TURNAROUND SCHOOLS: District Strategies for Success and Sustainability

Practical Tools for District transformation

Based on firsthand observations by Education Resource Strategies, Inc., of resource use in large urban school systems, this series is designed to help districts begin the process of identifying and addressing resource decisions that don't support improving student performance. This guide is one of six publications specifically designed to help district leaders analyze and optimize school system resource allocation.

ResourceCheck
ResourceCheck is an easy-to-use online self-assessment tool all district leaders can use to measure current resource use relative to best practices. This tool will give you a quick sense of where you should look deeper to get a better picture of what your district is doing. Users answer questions about district resource policies and practices and use the answers to evaluate performance.

Seven Strategies for District Transformation
Targeted for superintendents, this guide presents a comprehensive vision of seven strategies presented in ResourceCheck that are integral elements of effective district transformation.

Resource Guides
Targeted for district leaders including chief operating officers, chief finance officers, and chief academic officers and their staffs, four guides offer practical guidance and action steps that can help districts successfully challenge and transform their education system. Guides focus on school funding systems, school design, the teaching job, and district strategies for turnaround schools.

All six electronic publications can be found at www.ERStrategies.org.

INTRODUCTION

Schools and districts have been trying for years to improve persistently poorly performing schools, yet the report card on school improvement is decidedly mixed. Given an unprecedented influx of federal resources and increased attention on accountability for resources, it's time to learn what works. More money and strong commitment will help, but they are not enough to ensure success. Districts need to change the game.

Turnaround efforts at individual schools will not result in widespread, sustainable change without fundamental shifts in the way districts evaluate school, student, and teacher needs and match resources and support to meet those needs. Your challenge is to develop district capacity to address these four questions:

1. What does each school need?
2. What does each school get now?
3. Does your district have an effective turnaround program?
4. What are the right intervention strategies for each school?

At the end of the school year in 2008, Sterling Elementary School in Charlotte, NC, was struggling. Student results on state testing were low and declining. The school’s large population of English language learners and students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch presented ongoing challenges. Teachers were increasingly unhappy.

A year later, the picture looked very different. Sterling had experienced a 23 percent increase in students scoring proficient or above in math on state tests and a 14 percent increase in reading (far exceeding district
averages). Teachers worked together in 90-minute planning periods twice weekly to write common assessments, review student data, and plan for further improvement. Morale and tone at the school had improved dramatically.

Sterling’s experience was not a fluke. It was part of a district wide improvement strategy focused on providing extra and targeted resources to the lowest-performing schools. In 2006, Charlotte-Mecklenburg’s leadership began systematically identifying the highest-needs schools and organized them into an Achievement Zone. Schools in this zone receive additional monetary and central office support. Sterling was able to use these resources to improve teaching and leadership effectiveness and provide extra intervention for struggling students.

But additional resources and attention weren’t enough to break the cycle of Sterling’s chronic underperformance; major changes in culture, teacher capacity, and leadership were needed as well. Pete Gorman, Charlotte’s superintendent, established the Strategic Staffing initiative to catalyze these changes. The district made the controversial decision to move a top-performing principal to the school; he was able to bring with him a team of high-performing teachers who received extra compensation for agreeing to move to Sterling and help turn the school around. The principal also was given the flexibility to make changes in how resources are used at the school and the authority to transfer staff members who were not contributing to or supportive of the turnaround efforts. By recognizing the critical needs at Sterling and other low-performing schools and leveraging existing district resources to address those needs, Charlotte has put Sterling on the path to success.

Sterling’s story is one of the rare successes in turning around persistently low-achieving schools. The goal of this guide is to help district leaders bring about many more such successes.

