observe what practices have worked well in these schools and made them successful. Bright spot visits are not required and may vary year to year, so not all TN schools will participate.

Data

Data for this study were obtained from two sources: a survey administered to all districts that have participated in the TN, and transcripts from in-depth interviews with leaders from a purposive sample districts.

Survey

In Fall 2024, we designed a survey to be sent out to the Transformation coordinator and supporting district staff in each of the 21 districts that have ever participated in the TN. The survey was co-designed with CDE staff to collect census-level data about engagement in the TN. The survey questions asked about the extent to which various TN supports were useful for supporting low-performing schools, whether district priorities have changed over time, which professional development (PD) opportunities districts have engaged in, challenges to supporting low-performing schools, additional resources that would be useful to support districts, and whether the district recommends the TN (see Appendix A for a full copy of the survey).

Participants were invited by email to respond to the survey in Qualtrics. Out of the 21 districts that ever participated in the TN, we sent email requests to complete the survey to one or two individuals in each of 18 districts. Three districts were not sent a request to complete the survey because their Transformation coordinator is no longer in the district. Transformation coordinators from 16 unique districts responded. However, we received two responses from two unique individuals in the same district, for a total of 17 survey responses.

Interviews

We conducted interviews in a purposive sample of six districts that are currently participating in or previously participated in the TN. We selected a sample of schools that ranged in terms of district characteristics and levels of engagement with the Network in order to understand the range of experiences districts have with transformation work. Specifically, we wanted to identify district leaders to interview that served districts with a variety of student demographics, school settings, fidelity of TN implementation, and numbers of schools participating in the TN. The process for forming and selecting a purposive sample of districts is located in Appendix B.

We conducted interviews with one district employee in each of the six selected districts. During the interviews, we used a semi-structured interview protocol which asked participants about specific supports they receive/received from the TN, the impact of those supports on student outcomes, the sustainability of TN practices, the districts' role in supporting schools through transformation, challenges encountered through transformation work, and additional supports that would be useful to receive from the state to further support and improve TN practices (see Appendix C for a full copy of the interview protocol). Interviews were conducted between December 2024 and February 2025. Each interview lasted approximately 60-mintues. All interviews were conducted and recorded on Zoom. "Rev" software was used to transcribe all interviews. The methods for analyzing the survey and interview data are located in Appendix D of this report.

Survey Results

Survey Respondents

Of the 17 survey respondents, 11 respondents worked in 10 unique districts that participated in the TN in the 2024-25 academic year, while six of the respondents were in districts that had participated in the TN prior to the 2024-25 academic year. Respondents took on a number of roles within the district. Table 2 below summarizes the positions the respondents held at the time they responded to the survey.

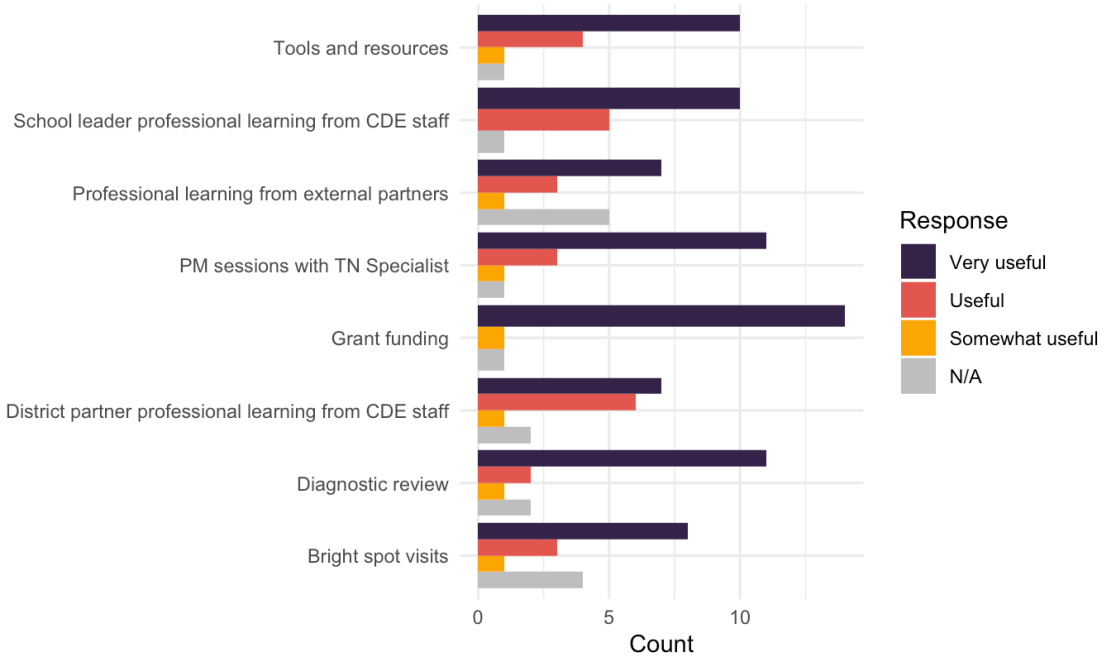
Table 2: Number of survey responses by position

Position TItle	Number of Survey Respondents
Superintendent	3
Assistant Superintendent (including Area or Deputy superintendents)	5
Chief Academic Officer/ Chief Academic Partner	2
Executive Director of Schools	3
Director of Site Leadership/ Director of Special Services	2
Principal	1
Missing	1

Descriptive Summary of Survey Results

The following figures display results from one respondent in each of the 16 districts that completed the survey. Figure 1 shows how respondents rated the usefulness of different types of support for improving chronically low performing schools. These supports were defined as: tools and resources, PD from CDE staff, PD from external partners, PM sessions with the School Transformation Specialist, grant funding, district PD, the diagnostic review, and bright spot visits. Respondents rated each support on a four-point scale from “Not at all useful” to “Very useful”, with an option to select “N/A” if the district did not use that support.

