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THE TURNAROUND: INSIDE CLARK COUNTY SCHOOLS A YEARLONG JOURNEY

COMING THIS WEEK

Three high schools and two elementary schools in the Clark County School District have been designated as needing help to turn around poor performance. Starting today, the Sun, with the cooperation of the district, will chart their progress.



David Wilson
Chaparral principal

MONDAY:

The new principal at Chaparral High School expects to take no more than three years to dramatically reverse the school's glum graduation rate — 28 percent, third lowest in the district. "Effective teaching, that's all I give a damn about," Wilson, 55, said. His previous post: principal at Virgin Valley High School in Mesquite.



Antonio Rael
Mojave principal

TUESDAY:

Rael, a football player-turned-educator, is taking over at Mojave High School in North Las Vegas, a campus plagued by gangs, graffiti and vandalism. He's got skin in the game: Rael's 14-year-old daughter is a freshman at Mojave this year. "We have some challenges ahead of us, but we're going to win those challenges one child at a time," he said.



Neddy Alvarez
Western principal

WEDNESDAY:

Alvarez, 47, got to stay at Western High School because she has held the post less than three years. A Cuban-American leader at a largely Hispanic school, Alvarez has the same high goals for her students that were expected of her when she attended Chaparral. "The turnaround is about changing that mind-set because people only meet the expectations that are put out there for them."



Jerre Moore & Keith France
Hancock and Elizondo principals

FRIDAY:

France, 43, was brought in to improve test scores at Elizondo Elementary School in North Las Vegas, where less than half of students are at grade level in math and reading. France hopes to boost involvement among Hispanic parents who say they don't feel welcomed. "I will not let that happen," he says. At Hancock Elementary School, returning Principal Moore, 63, is credited with significant gains in standardized test scores last year. "You've got to hire people who are relentless in what they do and are always prepared," Moore said. "We're under a microscope, which is OK. If you're doing your job and you're effective you're going to get it."



CHRIS MORRIS / SPECIAL TO THE SUN

ON A COURSE TO IMPROVE EDUCATION

FIVE UNDERPERFORMING SCHOOLS ARE TARGETS OF EXTRAORDINARY EFFORTS TO BOOST STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

By PAUL TAKAHASHI AND DAVE BERNIS

Dawn is still an hour away and Dwight Jones is in his office, running on four hours of sleep. There's not enough time in the day, he says, to address all the problems facing the Clark County School District.

So much to do. So much at stake. And as Jones begins his first full school year as superintendent, he sounds overwhelmed.

"I believe we've got to change this whole system," Jones would say later, his eyes sunken but determined. "We've got thousands of kids who are in harm's way right now ... We're working as fast as we can to save some of them."

The School District's reputation is well known: the fifth-largest and among the poorest performing in the country. Last fall, Jones, Colorado's education commissioner, was recruited to take charge of the district and correct its course.

It will take some time, he says. You can't turn an aircraft carrier around on a dime. But there are litmus tests to gauge results by the end of the school year.

Those tests are three high schools and two elementary schools, deemed to be performing so poorly that they've been singled out as turnaround schools, in need of makeovers aimed at

nurturing success where failure has been too familiar a face.

The schools — Elizondo Elementary, Hancock Elementary, Chaparral High, Mojave High and Western High — have been defined as failing under No Child Left Behind, the federal law to compel better student performance. Most students at these five schools can't read or solve math problems at grade level. More than half of the high schools' students aren't expected to graduate in four years.

The unprecedented turnaround effort started last spring. Principals and teachers have been replaced, pep talks delivered, curricula revised, campuses repaired and scrubbed clean.

Now the hard part begins. School starts Monday.

So too begins the Sun's yearlong project to chronicle the triumphs and successes, the trials and tribulations of the School District's great experiment with education in Las Vegas: the turnaround.

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Over the past two decades, when Clark County was the fastest growing metropolitan region in the country, the School District was too busy opening schools to give adequate attention to the quality of what was being taught, and how it was being taught, inside. Indeed, the district would emerge from its building boom as the

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lasvegassun.com/turnaround

See photo galleries, read blogs from principals and watch video from a round-table discussion with School District leaders.

Follow our yearlong examination of the Clark County School District and voice your concerns on the state of education in Las Vegas.



TV partnership

Our partners at KSNV Channel 3 are participating in "The Turnaround." Video reports start at 11 tonight and will continue on "News 3 Nightly at Six" for the duration of the project.