Schools and districts have been trying for years to improve persistently poorly performing schools. They have poured additional resources and support into these schools, introduced new and promising programs, and added accountability measures. The report card on school improvement is decidedly mixed, with some districts demonstrating success and others not. Why? Based on our experience in working with urban districts for 15 years, we conclude that successful school turnaround also requires district turnaround. There is still much to learn about what it takes to turn around persistently low-performing schools in ways that last, but rethinking the surrounding system must be a critical part of the solution. More money and strong will are not enough. Districts need to change the game.

Even the most successful turnaround efforts at individual schools will not result in widespread, sustainable change without fundamental shifts in the way districts evaluate school, student, and teacher needs and match resources and support to meet those needs. Building this capacity as part of a district wide turnaround strategy will allow districts to continuously assess and address the needs of all schools.

Our work in more than a dozen urban districts reveals that the path to successful turnaround begins at the district level. Your challenge is to develop district capacity to address these four questions:

1. **What does each school need?** To answer this question, districts must develop and adhere to a comprehensive, systemic approach to identify the needs of schools, students, and teachers. Districts must be able to evaluate the needs of current and incoming students; examine whether the school has the teacher and leadership capacity to address student needs; and assess how well the school is implementing essential practices and conditions. Ideally, the district will have a clear, ongoing strategy to measure school and student needs and performance for all schools, not just the lowest-performing schools.

2. **What does each school get now?** Districts must identify all resources currently available to each school and understand how effectively schools are using those resources to tailor instruction, instructional time, and attention to student needs and to support teachers in improving instructional quality.

3. **Does your district have an effective turnaround program?** Districts should have a comprehensive turnaround strategy focused on changing underlying structures of failing schools, not a one-size-fits-all approach nor a mix of standalone, add-on programs. The strategy should focus investments in the most powerful or “mission-critical” interventions.
4. **What are the right intervention strategies for each school?** Districts must aggressively target those challenges that make persistently low-performing schools different from other schools and provide the additional resources and support that each individual school needs to overcome the challenges. Key priorities, in order of importance, are to assure strong leaders and expert teacher teams; provide baseline health, social, and emotional help for at-risk students; implement school designs that organize teaching expertise, time, and attention to match student needs; and ensure necessary resources and support.

This guide offers practical guidance for school turnaround tailored to your district’s situation.

- Use the Self-Assessment to determine how well your district currently supports turnaround and to measure current practice against optimal interventions.

- Work through a four-step process to answer the key questions of what your schools need, what resources your schools get and how they use them, whether your district has an effective turnaround program, and whether you are investing in the most important interventions. You will find worksheets at the back of the guide to help you.

- Identify actions you can take.

- Make the best short-term budget decisions, leverage the opportunity of federal funding, and lay the foundation for long-term success.
SELF-ASSESSMENT

This section offers a tool for assessing your district’s approach to school turnaround and for measuring your current practice against best practice in interventions, such as staffing, school design, and support. This tool can help you set priorities for your turnaround efforts.

Instructions

For each best practice, circle the choice that is closest to current practice in your district. If you don’t know the answer, leave it blank. Give yourself one point for every 1, two points for every 2, and three points for every 3.

Evaluating Your Score

First, take a look at all the areas in which you circled a 1. These are the areas on which you need to focus to improve equity in your district. Second, to get an overall sense of how your district compares to best practices, compute your score:

- If your total score is between 61 and 78 and there is clear evidence of performance improvement in your turnaround schools, you’re on the right track. Your district is likely doing a good job providing turnaround schools with the resources and support they need to succeed.

- If your total score is between 43 and 60, there are opportunities for improvement in your district. Look through the Self-Assessment to identify the areas where you scored lower and turn to those sections of this guide for ideas on how to diagnose and address your funding issues.

- If your total score is below 42, you need to reexamine your approach to turnaround schools. Read the rest of this guide for direction on how to diagnose and address your funding issues.
WHAT DOES EACH SCHOOL NEED? Does your district systematically assess student needs, teacher capacity, and school practice at each school?