Figure 1: District coordinator perceptions of the usefulness of TN supports

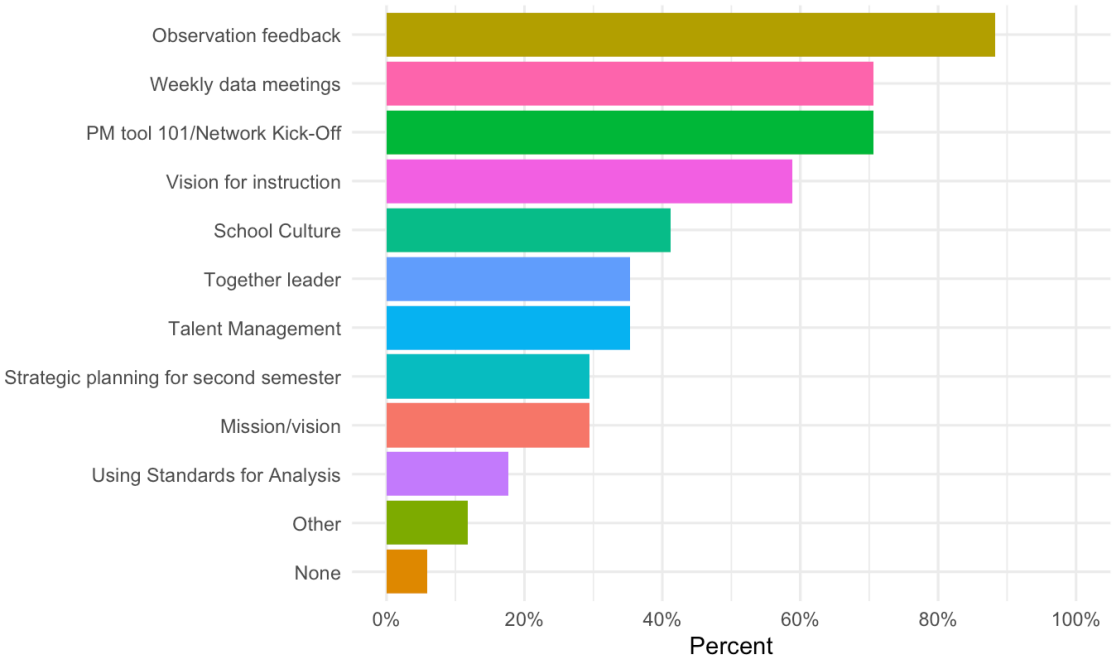


Most respondents rated each support as either "Very useful" or "Useful." While some different districts selected "Somewhat useful" for one or more supports, no district mostly selected that option across the board. A few districts selected "N/A" for one or a few supports, and one district selected "N/A" for every support. This last district respondent also did not provide detailed survey responses to the remaining items and did not recommend participating in the TN. No district indicated that any support was "Not at all useful."

The grant funding provided by the TN was considered "Very useful" by almost all responding district contacts. The diagnostic review and performance management (PM) sessions with the School Transformation Specialist were also considered to be very useful for many districts. Relative to the other items, fewer districts found that the professional learning provided by external organizations, the professional learning provided by CDE staff, or the bright spot visits were very useful; instead, about half of respondents responded "Useful" or "Somewhat Useful" for these activities.

Figure 2 outlines the percentage of districts that reported accessing the listed TN professional development sessions.

Figure 2: Percentage of district respondents who reported participating in PD



Of the 16 districts, almost 90% of them reported that their district participated in professional development on the "Observation feedback" cycle. Other commonly attended PD sessions included ones on holding weekly data meetings, using the performance management (PM) tool, and creating a vision for instruction. Fewer districts participated in PD on using standards for analysis or developing a school mission/vision. In cases where a low percentage of respondents indicated engaging in a particular PD session, this may be because the PD session was not offered during their time in the TN or only applied to particular school contexts. Therefore, low participation does not necessarily indicate lack of interest, but rather participation rates reflect, in part, the frequency with which TN PD sessions were offered.

Open-Ended Response

The following results summarize the open-ended responses from all 17 survey respondents, including the two respondents from the same school district. (See Appendix E for a full list of all open-ended responses for each item.)

Describing TN Work with Schools

The first two survey items asked respondents to describe (1) an example of how their work with the TN has evolved and (2) how their work with the TN has positively impacted their district practices. Since respondents often provided examples of how their district has taken up TN practices in both questions, we combined the responses to highlight which supports each district found most useful. Table 3 shows the combined codes from items 1 and 2. The top code represents the TN support most often mentioned in open-ended responses as helpful for district practice.

Table 3: Positive practices utilized by districts from TN support

Descriptive Code	Number of Mentions
Observation feedback cycle	10
CDE support with planning and monitoring	9
Support for non-TN schools	7
Planning / PM tool	6
PD / support for leadership	4
External partners	4
EASI funds	3
Data collection and use	3
Coaching	3
Data informed instruction	3
Specific Transformation specialist mentions	3
Embedded professional learning	2
Diagnostic review	2
Instructional rigor/ focus	1
Four domains rubric	1
Hiring and retention	1
Schedule change to support meeting	1
Collaborative lesson planning	1

Of all the TN supports, 10 of the 17 survey respondents mentioned the observation-feedback cycle as one that their district had adopted and implemented across schools in the district. For example, one district shared "The most impactful [support] has been the use of the observation/ feedback cycle. It is a process that we have continued to use since first encountering it via the network 8-9 years ago." The second most frequently mentioned support that was useful for districts was CDE support with planning and monitoring, including developing 90-day plans and developing routines for regular school visits and building walkthroughs. Seven district administrators mentioned that they had been able to use different structures learned through TN participation and apply them to other schools in their district. Finally, six district respondents specifically mentioned that the PM tool was a useful support for helping schools "plan and prioritize goals and benchmarks, as well as reflect on and progress monitor them." The remaining supports were mentioned less frequently but also reflect the diverse set of supports that the TN team provides when working with districts and attempting to respond to their needs.

Less Useful Supports

The survey respondents were asked if any TN activities or supports were less useful for their district. Of the 17 respondents, seven respondents skipped the question, six respondents indicated that all of the supports were useful, and four provided feedback about supports that were less useful for their districts. One of the district respondents shared that when they began working with the TN in earlier years, supports such as the PM tool were not as useful for their district, but that more recent TN supports have been more useful. Another respondent mentioned that some of the trainings were lower quality over the years, but did not identify a particular training. A third respondent shared that a challenge for their district was finding the time or resources to attend all of the trainings. The last respondent provided perhaps the most critical feedback, sharing that they were:

> Lacking support between PM Sessions to implement what we learn and to follow through on goals with the level of intentionality needed for rapid school improvement. Lack of analyzing a variety of data to inform change and set clear action steps.

This last respondent had previously shared that the professional learning about identifying "big rocks" and instructional focus was useful, and that the PM tool helped them prioritize goals. However, as the quote above indicates, they also found that the support between check-ins was less than they would have liked to facilitate rapid change. They did not elaborate on what additional data sources could have informed their action steps.

Challenges to Supporting Low-Performing Schools

Our team asked survey respondents to share challenges they faced when attempting to support low-performing schools and whether they could identify any additional supports the TN could provide to address the challenge. While several survey respondents identified challenges, few provided ideas for what the TN could do to address the challenge. The most common challenge identified was staffing and turnover of both school leaders and teachers. Four districts specifically identified teacher turnover as a challenge while the fifth shared that it was challenging to find and hire leaders for low-performing schools. This last district additionally shared:

> It is incredibly challenging right now to find and hire leaders for low-performing schools. The support we've received helps us to develop the leaders we have, but it could be impactful to think about strategies for attracting, hiring, and retaining turnaround leaders.

Another district shared similar issues with staffing but recognized that "the network offers what it can in terms of ideas for recruitment/ retention, but it [may be] beyond their capacity."

A second group of responses explained that it was a challenge to prioritize what to focus on (two responses), sustain that work (one response), and "continue to focus on outcomes during times of change" (one response). For example, one respondent shared:

> The biggest challenge is trying to do it all at once. It is easy to believe you can. I think the transformation network allows you to really think about how you prioritize the work. They really help build that staircase so that we can have a way to get the top by doing one thing at a time.

A second respondent suggested that sustaining improvement was a challenge for which it was useful to have the CDE partner as accountability and support to maintain "eyes on the target."

Two district leaders mentioned that changes to funding distribution could help support their work with schools. One of those respondents said:

> While we really appreciate the funding through the EASI grant, we wish that access to these funds could happen earlier on the accountability clock timeline - we have really moved to intervening early, and the weighting of the state grant doesn't allow schools early on the clock to access funds.

Finally, the last set of challenges included instructional or personnel-based suggestions, such as wanting to have more support for teacher leaders and support with generating teacher buy-in. For example, one respondent shared that "professional learning for leaders around high poverty" would be useful, while another stated simply that the largest challenge was operating in resource poor schools which often face significant challenges. Similarly, a third respondent shared that "supporting leaders through the emotional challenges of transformation work" is a big challenge in which the network supports them. Finally, an additional respondent shared:

> The biggest challenge is time and changing mindsets to do things differently. Unless they were going to provide side-by-side coaching for teachers (which would be ridiculous), no, changing mindsets and adjusting schedules and workloads is district and school-based work.

