



Frequently Asked Questions
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Identification of a Priority, Focus, or Reward School

Is a list of all Priority, Focus, and Reward Schools available to the public?

- Yes. A list of Priority, Focus and Reward Schools can be found at:
<http://www.nj.gov/education/reform/PFRschools/Priority-Focus-RewardSchools.pdf>.
The list includes the schools' classification and the rationale.

What data was used to categorize Priority, Focus, and Reward Schools?

- Proficiency rates were used to determine Priority, Focus, and Reward Schools, based on three-year averages of state assessments data, from the 2008-09, 2009-10, and 2010-11 school years.
- These averages consider the performance of every tested student, based on the NJASK, HSPA, and APA.
- Students coded as (enrolled) in school for less than 1 year are not included in relevant proficiency rates.
- When a student has both an APA level and NJASK/HSPA scaled score, NJDOE relies exclusively on his/her scaled score.

Who should be contacted with questions about how schools were classified?

- A technical overview of the calculation of Priority, Focus and Reward Schools is available on the NJDOE website at:
<http://www.state.nj.us/education/reform/PFRschools/>
- If a district Superintendent has questions about the classification of a school, they should contact the NJDOE Chief Performance Officer, Dr. Bari Erlichson at 609-292-6037

When calculating average proficiencies, are English Language Arts and Math averaged together?

- Based on the assessment data cited above, NJDOE computes each school's Math and LAL proficiency rate, and then generates an average proficiency by weighting each subject's proficiency rate by its number of valid scores. The same method is used to compute an overall proficiency rate for all subgroups in a school.
- Some schools tested both in NJASK and HSPA. The proficiency rates for such schools are separated by the testing program and considered individually. For instance, suppose a school would have been a Priority school based on its NJASK performance, but not classified as such when also factoring in its HSPA results. That school would *still* be designated a Priority school because a low proficiency rate in any testing program would have triggered the designation of Priority and Focus. Likewise, large within-school gaps or low subgroup performance based on either NJASK or HSPA can result in a school being designated as a Focus School.

Can the test scores for a small number of students, in one subgroup, who are enrolled in out-of-district programs cause a school to be identified as a Focus School?

- It is important to emphasize that no single subgroup's performance alone caused a school to be categorized as a Priority or Focus School since each school's *two* lowest-

performing subgroups are grouped together. In addition, the State employs a number of criteria to ensure that each identified subgroup comprised a substantial share of the student body (at least 90 test-eligible students over three years and five percent of the enrollment). Therefore, the performance of a small number of students placed in programs outside of the district is not the lone factor for determining a school's identification.

Overview of RAC approach

What is a Regional Achievement Center (RAC)?

- The RACs represent a new approach of how the State engages with and intervenes in New Jersey schools and districts. The NJDOE is undergoing a fundamental shift from a system of oversight and monitoring to service delivery and support. The NJDOE is shifting focus to low performing schools, aligning significant resources and coordinating school improvement activities through the RACs.
- The RACs are a new system of seven field-based centers that are charged with driving improvement in New Jersey's Priority and Focus Schools. Each RAC is led by an Executive Director, a master educator who is accountable for student achievement gains in his or her region. RAC staff members partner with Priority and Focus Schools to create and execute comprehensive School Improvement Plans aligned to eight turnaround principles that are widely known to be central to school improvement:
 - **School Leadership:** The principal has the ability to lead the turnaround effort
 - **School Climate and Culture:** A climate conducive to learning and a culture of high expectations
 - **Effective Instruction:** Teachers utilize research-based effective instruction to meet the needs of all students
 - **Curriculum, Assessment, and Intervention System:** Teachers have the foundational documents and instructional materials needed to teach to the rigorous college and career ready standards that have been adopted
 - **Effective Staffing Practices:** The skills to better recruit, retain and develop effective teachers and school leaders
 - **Enabling the Effective Use of Data:** School-wide use of data focused on improving teaching and learning, as well as climate and culture
 - **Effective Use of Time:** Time is designed to better meet student needs and increase teacher collaboration focused on improving teaching and learning
 - **Effective Family and Community Engagement:** Increased academically focused family and community engagement
- School Improvement Plans incorporate the results of a Quality School Review (QSR) that is conducted in each Priority and Focus School. The QSR is also aligned to the eight turnaround principles once per academic year.
- Interventions in Priority Schools are closely monitored and continue for at least a three-year period, providing schools the time needed to implement required changes and demonstrate improvement in student achievement. Priority Schools that fail to

implement the required interventions or fail to demonstrate required improvement in student academic achievement may become subject to state-ordered closure or other action.

- Focus school interventions will continue for a minimum of two years after identification, at which time a school could exit status if all relevant requirements for improvement are met.

What is the rationale for the creation of Regional Achievement Centers?