1. The district has an effective method for evaluating student needs at each school.

*Why is this important?*
The district needs good information about student needs, including performance, risk factors, and whether the student has special education needs or is an English language learner (ELL) student in order to ensure each school has the resources and support required to address those needs.

Points: ___

2. The district deliberately manages the distribution of the highest-needs populations across schools.

*Why is this important?*
Many low-performing schools have higher-than-average populations of the highest-needs students — students significantly behind grade level, special education students, ELL students, and free and reduced-price lunch students. Although districts may choose to keep these students together at specific schools for instructional or other reasons, it is critical that the district provide supplemental resources and support to meet these higher needs.

Points: ___

3. The district has an effective method for evaluating principal performance.

*Why is this important?*
The district needs good information about principal performance, capacity, and developmental needs to effectively match staff at turnaround schools to student needs.

Current practice in your district (circle best answer)

1. The district has no effective method for tracking student needs by school.

2. The district tracks enrollment of special populations (e.g., special education, ELL, free and reduced-price lunch) by school.

3. The district has a clear, well-established process for evaluating student needs by school that includes measures of performance, risk factors, and special populations.

1. The district does not deliberately manage the distribution of the highest-needs populations.

2. The district provides additional resources to the highest-needs student populations (e.g., self-contained special education) but does not actively manage the assignment of these populations.

3. The district has examined the distribution of students at turnaround schools and taken action either to change student assignment or to ensure that sufficient resources are available policies for those schools.

1. The district has no effective method for evaluating principal performance.

2. The district evaluation system is primarily qualitative, based on clearly defined standards.

3. The district has an effective method for evaluating principal performance relative to clearly defined standards that combines qualitative and quantitative data from a
Points: ___

4. The district has an effective method for evaluating teacher performance.

*Why is this important?*

The district needs good information about teacher performance, capacity, and developmental needs to effectively match staff at turnaround schools to student needs.

1. The district has no effective method for evaluating teacher performance.
2. The district evaluation system relies primarily on observations and/or does not systematically assess teacher performance.
3. The district has an effective method for evaluating teacher performance that draws on a variety of different data sources, including observations, responsibilities, and student outcomes.

Points: ___

4. The district accurately projects enrollment and adjusts school budgets (dollar or staff allocations) when a school’s enrollment targets are not reached, balancing stability and equity concerns.

*Why is this important?*

Schools that are significantly under enrolled but retain funding can be significantly overfunded relative to schools with accurate student enrollment projections.

1. The district does not adjust budgets based on final enrollment.
2. The district adjusts budgets only when enrollment is higher than projection but does nothing when enrollment is lower than projected.
3. The district has a process to adjust budgets based on actual enrollment that addresses both over- and under enrollment relative to projection.

Points: ___

5. The district has an effective method for evaluating school practice.

*Why is this important?*

Average teacher compensation and average teacher experience can vary widely across schools, often resulting in more junior teachers in hard-to-staff schools. If districts budget using district average teacher salaries, these inequities can be masked. Districts need to understand how differences in teacher compensation drive differences in spending across schools. With this information, they can make better decisions about staff assignment and support, reducing differences in compensation or providing additional funding or support to schools with a high number of junior teachers.

1. The district has no clear method for assessing school practice.
2. The district has a well-defined set of school essentials but does not use them as a part of school planning to inform school priorities and support.
3. The district has a well-defined set of school essentials that are a central part of school improvement planning and inform school priorities and support.
WHAT DOES EACH SCHOOL GET? Does your district allocate resources equitably to schools based on need? Do schools use those resources effectively to support instructional goals?

Current practice in your district (circle best answer)

1. The district ensures that students with greater learning challenges, such as students significantly behind grade level, special education students, ELL students, and students in poverty, at all schools receive additional resources to support these needs.

Why is this important?
Districts must fund schools sufficiently to allow them to serve their populations. Students with different learning needs may require high levels of funding. Persistently low-performing schools often have high concentrations of exceptionally needy students. Broad-brush district funding formulas may not fully account for these needs. Schools should receive the level of resources they need to serve their students regardless of turnaround status.