Many districts shared that it was a struggle to generate buy-in from their current teachers and leaders into the work they were doing with the TN. These respondents also noted that the TN did what it could, and that many of these challenges were simply part of the work of supporting low-performing schools.

Suggestions for TN supports

One of the final questions asked district respondents to consider whether there were any additional supports that the TN could provide that would strengthen their work with schools. Seven of the respondents did not suggest additional supports or indicate that the supports that were currently provided were adequate.

Three respondents asked the Network to continue streamlining and improving work they already do. Two respondents suggested that "continuing with high quality professional development" of leaders so that all leaders use a consistent and standardized methodology and "continued focus on developing principal supervisors" were key components of their improvement work. A third respondent requested that the Network continue to streamline the EASI grant application process. In a similar vein, one additional respondent suggested that "PD around small group instruction for staff would be useful", which suggests that an increased focus on developing teachers and instructional practices is salient.

Four respondents suggested that the Network could offer in-person support for new leadership. For example, one respondent shared that "Ongoing in-person support and diagnostic reviews, especially when there is new leadership in the building" would be useful. Another respondent suggested that they would like support for figuring out how to apply the four domains tool to their work in schools, while a third emphasized "district-level strategic planning for improvement for instruction." The final response in this group shared that "supporting the implementation of multiple systems simultaneously and how leaders can learn to do that in a focused, consistent matter" would be useful.

One respondent (the same respondent who indicated that they would not recommend the TN) said "better engagement. Not just emails." A final respondent did not reach the end of the survey and thus left the final survey items blank.

Would you Recommend the TN?

The final survey item asked respondents to indicate whether they would recommend the TN to other schools and districts, with the option to add open-ended text explaining their selection. Table 4 displays the distribution of responses. Of the 17 survey respondents, 15 reported that they would recommend the TN to other districts and schools. One respondent selected no, and one did not finish the survey.

Table 4: Responses to "Would you recommend the Transformation Network to other districts and schools?"

	Number of Respondents
Yes	15
No	1
No Response	1

Overall, district respondents shared that they thought highly of working with the TN and the CDE team, and shared that their work with the Network has helped support their efforts to improve schools in their district. Several respondents suggested that one of the main benefits of being in the Network was collaborating and learning from both other Network schools and from the CDE team. They found that the CDE team cared and were helpful thought partners (five respondents) and that the access to resources was useful (one respondent). For example, the open-ended responses of three individuals are included as follows:

> I found CDE to be very flexible and supportive. They care about your context, and they are committed to providing tools and resources to support change efforts.

> We definitely would recommend. The support Jenny H. has provided has been invaluable. She is always available, has great experiences to pull from and share. She is a thought partner when you need it and a sounding board when you need it.

> I think a network of schools tackling similar challenges is helpful. Success comes from a lot of collaboration and thought partnership. Many leaders in the network have a "piece" of the answer, they are just challenged in figuring out how to make things work together.

The single individual who did not recommend the TN did not provide an open-ended response.

Interview Results

We now present key findings from six interviews conducted with district staff selected through purposive sampling. The interview data further contextualize the survey response data by offering in-depth insights into how districts perceive their engagement with the TN and the different roles that they have taken to support school improvement work. The interviews also shed light on the challenges this set of districts encountered as they engaged in transformational improvement work. We organized the interview findings into four sections. The first section describes district perspectives on engaging with the TN. The second section describes the different configurations districts took when supporting TN work. The third section outlines the challenges that districts encountered, and the final section summarizes district leaders' recommendations to other districts engaging in transformation work.

District Perspectives on Engagement with the School Transformation Network

Overall, all six interview participants expressed strong appreciation for the support they received through the TN. Two themes emerged regarding district perspectives on their engagement with the TN. First, respondents consistently mentioned the value of the support provided by the School Transformation Specialist. Second, they emphasized the usefulness of the tools and resources offered by the network, although the specific tools cited varied depending on each district's unique context.

Cross-System Partnerships Provide a Supportive Context for Transformation Work

The TN is designed to provide state support to low-performing districts and schools so that leaders are not operating in isolation but rather engaging in improvement work in partnership with a CDE School Transformation Specialist. Every district leader interviewed described their designated School Transformation Specialist as a thought partner, collaborator, or teammate. One described of their School Transformation Specialist:

> [They] really gave some great guidance, kind of that 25,000 view as well as some tailored guidance of, 'I'm seeing this in school. Can you come in and take a look with me to let me know what you think the next best step might be?' So [they were] an incredible thought partner for me during that time period.

As part of this partnership mentality, district leaders described not feeling as though their interactions with the state were punitive or that the state had "taken over" their district or its schools. Instead, they expressed that the state was willing to meet them where they were at in terms of school culture, practices, and improvement efforts. One superintendent described the first time that their School Transformation Specialist visited one of the Network schools. The superintendent recalled being happily relieved by the support and understanding of the Transformation Specialist, sharing that she had assumed the Specialist "would walk in and be like 'this place is a junk show, right?' and that would not be helpful. But nobody from the Transformation Network ever walks in like that. They walk in and they're like 'oh, yep, yep, yep. Totally. Yep, seen it all before. Here we go!'"

This cross-system partnership described by district leaders aligns with the design of the TN. Relative to more top-down school turnaround models such as the School Improvement Grant

(SIG) model, the TN takes a collaborative approach to addressing chronically low student performance. The shift from top-down to more collaborative turnaround approaches created a period of institutional interstitially (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2020; Buchbinder & Diaz-Bilello, 2025), during which the state and district had to actively reconsider their roles in turnaround efforts. Instead of placing the burden of improvement solely on individual school leaders, this model acknowledged that schools are better set up for success when leaders can draw on support from the broader educational ecosystem, including both district and state agencies. Our conversations with district leaders suggest this system-level approach to school improvement facilitated healthy collaboration and trust across system levels, creating a supportive context for engaging in meaningful transformation efforts.

Transformation Network Tools and Resources help Structure Improvement Work

In addition to the cross-system collaboration of which district leaders spoke highly, they also emphasized the importance of the tools and resources provided by CDE in supporting their transformation work. Many of the same tools and resources mentioned in the survey results were discussed and further elaborated upon during the interviews, offering deeper insights into their practical utility. District leaders described these tools and resources as essential structures that helped organize and guide their improvement efforts. As will be discussed, many of the tools and resources provided by the TN align closely with effective school improvement practices identified in the literature.

Two of the tools noted as useful among district respondents were the diagnostic review process and the PM tool. Interviewees noted the diagnostic review process as particularly useful for honing in on a few concrete, high-yield improvement areas and the PM tool as a useful tool to monitor progress on success indicators related to the major improvement areas. Both of these tools provided a useful framework for organizing and monitoring improvement strategies while allowing districts latitude in identifying areas of most relevance and importance to their specific context. Research on effective turnaround practices has highlighted "specificity" as a significant predictor of school improvement (e.g., Hill et al., 2023) such that clearer goals in improvement programming result in larger improvements in outcomes. Additionally, research has highlighted data-driven management as an important feature in monitoring progress towards meeting goals and in successfully improving student and school outcomes (e.g., Player and Katz, 2016). Based on responses from the interviews, using both the diagnostic review process and PM tool appear to be supporting districts' abilities to define and track clear goals.