- New Jersey’s approved NCLB waiver is a great place to start for understanding the rationale for the Regional Achievement Centers. The waiver can be accessed at the following site: <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/esea-flexibility/map/nj.html>. Key excerpts are below:
 - “The central goal of the NJDOE is to ensure that all children, regardless of life circumstances, graduate from high school ready for college and career. Currently, New Jersey is far from accomplishing this mission.
 - “The State’s new set of performance reports will be the heart of the NJDOE’s new accountability system. The information provided will not only give parents and the public a full accounting of each school’s current performance, it will also indicate how each school is contributing to the State’s ultimate goal: preparing all students for success in college and career. Key metrics, such as early childhood literacy, chronic absenteeism, 8th grade reading and math proficiency, growth scores on State assessments, AP passing rates, ACT and SAT scores, and high school graduation rates will paint a full and accurate picture of school and district performance with a display of statewide ranking and comparison to peer schools.
 - “These reports will also enable the NJDOE to fairly and transparently categorize schools so schools receive the support and/or recognition they deserve and need. Consistent with this application’s guidance, New Jersey will focus its attention on its most persistently underperforming schools (Priority), those with troubling achievement gaps (Focus), and those achieving remarkable results (reward).
 - “The NJDOE is also completely reorganizing how we engage with and intervene in schools and districts... The NJDOE’s new system of seven field-based Regional Achievement Centers (RACs) will be charged with driving improvement in New Jersey’s lowest-performing schools.
 - “...the Department will focus its scarce resources on those schools in a perpetual state of underperformance and those with the most troubling achievement gaps.
 - “In total, then, this waiver application is an essential component of a set of integrated strategies for drastically improving student performance and closing the achievement gap.

RAC and school staffing

How are the RACs managed and staffed?

- Each RAC is led by an Executive who is held accountable for the progress of each Priority and Focus school in his or her region. In addition to driving school improvement efforts within the region, each Executive Director manages a team of specialists, relations with school districts, and coordination with other RAC regions and the NJDOE.
- The RACs are staffed with school improvement specialists: each summer.
 - **State Turnaround Coaches** work directly with Priority School principals to ensure that interventions are cohesive and coordinated.
 - **State Elementary Literacy Specialists** work with school level literacy coaches and teachers to continually monitor and improve PreK-5 literacy instruction and student achievement.
 - **State Secondary Literacy Specialists** work with school level literacy coaches and teachers to continually monitor and improve grades 6-12 literacy instruction and student achievement.
 - **State Mathematics Specialists** work with school level coaches and teachers to continually monitor and improve mathematics instruction and student achievement.
 - **State Instructional Specialists** work with school leaders and teachers to develop a common definition of effective teaching utilizing the district-adopted teacher effectiveness rubric. Instructional Specialists will also work with school leaders to ensure they are able to accurately and reliably use the district rubric to identify and give feedback for improving teacher effectiveness.
 - **State ELL Specialists** work with administration and teachers to continuously improve learning opportunities for all ELL students.
 - **State Climate and Culture Specialists** work with the appropriate school staff to develop a climate for learning and culture of high expectations through the implementation of a formal and research-based program and through effective family engagement focused on student achievement as well as climate and culture issues.
 - **State Data Specialists** provide training and on-going support to school leaders and data specialists embedded in schools in the effective presentation of school and classroom level climate, culture and achievement data in order to improve the climate/culture and increase student achievement.
 - **State Intervention / Special Education Specialists** assist schools in implementing research-based programs to support special education students or those students two or more grade levels behind in literacy and/or mathematics.
 - **Project Managers** monitor the progress and success of RAC interventions, assisting in the delivery of coordinated, cohesive interventions.

Are Priority or Focus Schools required to hire staff?

- Focus Schools are not required to hire additional staff.
- Priority Schools are required to identify existing staff or hire new staff that would spend a majority of their time working within the following turnaround areas: data, climate and culture, math, and literacy. The school leadership team works closely with RAC staff to build school capacity to strengthen the turnaround areas and sustain improvements required in each unique School Improvement Plan (SIP).

RAC interventions

What is the Quality School Review (QSR)?

- The QSR is a baseline needs assessment of Priority and Focus Schools with school quality indicators aligned to the eight turnaround principles. The QSR replaces the CAPA Review.
- QSRs will be conducted every spring in both Priority and Focus Schools. The development of School Improvement Plans is driven by QSR results.

What is the School Improvement Plan (SIP)?

- Based on the findings from the QSR, RAC teams work in conjunction with school and district leaders, educators, and families to develop comprehensive and individualized SIPs based on the 8 turnaround principles and the unique needs of each school. School and district leaders commit to and are held accountable for the high quality implementation of the intervention strategies identified in the SIP with the support of the RAC team. Examples of intervention strategies include:
 - Implementation of NJDOE model curriculum and unit assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards;
 - Redesign of instructional time to better meet student needs and increase teacher collaboration focused on improving teaching and learning;
 - Use of current data to design and implement specific classroom strategies to improve teaching and learning;
 - Required professional development focused on the eight turnaround principles for school leaders and educators;
 - Changes to the climate and culture of the school to ensure a quality learning environment with a culture of high expectations for every student;
 - Development of new family and community engagement strategies that are specifically focused on academic achievement; and
 - Hiring or reassigning full-time professional specialists (e.g. culture and climate leader, data leader, literacy leader, mathematics leader) to be embedded in schools.
- School Improvement Plans are reviewed and modified, if necessary, during cycle reviews at regular intervals throughout the school year. Cycle reviews are designed to monitor progress toward the implementation of SIP interventions designed to promote student achievement.