Points: ___

2. The district considers current funding levels when determining additional funding and support for turnaround schools.

Why is this important?
It is impossible to ensure that turnaround schools are getting the support and resources they need without considering their total resources — base funding plus additional turnaround funding. Some turnaround schools may be so underfunded that they need additional support on top of the turnaround funding; others may already have significant resources and realignment of those resources is more critical than adding funds.

Points: ___

3. Turnaround schools have lower class sizes and teacher loads for the most critical grades, subjects, and students.

Why is this important?
Class size guidelines that target the same class sizes regardless of subject or grade generally result in higher class sizes for core subjects in lower grades. Turnaround schools should actively manage class sizes, encouraging smaller classes for struggling learners and in critical grades and subjects.

Points: ___

1. Additional resources for greater student needs come mostly through categorical funds and address only some categories of struggling students.

2. Additional resources for greater student needs come mostly through categorical funds but address all four student types listed to the left.

3. The district leverages both general and categorical funding to provide additional funding to students with high needs, including special education, ELL, poverty, and students who are off-track or struggling academically.

1. All turnaround schools receive the same incremental funding.

2. All turnaround schools receive the same incremental funding but some additional funding is available for schools with a currently extremely low funding level.

3. The district considers current funding levels when determining additional turnaround funding and the level of additional funding varies from school to school based on need and current funding.

1. Class size targets vary only by student type (e.g., special education, ELL) and for electives, such as physical education.

2. Class size targets vary by grade and subject.

3. Schools deliberately manage class size targets based on student needs.
4. **Turnaround schools maximize instructional time in core academic subjects.**

*Why is this important?*
Students who are struggling academically and may be significantly behind grade level need additional time in key academic subjects to catch up to their peers. Standard schedules provide only 45–60 minutes per day per subject.

Points: ___

5. **Turnaround schools extend learning time for students who need it.**

*Why is this important?*
The standard length of school day and year limits the extra learning time that struggling learners have to catch up to their peers. Districts and schools must work to provide time during, before, or after the school day; during the summer; or through a combination of these.

Points: ___

6. **The district provides guidelines and shares best practices on how to differentiate instructional time and increase individual attention based on student need.**

*Why is this important?*
Lack of principal knowledge and limited scheduling and staffing options prevent the best use of student and teacher time. Districts should identify, document, and share successful approaches for providing individualized instruction.

Points: ___

1. Schools do not provide additional time in core academic subjects.
2. Some schools provide additional time in some subjects.
3. All schools provide additional time in English language arts and math.

1. Schools do not extend learning time.
2. Some schools provide extra time for struggling students.
3. All schools provide extra time for struggling students.

1. The district provides limited support.
2. The district provides some support to some turnaround schools.
3. The district provides significant support to all turnaround schools.
HOW EFFECTIVE IS YOUR TURNAROUND STRATEGY? Does your district have an effective turnaround program that tailors interventions to meet individual school needs?

1. The district has a systematic way to assess school performance for all schools and to identify which schools should be turnaround schools.

Why is this important?
Without a clear method for evaluating school-level performance growth, it is impossible for district leadership to make the best decisions about which schools need turnaround support and how much support they need.

Points: ___

Current practice in your district (circle best answer)

1. The district does not have a clear, well-established process for assessing school performance or clear criteria for which schools are turnaround schools.

2. The district has a process for assessing school performance but does not have clear criteria for which schools are turnaround schools.

3. The district has clear, well-established processes for assessing school performance and clear criteria for which schools.

Points: ___

2. The district has a deliberate turnaround strategy for persistently low-performing schools.

Why is this important?
Breaking the cycle of failure in turnaround schools requires evaluating all aspects of a school’s staff, schedule, student and teacher supports, and funding. Ad hoc interventions that do not integrate all of these factors are likely to fail.