District leaders also highlighted their opportunities to consult with external organizations such as UVA and RELAY as useful to supporting school and district improvement. One district leader who engaged with UVA described that their relationship with external provider was "about creating systems around assessment PLCs and curricular resources, curriculum, standards-based instruction, lesson planning, really that instructional infrastructure hub." For this leader, focusing on the nuts and bolts of teaching and instruction was an invaluable piece of the turnaround effort. Another district leader described that as a result of UVA training, "everybody's speaking the same language, and they understand the expectations around…90-day plans…it is part of what we do now, and [the schools] look forward to it, they work the plan." A district leader who worked with RELAY described that after RELAY, "I felt a little bit more capable of guiding them into some next steps." The opportunity to work with external organizations is a key feature of the TN, as well as other newer approaches to school improvement. In cases where expertise in a particular turnaround area does not lie within the school, district, or state, research points to work with these external organizations as critical to developing the necessary tools and skills to support improvement efforts (Buchbinder & Diaz-Bilello, 2025; Murphy & Bleiberg, 2019; Peurach & Neumerski, 2015).

In addition to the diagnostic review process, PM tool, and engagement with external organizations, all district leaders highlighted TN PD sessions as essential for supporting school improvement through talent management. One district leader noted that while the academic achievement and growth of students are monitored as essential indicators of school improvement, improvements in academic achievement and growth rely on "the skill development that's happening in teachers…and that happens through what the Transformation Network continues to give PD on." The leader continued:

> We're very thankful for the professional development that [the Transformation Network] offers because they have observation feedback…training for coaches and administrators. And so, any time you're in our system, if you're going to give feedback to teachers, you have to go through that training before you can give feedback. So, then that's streamlined too. So, everyone's doing it in a very similar way no matter where you go [in] the district.

Talent management is a central component of the "Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement" (Colorado Department of Education, 2022). This domain emphasizes the importance of equipping teachers and leaders with the skills and resources necessary for effective instruction, while offering professional learning opportunities to support continued growth. The TN operationalizes this domain through the diverse professional development opportunities offered and a sustained focus on strengthening the observation-feedback cycle in schools. By prioritizing talent management, the TN enhances teachers' capacity to support student learning more effectively.

The Role of Districts in Supporting School Improvement

Every district organized their work with the TN differently. For example, some small districts assigned a single person whose role it was to be the district partner, attend the TN PD, and perform weekly check-ins with school leaders. However, in some of these districts, this individual held a senior leadership position – such as superintendent – which made it more challenging to consistently fulfill the demands of the role. In contrast, some larger districts hired a designated person to fill the TN support role, or they assigned the role to various individuals in the district depending on which schools specifically were in the network. Despite variation in organizational structures, districts shared several common approaches to their improvement work. In particular, all districts described that having a cohesive vision, relying on a leader to help facilitate the work, and continuously working to sustain the changes even after they ended their direct involvement with the TN were central to supporting schools.

Cohesive Vision Facilitates Targeted Improvement Efforts

District leaders shared the importance of having a cohesive vision in supporting school improvement efforts. While district leaders recognize that schools may have varying needs and goals, most of the leaders described the importance of creating the "right system in which the schools can then be successful." After pointing to some of the differences between the schools in her district, one leader stated:

> Yet they all have in common that every school is using data-driven instruction and collaboration during their PLC times…We have certain things that are standardized across our system…we expect lesson planning from every teacher. We expect scientific evidence-based resources. We found that [when every school is using different resources], then it's hard to go in and provide that right professional development for everybody.

For this leader, she found that schools in her system were most successful when they worked under a cohesive set of practices. Having cohesive practices across the district helped her better respond to school needs while supporting collaboration across schools in the district.

Two school leaders highlighted their diagnostic review processes as a key mechanism for aligning school-level improvement priorities with the district's overarching vision. One leader emphasized that aligning priority areas to a district vision helped to streamline improvement efforts and allowed the district to better support the school, by sharing, "we had 10 different schools, and they were probably doing 10 different things, and so it was hard from a district perspective to support that…the more you can get them focused on those key high-leverage improvement actions, that's better for them in the long run." The other leader noted that "initially it was probably more each school kind of doing their own thing, and over time we recognized that wasn't very effective." This leader described looking closely at district and school goals and ensuring some level of alignment between the two and noted, "[schools] might have their own spin on some aspect of what we're doing, but it's incorporated at both levels." Another leader similarly described the following:

> What I find is that our school district…was working in silos…every principal did their own thing. They were not coming together for professional development, and we didn't have one vision in one direction. And so…we established a district vision, district vision for instruction, which is part of the Transformation Network, and really overhauled our instructional infrastructure, and we did that as a team with all of our principals…you focused on the same big rocks that we had, so nobody was working in silos anymore. It completely broke that down.

Echoing the goals of the TN, district leaders described that working with school leaders to define a set of cohesive practices was crucial for creating a unified vision of improvement. Co-creating a vision for instruction helped build a community of practice among school leaders who could then work together, rather than in silos, on similar efforts to support teachers and students.

Since district leaders viewed a clear vision for instruction as integral to successful transformation work, they noted this as a priority when hiring new school leaders. One noted that while some school leaders try to approach the position as managerial, "what I look for [instead] in a leader is instructional. Are you instructionally strong? Are you going to be able to give that right feedback to teachers just in time to be able to change the trajectory of student outcomes in a positive way?" Prior literature has similarly pointed to the importance of strong instructional leadership as a mechanism for spurring and supporting ongoing transformational change (Hambrick Hitt et al., 2018; Rorrer et al., 2008).

Dedicated "Shepherds" Help Ensure Schools Receive Necessary Supports

Related to strong leadership and vision, literature has pointed to the importance of dedicated roles or departments within districts whose primary responsibility is to support turnaround schools. This person or department, which Meyers (2020) refers to as "shepherds," would regularly visit schools, provide support to schools, bring leaders together to learn from one another, and help build capacity within the district and buildings.

One of the requirements of participation in the TN is that a district appoint a dedicated individual, or 'district partner,' responsible for collaborating with the School Transformation Specialist and facilitating school improvement work. While this looks different from district to district, every districts had at least one person who was responsible for serving in this "shepherd" position.

Some of the larger districts interviewed hired a specific staff member whose primary role was to oversee and support low-performing schools. One district described the role of these "supervisors" as follows:

> All of our supervisors, we have an expectation, a cadence that they need to visit schools. And typically, our schools that are turnaround or a priority improvement plan type, they'll get a visit every week…if there are things that we're doing or practices that we're doing that aren't benefiting those schools or there's a barrier, that closer connection between the district and school helps us get that barrier out of the way.

Other districts, particularly smaller districts, did not have the capacity to hire staff or develop a department dedicated exclusively to supporting low-performing schools. In these districts, the person in the role of the dean of instruction, for example, served as the "shepherd." These individuals often had responsibilities that fell outside of supporting low-performing schools while also working closely with CDE to visit TN schools and provide support around improvement efforts.

Regardless of the size or capacity of the district, the interview data suggest that appointing a dedicated person or group of people at the district level to serve as "shepherds" is integral to the success of the TN. These people are commonly required to become deeply embedded with the improvement work at each school and can focus exclusively on steering key TN practices at these sites.

Districts Support the Sustainability of Transformation Network Supports

Another key role of the district in supporting school improvement efforts is helping to sustain TN practices after the grant period ends. While the Network provides ongoing access to some of their tools and resources after the grant period, schools' and districts' official engagement with the TN lasts a maximum of three years. After that period, the burden falls on the district to maintain the supports and practices that contributed to school improvement.

