



Principals In Action

**Margarita Garcia, Washington Heights Elementary School
Fort Worth, TX**

Background

Almost nine in ten of the 400-plus students in this K-5 school come from economically disadvantaged homes. More than 68% possess limited proficiency in English. When Texas moved to a standard based high stakes tests, Washington Heights experienced a significant decline in student performance. During 2003-04, less than 50% of fifth graders met the state standard in reading.

Margarita assumed leadership for Washington Heights in 2003. She inherited a building where teachers felt disinclined to change in order to improve learning. The culture and behaviors were similar at her previous school so Margarita did not make structural changes in her first year. But after seeing the results in 2003-04, she knew it was time for intervention. She called on School Turnaround.

In Margarita's Own Words

School Turnaround is hands-on and very personal. My turnaround specialist really knows my teachers and my kids. She helps me work the data—actually helping me put the kids into the databases. She leads by example.

At first, my relationship with School Turnaround was an uncomfortable situation. You have to open up about what you are doing to your turnaround specialist and talk about what is working and what is not. And looking at your weak areas is not easy. But I think that once I saw that she really knows her stuff, it evolved into a relationship based on trust. And the point of trust was not to feel good. It was to increase reading achievement.

The first thing that specifically moved us toward improvement was the schedule. I took control of it and we now all do reading at the same time in 90-minute blocks. Our second block is math. So we have two 90-minute blocks of uninterrupted instruction. There is nothing else going on at that time, no pullouts are allowed. A side benefit is that when I visit classrooms during that period, I know what is to be happening.

Another School Turnaround blessing was to empower teachers with the data. Teaching them how to read it, how to disaggregate it, how to set up tutoring groups while making them more proficient with the data. Before, I was the one doing data. Now my teachers are taking over.