Points: ___

1. The district has no specific strategies for low-performing schools.

2. The district has a variety of programmatic interventions, each applied independently to some subset of low-performing schools.

3. The district has a deliberate, comprehensive turnaround strategy for all persistently low-performing schools.

Points: ___

3. If your school has a comprehensive turnaround strategy in place, how many of these components does the turnaround strategy have?

- A transformational leader and expert teacher teams
- Help for at-risk students
School designs that provide additional time and individualized interventions based on student needs
- Additional resources and support

Why is this important?
Turnaround schools require all four of these critical interventions to break the cycle of failure.

Points: ___
4. The district’s method for determining which federal intervention strategy is most appropriate for each turnaround school is grounded in each school’s student needs and performance, teacher leadership capacity, and instructional practice.

Why is this important?
Each of the four federal strategies can have a dramatic effect on school performance. However, if the intervention provided does not adequately address school and student needs, it cannot succeed.

Points: ___

5. Investments in turnaround schools are used to change underlying structures and not for add-ons to existing programs (e.g., tutoring, afterschool programs).

Why is this important?
Most low-performing schools are not aligning current resources with student needs. Adding programmatic dollars without fundamentally changing the underlying structures limits both the effectiveness and the sustainability of turnaround efforts.

Points: ___

6. The district has clear performance standards for turnaround schools and school leaders and tangible consequences for both meeting/exceeding and falling short of those standards.

Why is this important?
Additional resources and flexibility for schools and school resources must be accompanied by clear goals and both positive and negative consequences to hold schools and staff accountable for results.

Points: ___

1. There is no clear method for determining the federal intervention approach.

2. The choice of federal intervention model takes some but not all of these factors into account.

3. School and student needs drive the choice of federal intervention model.

1. All or most turnaround support is devoted to separate add-on programs.

2. Turnaround support is a combination of program-based and restructuring-focused.

3. Turnaround support is provided as part of an integrated restructuring process.

1. The district has no clear performance standards for turnaround schools.

2. The district has established standards for turnaround schools but the consequences of meeting or not meeting those standards are not clear.

3. The district has clear performance standards for turnaround schools and consequences of performance are well understood and enforced.
WHAT ARE THE RIGHT INTERVENTIONS? Does your district invest first in mission-critical areas?

1. The district has an effective method for placing high-capacity principals in turnaround schools.

Why is this important? Turnaround schools require a high-capacity leader who can develop an instructional vision and structure the school’s people, time, and money to support that vision. It is nearly impossible to turn around a persistently low-performing school without a top-notch leader.

Points: ___

2. The district provides incentives to teachers to work in turnaround schools.

Why is this important? The most effective staff serves a low-performing school voluntarily. Incentives are used to acknowledge the challenges of working in a turnaround school and reward teachers for taking on this difficult assignment.

Points: ___

3. Principals at Turnaround Schools have authority to staff their school to match an instructional vision.

Why is this important? To effectively implement their school instructional vision, principals need the ability to match the skills, experience, and work styles of their staff to the needs of their schools. Collective bargaining agreements including seniority hiring and transfer rules, as well as district policies and practices, can limit principals’ flexibility in matching resources to their needs.

Points: ___

4. Turnaround schools have support for removing low-performing teachers.

Why is this important? A small number of severely underperforming or...
disruptive teachers can have a profoundly negative effect on school culture and performance. To succeed, turnaround schools must have some flexibility in removing their worst performers. Some of these teachers may just be a poor fit at the school and can succeed at a different school, others may need to be counseled out of the district.

2. There is an effective process for transferring low-performing teachers from turnaround schools to other schools.

3. There is an effective process for transferring low-performing teachers from turnaround schools and removing them from the district if appropriate.

5. Most specialist teachers (e.g., special education, ELL) at turnaround schools are certified in core academic subject areas as well.