Many of the district leaders interviewed spoke about their efforts to continue the school improvement work after the grant period. One superintendent said, "we haven't had network schools for a few years now, but a lot of those practices, a lot of those partnerships, are things that we've continued to support at schools." The superintendent went on to list several ongoing practices that the district has sustained, such as "continuing to embed practices like observation feedback, some of our data meeting work…curriculum adoptions…some general professional development for all district staff."

In addition to continuing to support the schools that officially participated in the TN, many district leaders spoke to their efforts to apply TN practices district wide. One district leader, for example, mentioned conducting diagnostic reviews for all schools in the district, and another mentioned implementing the PM tool in all schools as a way to monitor progress toward meeting goals. One superintendent described having witnessed the success of the district's support from RELAY in helping move schools off the accountability clock. Another leader mentioned applying some of these same practices to other schools in the district and shared:

> So, what we started doing when we saw the success with some of the practices is we said, 'Hey, let's introduce that school that's in year one or year two on the clock and not wait five years and have the state tell us we had to do it, but let's do it beforehand'. And we've had some success with that in moving schools off of the clock before they get to that accountability hearing at the end.

Ultimately, this capacity building and transfer of knowledge within districts is a primary goal of the TN. To have district leaders describe that they are sustaining the work in practice is a positive sign that district leaders can continue supporting school improvement efforts for the long-term.

Challenges Districts Encountered with School Improvement Work

District leaders also spoke to key challenges and barriers they faced in supporting school improvement efforts through the TN. This section describes some of the most prominent challenges mentioned by district leaders, along with their suggestions of possible ways to address these challenges.

Investing Sufficient Time and Resources

One of the primary challenges noted by district leaders was the large investment of time and resources required to support school improvement in the face of competing priorities. The prioritization of TN activities can be particularly challenging for small districts, where TN work and oversight often falls in the hands of an individual like the superintendent. The superintendent of one district noted:

> I spend 80% of my time on non-instructional matters, right? And I inherited like a huge mess, financially, operationally, facilities-wise…So it's just sort of like that has to be your priority, because it just is…That stuff is just totally all-consuming as a superintendent, so, I wish I could say I was driving my own agenda, but that's just not real.

While this superintended expressed the desire to focus more time and energy on school improvement work with the TN, other urgent priorities often took precedent.

When districts invest significant time and resources in developing a principal's leadership capacity, that investment is lost when the principal leaves the school – along with the coaching and support received. Reflecting concerns raised in the survey responses, one district leader suggested that the TN offer support in developing strategies to improve the retention of both school leaders and teachers.

Obtaining Buy-In from all Levels of the System

Another challenge noted by district leaders was receiving buy-in from school leaders and teachers engaged with the TN. District leaders noted that initially, some school leaders, teachers, and staff were skeptical of the TN due to negative prior experiences with other external organizations. One noted, "there is a lingering sort of mistrust of outside partners, you know…a lingering sunburn, I guess…[the previous superintendent] brought in an outside partner that was not nearly as successful…all you need is one bad experience to extrapolate to outside partners." In addition to lingering skepticism stemming from prior engagement with external organizations, some district leaders observed resistance to change among veteran teachers, particularly those with long-standing instructional habits. Such resistance has also been identified as a challenge in other studies of transformative organizational change (Glazer et al., 2020).

Interviewees noted that in response to this challenge, they had to play a larger role in guiding schools and encouraging full TN participation. Multiple interviewees suggested that it was important to "go all in" and "take advantage of everything the Transformation Network has

to offer," noting that schools will experience larger improvements if they fully commit to the TN practices. District leaders observed that typically, once schools begin engaging with the Network, they realize that the Network is not trying to change their practices but rather support and improve upon the work they are already doing. One leader shared, "I will invite anyone from the Transformation Network into any of my schools any day of the week. Whereas before people might have been a little bit leery about having Colorado Department of Education come into your schools, I welcome that team with open arms."

Accessing Transformation Network Supports when Geographically Distant

A logistical challenge noted by a couple of district leaders was geographic location. District leaders located in more remote areas of the state, spoke to the large time and financial commitment required to travel to Denver for professional development. For example, one leader shared, "it's three days of commitment to go anywhere on the front range" – a day of travel, a day of training, and a day of travel back. It can be challenging to find substitute teachers for that long and requires a substantial portion of program funding to transport and lodge leaders and staff for those trainings. In addition to the challenge of district and school leaders traveling to Denver, a couple of interviewees noted that they cannot get as much support in a timely manner when School Transformation Specialists live further away.

Two district leaders provided potential solutions to this challenge of geographical distance. One shared that she liked how the PD sessions had been conducted "at the beginning when they would do two days. They would do a full day of PD and then one bright spot visit and they had it paired back-to-back." This way, district staff travelling long distances felt that their trip was more worthwhile because they engaged in multiple activities in one visit. This same leader also suggested that districts located further away receive more funding to support the cost of travel. Right now, all TN schools receive the same amount of funding regardless of location, but the Network could consider geographic location as a factor in allocating funds.

Another district leader suggested having regional CDE contacts so that a School Transformation Specialist is located closer and is more readily available to visit the school or district when needed. This would also open up the possibility of conducting trainings locally such that district and school leaders located on the western slope could convene there without needing to travel to Denver to participate in trainings.

Sustaining Improvement Efforts after the Grant

A final challenge noted by interviewees is the sustainability of TN practices beyond the three-year grant period. While funding and intensive supports are temporary, the goal is that participating schools and districts will have the capacity to continue implementing these practices indefinitely. Some of the district leaders noted, however, that once CDE supports end, it can be hard for schools and districts to sustain transformation practices and keep performance up, as district priorities expand to other focal areas.

District staff provided two suggestions for helping sustain TN practices over time. One district leader requested that there be more district-level coaching, or what she described as "superintendent-level district strategy work." She anticipates that by providing more coaching and strategy support at the entire system-level, districts will be better equipped to continue guiding the work of schools, even in the absence of direct support from CDE. Another district leader suggested that a "light touch" TN option be offered to schools that have left the Network or that have never been in the Network and would like some additional support in improvement

efforts. In cases where a school is not eligible for participation in the Network or does not want to engage in full Network support, this light touch option would, in theory, help to guide the prioritization of improvement efforts without requiring as much of a commitment. One example of a place that has already taken a "light touch" approach to the Network is Dos Rios (Diaz-Bilello et al., 2022). In this school, they used some of the TN tools such as the PM tool and connected with a School Transformation Specialists occasionally but were not involved in the Network to the same extent as full grant recipient schools.

In addition to these specific suggestions provided by district leaders, several practices within the TN are designed to promote the sustainability of school improvement efforts over time. For one, the TN works with districts and schools to align school improvement strategies with district priorities so that schools can focus on attending to both at the same time. By consolidating and streamlining improvement practices, schools can focus on key priority areas that are also in line with the broader district vision (Mooney & Mausbach, 2008). A related feature of the TN that directly helps to support sustainable practices is having strong district leadership and vision. Research on essential features of educational reform have repeatedly pointed to district leadership as a lever in spurring and maintaining improvement efforts (e.g., Anderson, 2006; Rorrer et al, 2008). By hiring strong school and district leaders and building up the capacity of the leaders over the course of participation in the Network, leaders are better equipped to continue to lead turnaround practices without the direct support of School Transformation Specialists.