Does the RAC Team work with the Priority and Focus School leadership in developing the School Improvement Plan?

- Yes. Development of School Improvement Plans is a collaborative process, which includes school and district leadership, teachers, and other key stakeholders.

Are there specific curriculum requirements for Priority and Focus Schools?

- Yes. Priority schools are required to demonstrate that they have a high quality curricula aligned to the Common Core State Standards. Where aligned curriculum does not exist, Priority Schools are required to implement the NJDOE model curriculum in ELA and Mathematics, which includes end-of-unit assessments.
- Focus Schools are not required to implement the model curriculum, but will need to ensure alignment to the Common Core State Standards.

Are interventions different for Priority and Focus schools?

- The interventions and supports necessary for Priority and Focus Schools are different based on the individual needs of the schools. Because Priority Schools are marked by low school-wide achievement, interventions will address school-wide concerns. By definition, Focus Schools have targeted areas of weakness in the school, such as specific subgroup performance. Supports and interventions in those schools is much more targeted to specific area of weakness.

Do the RAC teams work with SIG schools?

- Yes. All School Improvement Grant (SIG) schools are classified as Priority Schools. RAC School Turnaround Coaches work with school and district leaders to coordinate RAC support with ongoing SIG activities.

RAC accountability

How do the RAC Teams assess progress in each area of the turnaround principles?

- The RAC teams work with Priority and Focus Schools to define clear goals and metrics that schools are accountable for achieving. Goals address both inputs (the high quality implementation of the intervention strategies in the SIP) and outputs (improved student achievement).
- Within Priority Schools, detailed walkthroughs and reviews are conducted every 7 weeks to assess progress against each intervention strategy. Quantitative (survey results, student and teacher attendance, student discipline data, formative assessment results) and qualitative (quality of classroom instruction, school leadership) data is used to track progress.
- Within Focus Schools, progress is tracked on a 7-week basis using data on quality of implementation and various quantitative metrics such as student attendance and benchmark assessment data.

Who is held accountable for ensuring the SIP is implemented and student achievement improves?

- Accountability is shared among schools, districts, and RAC staff members, all of whom are held accountable for Priority and Focus School success.
- Priority and Focus Schools that do not demonstrate sufficient improvements could be subject to further State action.
- Priority Schools that fail to implement the required interventions or fail to demonstrate required improvement in student academic achievement may be subject to the appointment of high-quality turnaround providers and other advanced interventions.

Funding / Title I information

How is district funding affected by the RACs?

- RAC teams work with Priority and Focus schools and their districts to align Title I and school-level expenditures with School Improvement Plans.
- RAC teams ensure that districts with Priority and Focus Schools channel appropriate levels of funding and resources to turn around their lowest performing schools.

In a district receiving Title I funds, can Title I monies be used to support interventions in Priority or Focus Schools if they are not Title I eligible?

- No. Title I is a federally funded program and has narrow requirements for funding school-wide and targeted Title I programs. Federal Title I funds may only be used to benefit staff and students at Title I funded schools.

Can a district "skip" funding a Title I eligible Priority or Focus School?

- Districts may not skip a Title I eligible Priority School. It is important to note that Title I funding is not a determining factor related to a district's requirement to implement and fund all RAC-identified interventions. If a Title I eligible Focus School is "skipped" the district must use state, local or other federal funds to implement all interventions with fidelity. The decision to "skip" a Title I eligible School is defined in federal statute (Section 1113(b)(1)(D) of ESEA) and remains under the authority of the district. Prior to "skipping" any Title I eligible school, NJDOE strongly encourages a diligent evaluation and consideration of the factors that caused the school to be categorized. With the availability of high impact support from the RACs, the district may wish to revise the list of schools it has served with Title I funds in the past.

Do Title I Priority and Focus schools creat school-wide plans in addition to SIPs?

- No, the SIP replaces the school-wide plan.

If a district receives Title I funds, but the identified Priority or Focus School is not a Title I School, must the district make the “Priority and Focus Interventions reserve”?

- No. The reserve is for interventions at Priority and Focus schools only.

How should a district evaluate the benefits of a Title I targeted assistance program versus a Title I school wide program for low performing students?

- For help in determining if a schoolwide or targeted assistance Title I program is a better option for your Focus and/or Priority Schools, please contact the Office of Title I at 609-943-4283 or titleone@doe.state.nj.us.

Can Title I funds be used to support low-performing special education students?

- Irrespective of enrollment in a general or special education program, Title I schoolwide programs can support all students. In a Title I targeted assistance program, any student meeting the Title I eligibility requirements may receive Title I services. Title I services are supplemental (in addition to) special education services listed in a student’s Individual Education Plan (IEP) and should not be withheld because a student receives supports from IDEA funding sources.

Please email rac@doe.state.nj.us with any additional questions.