Why is this important?
Specialist teachers shoulder a significant amount of the instructional burden in schools with high populations of special-needs students. If specialist teachers are not qualified, the quality of their instruction is likely to be lower and struggling students will fall even further behind.

1. Most specialist teachers are not subject certified.

2. Some or most specialist teachers are subject certified.

3. All specialist teachers are subject certified.

6. Turnaround schools have high-quality formative assessments that provide ongoing information on student achievement.

Why is this important?
Teachers need timely, accurate student data to adjust instruction to meet student needs. Many teachers are likely to need support in using formative assessments as part of class work, using the data to understand student learning needs, and then adjusting instruction accordingly.

1. Schools do not have effective formative assessments.

2. Schools have and use effective formative assessments for some subjects and grades.

3. Schools have and use effective formative assessments for all subjects and grades.

7. Teachers in turnaround schools are provided with at least 90 minutes of collaborative planning time (CPT) per week, during which they have expert support, work with formative assessments, and collaborate with colleagues in their subject area and grade.

Why is this important?
To improve instruction and adjust instruction to meet student needs, teachers need to have at least 90 minutes of time together each week. During this time they work with a coach or other expert to examine formative assessment data and to continuously adjust instruction based on that data to improve results.

1. Teachers do not have at least 90 minutes of CPT per week.

2. Teachers have at least 90 minutes of CPT per week but do not have expert support in using student performance data to adjust instruction.

3. Teachers have 90 or more minutes of CPT per week with a teacher leader or instructional coach and use this time to review student performance data and adjust instruction.

8. The district provides additional health, social, and emotional support to students in a variety of at-risk categories.

Why is this important?
At-risk students — those with one or more risk factors, including poverty, foster care, or special needs — cannot

1. The district does not provide additional nonacademic support for at-risk students.

2. Nonacademic support is provided for at-risk students through standalone programs.
succeed academically without health, social, and emotional support to ensure that they are ready and able to learn. Low-performing schools often have high concentrations of at-risk students and therefore need additional resources to support the acute needs of this population.

9. School supervisors for turnaround schools have reduced spans of control and provide differentiated levels of support to schools based on performance level.

**Why is this important?**
School supervisors for turnaround schools must have the time to understand each school’s needs, work intensively with the principal to develop a turnaround strategy, and help secure the support the school needs from other central office departments (e.g., human resources). It is only possible for a supervisor to play these roles effectively if he or she is responsible for only a small number of turnaround schools.

**Summary Sheet with Scores**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT DOES EACH SCHOOL NEED?</th>
<th>POINTS</th>
<th>HOW EFFECTIVE IS YOUR STRATEGY?</th>
<th>POINTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Student needs</td>
<td></td>
<td>1. School performance</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Highest-needs population</td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Turnaround strategy</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Principal evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td>3. Strategy components</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Teacher evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td>4. Federal intervention strategy</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. School practice</td>
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<td>5. Change in structure</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total Section Score (Max15)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>6. Accountability</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<th>WHAT DOES EACH SCHOOL GET?</th>
<th>POINTS</th>
<th>WHAT ARE THE RIGHT INTERVENTIONS?</th>
<th>POINTS</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Funding for students needs</td>
<td></td>
<td>1. Principal assignment</td>
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<td>2. Current funding levels</td>
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<td>2. Teacher incentives</td>
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<td>3. Class size, teacher loads</td>
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<td>3. Hiring constraints</td>
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<td>4. Instructional time</td>
<td></td>
<td>4. Low-performing teachers</td>
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<td>5. Extended learning time</td>
<td></td>
<td>5. Teacher certification</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Individualized instruction</td>
<td></td>
<td>6. Formative assessments</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total Section Score (Max18)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>7. Collaborative planning time</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8. Support for at-risk students</td>
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<td>9. Span of control</td>
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<td></td>
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<td><strong>Total Section Score (Max 27)</strong></td>
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**TOTAL SCORE (Max 78)**