District Leader Recommendations to Other Districts

In the interviews, district leaders elevated three primary recommendations for other districts considering engaging in these intensive improvement efforts. The first piece of advice provided by almost every district leader was "go all in and take advantage of everything." District leaders acknowledged that the types of school improvement efforts in which they have engaged with the TN are time and labor intensive but noted that these resource-intensive investments are necessary to support successful school improvement. Second, district leaders emphasized the value of the skills and practices they learned through PD opportunities and through close work with School Transformation Specialists. They encourage other district leaders to participate in these opportunities and believe these to be important in sustaining improvement efforts beyond the grant period. Third, district leaders reiterated the importance of aligning school transformation work with district priorities. By doing so, schools can attend to a smaller, concrete set of focus areas that align with the district vision. This also supports the sustainability of school improvement efforts once formal engagement with the TN ends.

Discussion

This study was conducted to better understand districts' engagement with the Colorado School Transformation Network and the role that districts play in supporting school transformation efforts. The findings from this study both support and build on previous literature that emphasize the importance of a cohesive district vision, strong leadership, and persistent commitment to implementing supports for facilitating effective turnaround. Woven throughout these findings is the notion that the School Transformation Specialists from CDE are integral partners in the work, rather than providing oversight at a distance. District leaders described feeling like their work was valued and supported, which helped them build trust and be open to the practices the TN brought to the district. Once district and school leaders engaged in the diagnostic review, implemented regular observation feedback cycles, and began progress monitoring more systematically, they often remarked that they could see positive and incremental improvements over time. In large part, these observed connections between interventions and positive student outcomes helped to validate the theory of action underlying the TN initiative's focus on building the four domains. They also mentioned noticing a shift in the culture at specific school sites which promoted collaboration between teachers and increased dialogue around instructional practices. As a result of noticing these successful shifts in culture and practice, district leaders shared that they recognized that these can transfer effectively to all schools across the district and remarked that they were then eager to implement these practices in other schools.

The data collected in this study also reveal that district engagement with the TN varies as a function of district size and capacity. In smaller districts, individuals holding multiple leadership responsibilities such as a superintendent or dean of instruction frequently assumed the role of district partner or "shepherd." In contrast, larger districts were more often able to hire an individual whose primary or secondary role was to support schools in turnaround efforts. The individual tailoring of the TN to each district and school site made it possible for district and state partners to work together to identify school and district supports that would work in each unique context. However, geographically distal districts encountered logistical and financial challenges to attend in-person professional development sessions hosted in Denver. Participation required investments in course release time, travel, and substitute coverage. Despite these barriers, district leaders expressed that this in-person training was very valuable to see how other schools were approaching similar problems of practice, and to collaborate with other districts and schools in similar situations across the state. These findings underscore the importance of tailoring TN supports to the unique structural and geographic context of each district, as well as the importance of conducting ongoing monitoring of the system in order to expand access to transformation supports.

While the literature notes the importance of having a strong leader to facilitate school improvement (e.g., Meyers 2020), one of the foundational roles of the School Transformation Specialists is working with district leaders to develop their leadership skills. Several interviewees described that they learned a lot about how to have hard and directed conversations with school leaders from watching their School Transformation Specialist engage in these conversations. When a district leader was worried about how to frame a topic with a school leader, the leader shared that they would run through what they were going to say with the School Transformation Specialist. This type of thought partnership at upper levels of district administration is not common, as many district leaders work in silos (VanHusen et al., 2024).

Therefore, they found that having a network of other school leaders and state specialists helped them to develop their own leadership capacity.

District leaders consistently identified the opportunity to collaborate with a thought partner in developing a cohesive and targeted vision as one of the most valuable aspects of engaging with the TN. This support helped districts not only clarify their improvement goals but also determine appropriate strategies for monitoring and supporting progress toward those goals. As noted in prior research, goal specificity enables districts to concentrate efforts and track measurable improvements, rather than dispersing energy across a broad range of loosely connected initiatives (Hill et al., 2023). Both the survey and interview data affirmed the importance of articulating a clear district vision to drive coherence and focus on school improvement work. Moreover, leaders reported that observing tangible improvements in student and teacher data because of targeted interventions helped build confidence in the efficacy of the supports being implemented.

While the specific role districts play in school improvement may vary based on governance structures and the design of the turnaround program, results from this study reinforce the critical function of districts in guiding and facilitating school transformation. In many cases, district leaders pointed to strong district leadership tied to clear instructional visions as essential to guiding school improvement efforts and the prioritization of initiatives. Districts are well positioned to translate policy directions between state supports and schools and help to guide the direction of school improvement efforts to align with the broader district vision. Although districts engaged with the TN vary widely in terms of size, structure, and approach to school improvement, district leaders that adopted tighter and coordinated approaches with leaders of their schools described the benefits of achieving increased coherence across the district. These findings suggest that regardless of setting and context, districts are essential actors in the sustained implementation of school turnaround efforts.

Future Directions

A key limitation of this study was that it required district leaders to recall engagements with the TN over the past 10 years. Some of the district leaders we surveyed and interviewed did not work with the TN for a few years and responded to questions as best they could from memory. Even more, some districts experienced turnover in leadership positions such that not all surveyed and interviewed leaders were in their positions since the inauguration of their districts' work with the TN. As such, participants responded to items as well as they could based on what they recalled about their districts' prior work with the Network, but were not always able to speak from lived experience. In future years, the TN may want to consider collecting systematic information from districts on an annual basis to ensure that feedback received from participants remains current and accurate.

A second opportunity for future research would be to connect the perceptions of district leaders to the experiences of both school leaders and teachers in schools that engaged in transformation work. While district leaders often shared positive reflections on engaging with the TN team at CDE, it could be informative to triangulate their experiences with the experiences of the school personnel who work more directly with students.

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Appendix A

Survey

Q1 What best describes your district's current relationship with the Transformation Network?

- Active Participant (working with the Transformation Network in the 2024-25 academic year)
- Prior Participant (NOT working with the Transformation Network in the 2024-25 academic year)

Q2 Please select all years in which your district has participated in the Transformation Network.

- 2014-15
- 2015-16
- 2016-17
- 2017-18
- 2018-19
- 2019-20
- 2020-21
- 2021-22
- 2022-23
- 2023-24
- 2024-25
- I'm not sure

Q3 What is your current position/title? _____

Q4 When did you begin working for the district in this position? (Month, Year) _____

Q5 Please indicate the extent to which each of the following Transformation Network supports or activities is/was useful in supporting chronically low performing schools. If your district did not engage in a support/activity, please select "NA".

	Not at all useful (1)	Somewhat useful (2)	Useful (3)	Very useful (4)	N/A (5)
Coaching support from CDE staff (Performance Management (PM) sessions with a Transformation Network Specialist)	○	○	○	○	○
School leader professional learning from CDE staff	○	○	○	○	○
District partner professional learning from CDE staff	○	○	○	○	○
Professional learning from external partners (e.g., Relay, David Singer, Steve Chiger)	○	○	○	○	○
Diagnostic review and follow-up planning support	○	○	○	○	○
Tools and resources (e.g., four domains rubric, performance management (PM) tool, walk-through tools, Transformation Times, or monthly communications)	○	○	○	○	○
Bright spot visits to other sites (e.g., Riverdale, Prairie Heights, Centennial, University Prep, STRIVE, DSST, Denver Language School)	○	○	○	○	○
Grant funding (i.e., EASI)	○	○	○	○	○

Q6 - active Did your district change / has your district changed their priorities or the supports they provided to schools over the course of its participation with the Transformation Network? If so, how?

Q7 Please select all Transformation Network PD in which your district has participated.

- Observation feedback
- Weekly data meetings
- PM tool 101/Network Kick-Off
- Mission/vision
- Vision for instruction
- Strategic planning for second semester
- Together leader
- School Culture
- Talent Management
- Using Standards for Analysis
- None
- Other _____

Q8 Please share an impactful example of how you have incorporated learnings form the Transformation Network into your work with schools.

Q9 Are there any Transformation Network activities or supports that your district has not found useful? If so, why?

Q10 What's been the biggest challenge you've faced in supporting low-performing schools? Is there anything you wish you received from the Transformation Network to address this challenge?

Q11 What other supports could the Transformation Network provide that would be useful to strengthen your work with schools?

Q12 Would you recommend the Transformation Network to other districts and schools?

- Yes
- No

Q13 (Optional) Please list any specific reasons why you would or would not recommend the Transformation Network to other districts and schools.

Appendix B

Method for Selecting a Purposive Sample of Districts

The CDE Transformation Network team shared school and district-level data with CADRE to develop the purposive sample of districts. Data included school-level demographic information such as the percentage of students eligible for free- or reduced-priced lunch (FRL), the percentage of minority students, the percentage of special education students (SPED), and school enrollment size. Data also included school- and district-level "perception of implementation and integration" data. To create the perception of implementation data, five members of the CDE Transformation Network team collectively assigned ratings to each school that participated in the Network to represent their perceived level of implementation and integration (1=low implementation and integration, 5=high implementation and integration). The CDE TN team had worked with leaders at each of the districts and thus were able to assign each rating based on their experience.

At the district level, data included district setting (e.g., Denver Metro, Urban-Suburban, Outlying Town) and region (e.g., Metro region, West Central region). We aggregated all school-level data to the district level. Finally, we created a categorical variable to reflect the total number of TN schools in the district. A "low" category rating indicated that one or two schools in the district were TN, "medium" indicated three to eight schools, and "high" indicated nine or more schools.

We aimed to select a set of six districts that ranged demographically and on the following set of characteristics:

- District size: two small (less than 10 schools), two medium (10-49 schools) and two large (50+ schools).
- District location: two rural, two suburban, two urban.
- District implementation: three high (rating of 4) and three medium (rating of 3).
- Number of TN schools in the district: two low (1-2 TN schools), two medium (3-8 TN schools), and two high (9+ TN schools).

Using these criteria, we selected the six districts displayed in Table 1, which closely align with the desired set of criteria.

Table 1: Purposive sample of districts and district characteristics

District	District Size	District Setting	Avg. % of students receiving FRL	District TN implementation (1=low implementation, 5=high implementation)	Number of TN schools in district
Pueblo City 60	Large	Urban-Suburban	90%	2,4	High
Mesa County Valley 51	Medium	Urban-Suburban	70%	3	High
Montrose County RE-1J	Medium	Outlying City	70%	3	Medium
Adams 12 Five Star Schools	Large	Denver Metro	84%	4	High
Englewood 1	Small	Denver Metro	78%	4	Low
Lake County R-1	Small	Outlying Town	49%	4	Medium

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

To begin, can you please describe the role you play in the district and tell us how long you've been in your current role?

Background

1. Please describe your level of engagement with the Transformation Network.
    a. What year did the district first become involved with the Transformation Network?
    b. How many schools currently work with the Transformation Network?

2. What resources and supports have you received from the Transformation Network?
    a. How has the district's efforts to support low-performing schools evolved since engaging with the Transformation Network?
    b. If the district partner is familiar with the Four Domains rubric: If you were to assess where your district is located on the four-domains rubric [share this on the screen] where would you locate your district?

Impact of Transformation Network

3. Tell us about how involvement with the Transformation Network has impacted the work you do with schools.
    a. What interventions or approaches do you believe have been effective for schools and how has your district facilitated those improvement efforts?
    b. What impacts have you observed on student outcomes? E.g., what are you gleaning from the PM tools (that will not be in state data files)?
    c. Describe how PD learnings are used to support school improvement efforts.
    d. Does your district tend to take a "loose control" or "tight control" approach? (e.g., school district versus district of schools.)
    e. Tell us how the responsibilities and support taken up by your district differ from those provided by the state (Transformation Network).
    f. How do you continue to prioritize and focus your work?
    g. Describe how the district system has supported you as a district partner in leading turnaround efforts.

4. Tell us about your plans for the sustainability of these supports and activities.

District Responsibilities

5. Please describe the role your district plays in supporting chronically low-performing schools.

    a. How have those responsibilities changed over time? In what ways do you engage school leaders? Educators? Others?

    b. How has the improvement work shifted your resource allocations/district operational budget?

    c. What are the expectations of district partners?

    d. Does your district tend to take a "loose control" or "tight control" approach? (e.g., school district versus district of schools.)

    e. Tell us how the responsibilities and support taken up by your district differ from those provided by the state (Transformation Network).

    f. How do you continue to prioritize and focus your work?

    g. Describe how the district system has supported you as a district partner in leading turnaround efforts.

Challenges

6. Please describe major challenges you've encountered related to school improvement work.

    a. What strategies, if any, have you used to address these challenges?

    b. In what ways has the Transformation Network helped you address these challenges?

    c. What was the context for this challenge? How has this challenge changed post-COVID?

7. Are there any specific supports that the Transformation Network / CDE does not currently provide (or should be changed), and you believe would be useful for your district to receive or access?

Wrap-Up

8. Any remaining thoughts or stories you would like to share?

Appendix D

Methods for Analyzing Survey and Interview Data

Survey

We downloaded the survey data from Qualtrics and conducted all survey analysis using the statistical software R (for descriptive figures) and Excel (for analysis of open-ended response data). First, we cleaned the survey file to ensure that all survey responses represented unique responses from district Transformation coordinators. There was one district in which we received two responses from different individuals involved in coordinating Transformation Network supports at the district level. When generating descriptive figures, we removed the survey response from the district's secondary contact so that each response represented a unique district. However, when analyzing the open-ended responses we maintained all survey responses.

To analyze the open-ended responses, we coded the responses using Excel. A member of our research team read through each response and identified common response patterns. For example, if a respondent said, "All of our school leaders have been trained in observation & feedback and data informed instruction. These are key practices that we have implemented across our system," the response was coded as data-informed instruction and observation-feedback cycle to indicate that the respondent identified both as key practices. The Excel document was then used to generate counts of how many respondents mentioned similar themes and practices. In cases where open-ended responses were particularly unique or illuminating, we directly quote respondents' open-ended responses in this report.

Interviews

We used a multi-step process to analyze interview data, which included coding, consensus moderation, and coding checks using AI-software. We began by importing raw interview transcripts into Dedoose qualitative analysis software. While reading the transcripts, we developed categories that aligned with common responses in the raw data related to the research questions. Categories included: desired supports, state supports, district supports, collaboration across schools or districts, success indicators, organizational structure, resistance versus buy-in, tight versus loose, challenges, and sustainability. Two individuals from the research team independently reviewed each of the six transcripts and assigned transcript text to the identified categories of interest. After independently reviewing the transcripts, the two reviewers engaged in a consensus moderation process to ensure that codes were applied similarly to the interview transcripts. During this moderation process, we discussed areas in which codes did and did not align. Areas of alignment and non-alignment helped to bring to the forefront important differences in interpretation and suggest themes that arose in the data. As a secondary check, one researcher uploaded all six transcripts to the Notebook LM software program, which uses AI to identify commonalities and themes across data sources. Results from Notebook LM were found to be comparable to results from the iterative manual coding process.

Appendix E

Open-Ended Responses

Please share an impactful example of how you have incorporated learnings form the Transformation Network into your work with schools.
We used the data feedback course to improve that process. Along with our network partner we made an impact on that work. We were able to put together a protocol that worked. Now it is used by our team and part of our normal practice.
All of our school leaders have been trained in observation & feedback and data informed instruction. These are key practices that we have implemented across our system.
From the Observation and Feedback session, we implemented building level walkthrough schedules in alignment to school goals. Feedback tools have been created at the building level, as a means of providing immediate feedback and documenting the feedback provided.
Our district has used a number of the activities and the resources from the network within our schools. The most impactful has been the use of the observation/ feedback cycle. It is a process that we have continued to use since first encountering it via the network 8-9 years ago.
It all wraps up together but between our work with UVA, our work with Jenny Paschier and several network PDs we have made some really monumental shifts. Jenny has been instrumental in much of it.
We have used what we have learned from the Four Domains as well as progress monitoring
We did ODM training with all leaders
We had great take-aways from professional learning held at Sheridan School District that informed our big rocks and instructional focus. Use of the PM tool is helpful for schools to plan prioritized goals and benchmarks, as well as reflect on and progress monitor them.
The data meetings and observation feedback trainings fundamentally changed our instructional improvement approach throughout the district. The talent management training transformed our hiring and retention approach.
The framework for ongoing meetings and check-ins with principals has been very helpful in my meetings with principals. I have also implemented the observation feedback work across many schools along with the intentional/aggressive monitoring practice.
Having the Transformation Network partner come with us to UVA allowed us better plan our next steps for improvement. It also helped us strategize how we would train new leaders when turnover occurred. Jenny has been instrumental in conducting SRAs, joining us for observation/feedback, and collaborating on 90-day plans.
Working with TN partner on whole-school yearly planning in cycles.
We have brought some of the trainings (Instructional Data Meetings and Observation-Feedback) to all of our administrators across our system.
We have adjusted our master schedule to accommodate daily structured meetings for each grade level. Included in these is collaborative lesson planning, MTSS meetings, and Data meetings. We have also adopted the use of the Observation/Feedback tool and cycles. We are still learning - but there has been very positive feedback from teachers with the changes we have made the last few years.
Specifically, I have used learning from another leader about 90-day plans in my everyday work. It has impacted the way that I think about major improvement strategies and in-depth, intentional planning with leaders for semester-long goals and priorities.
We are now currently using PM tools across our buildings. I think the support for both creating and progress monitoring the plans have been extremely useful.

Are there any Transformation Network activities or supports that your district has not found useful? If so, why?
No
Not at this point, we look forward to future PD's and value our coaching sessions.
As early participants in the network, I think that some of their initial tools and resources weren't as impactful (p.m. tool), etc. That said, I feel like the network has always been responsive to feedback and has update or modified resources as needed.
We have had one off trainings over the years that have been of lesser quality, but I can't remember specific examples.
We have not been able to attend all of the workshops, some of which would likely have been very valuable.
No
Lacking support between PM Sessions to implement what we learn and to follow through on goals with the level of intentionality needed for rapid school improvement. Lack of analyzing a variety of data to inform change and set clear action steps.
Everything has been tailored to our needs and is useful.
No
None - we have loved all of the support!! Nicole and Lauren are the best!

What's been the biggest challenge you've faced in supporting low-performing schools? Is there anything you wish you received from the Transformation Network to address this challenge?
I think it is getting more support from the district as I feel there was a lack of understanding of our needs. I believe the network helped with that. I wish there were more opportunities for our teacher leaders but that had more to do with subs and timing.
Supporting leaders through the emotional challenges of transformation work. The network already supports with this.
Tier 1 Instruction - meeting the needs of individual students
I think that staffing (teachers and leaders) and systems implementation are the two biggest factors that impact support for low-performing schools. I think the network offers what it can in terms of ideas for recruitment/ retention but is beyond their capacity. I think maintaining a cohesive focus around the implementation of improvement levers is the most effective way in which they can have an impact.
I don't know that there is anything specific that the network could have provided. The biggest challenge is that often times, the lowest performing schools have significant challenges that they are facing that make the work difficult on a day to day basis.
Funding
We have struggled with teacher retention. Teachers are leaving to go to "easier to serve" schools
Professional Learning for Leaders around High Poverty
Reducing teacher turnover is the biggest challenge. I am not sure the TN can do much to help, except to maybe focus on how to build systems that are resilient to turnover.
Sustaining improvement. We have a lot of needs, and having a consistent partner was very beneficial - sometimes the day-to-day is distracting, and having the CDE folks here as accountability and support is useful in helping us maintain eyes on the target.
The biggest challenge is time and changing mindsets to do things differently. Unless they were going to provide side-by-side coaching for teachers (which would be ridiculous), no, changing mindsets and adjusting schedules and workloads is district and school based work.
Continued focus on outcomes during times of change.

While we really appreciate the funding through the EASI grant, we wish that access to these funds could happen earlier on the accountability clock timeline- we have really moved to intervening early, and the weighting of the state grant doesn't allow schools early on the clock to access funds.
Our challenge continues to be teacher turnover. However, our work with the transformation network has helped us narrow our focus, which has been on the management side of the Get Better Faster Scope and Sequence - Routines and Procedures - which has been good for all staff, new and seasoned.
It is incredibly challenging right now to find and hire leaders for low-performing schools. The support we've received helps us to develop the leaders we have, but it could be impactful to think about strategies for attracting, hiring, and retaining turnaround leaders.
The biggest challenge is trying to do it all at once. It is easy to believe you can. I think the transformation network allows you to really think about how you prioritize the work. They really help build that staircase so that we can have a way to get the top by doing one thing at a time.

What other supports could the Transformation Network provide that would be useful to strengthen your work with schools?
PD around small group instruction for staff
I am not familiar with the current work of the network. That said, I think supporting the implementation of multiple systems simultaneously and how leaders can learn to do that in a focused, consistent matter would be most helpful.
Better engagement. Not just emails.
Perhaps how to apply the four domains tool to work in districts and schools
District-level strategic planning for improvement for instruction
Ongoing in-person support, and diagnostic reviews especially when there is new leadership in the building.
Please continue with the high quality professional development. It is critical to ensure our leaders are all trained with consistent and standardized methodology.
Current support is adequate
Continued focus on developing principal supervisors- it's a unique job that not everyone is trained or skilled in
I can't think of anything. They have really done amazing work. They are supportive, encouraging, and teach and model alongside us.
Please continue to streamline the application for the EASI grant. It is less cumbersome than in the past, and I would appreciate seeing that continue.
I think the supports the currently use have helped to grow our district. The amount they do is just right to support.

(Optional) Please list any specific reasons why you would or would not recommend the Transformation Network to other districts and schools.
Nicole Monet has created and led a top notch team. They are very impressive!
I think a network of schools tackling similar challenges is helpful. Success comes from a lot of collaboration and thought partnership. Many leaders in the network have a "piece" of the answer, they are just challenged in figuring out how to make things work together.
I found CDE to be very flexible and supportive. They care about your context, and they are committed to providing tools and resources to support change efforts.
We definitely would recommend. The support Jenny H has provided has been invaluable. She is always available, has great experiences to pull from and share. She is a thought partner when you need it and a sounding board when you need it.
Developing relationships to collaborating partners, access to resources
Definitely would recommend- this has changed the focus and skills of our building and district leaders.