WHEN CHANGE IS NOT A CHOICE: A PRIMER ON SCHOOL TURNDAROUNDS

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The Evolution of School Improvement

- from “high needs” schools to “low performing” schools
- from “slow and steady” change to “quick and dramatic” change
- from comprehensive school reform to the replacement of personnel
- from incentives to sanctions
- from schools to school districts
What is involved in turning around a low-performing school?
It all begins with leadership. In the absence of a capable leader, teachers are unlikely to initiate school turnaround on their own.
Turnaround Leaders Understand That Change Can Be Feared

- Fear of wasting time and energy
- Fear of losing autonomy
- Fear of experiencing incompetence when trying new things
- Fear of becoming socially isolated
- Fear of unpleasant surprises
- Fear of more work
Turnaround leaders also understand that people tend to resist what they fear. In other words, resistance is to be expected. Ways must be found to acknowledge and address fears.
Assumptions about the Transition Process

1. People have characteristic ways of ending things and beginning things.
2. Transitions are not the same as changes. Changes are situational. Transitions are psychological.
3. A change without transition is likely to be unsuccessful.
4. We lack a vocabulary for talking about transitions.

William Bridges, *Transitions*
Stage 1 of Transition: Ending

Letting go of the old way and the old identity people had. People need help dealing with their losses.
Stage 2 of Transition: The Neutral Zone

Going through an in-between time when the old is gone but the new isn’t fully operational. In this “neutral zone” psychological realignments are taking place.
Neutral Zone Dangers

1. Anxiety rises and motivation falls. People feel disoriented. Energy is drained away from work into coping tactics.
2. Employee absenteeism increases.
3. Old weaknesses in the organization reemerge and old resentments surface anew.
Neutral Zone Dangers (cont.)

4. People feel confused and priorities are confused. As uncertainty grows, confidence in the organization is lost.

5. Polarization occurs among employees. Some want to rush forward; others want to go back to the way things were.

6. The organization becomes vulnerable to outside criticism.
Stage 3 of Transition: New Beginning

This is when people develop the new identity, experience the new energy, and discover the new sense of purpose that make the change begin to work.
Strategies for the New Beginning

1. Be sure people understand the purpose and the outcome being sought.
2. Paint a picture of how the desired outcome will look and feel.
3. Lay out a step-by-step plan regarding how the new outcome will be achieved.
4. Give each person a part to play in the plan. People need a tangible way to contribute.
A School Turnaround Specialist Must Be Able To

- Convey a sense of urgency without seeming to panic
- Promote collaboration while avoiding groupthink
- Inspire trust while letting everyone know that incompetence will not be tolerated
- Engage people in the task of raising test scores without seeming to care about numbers more than children
What needs to be changed in order to turn around a low-performing school?

The 5 most frequent changes identified by principals were:

- Change the school’s reading program
- Remove or re-assign selected personnel
- Improve instruction
- Provide more timely data on student progress
- Reduce discipline problems
What needs to be changed in order to turn around a low-performing school?

The 5 most frequent changes identified by teachers were:

- Increase parent involvement
- Provide more support from the school district
- Implement better interventions to assist low achieving students
- Create more community partnerships
- Develop a new approach to school discipline
Five Critical Challenges for School Turnaround Specialists

1. Building consensus about which school conditions need to be changed
2. Encouraging teachers to abandon ineffective routines and dysfunctional mental models
3. Establishing order while maintaining a caring learning environment
4. Developing regular education teachers’ capacity to provide individual instructional interventions
5. Keeping the focus on helping low-achieving students without neglecting the needs of high-achievers
All principals live in a world of trade-offs, especially turnaround principals. Where there are trade-offs, there are judgments to be made.
Example of a Trade-Off

The Henrico County school division has found that doubling time in middle school math classes raises student achievement 11% on average. In order to double time in math, students lose an elective.

Is this trade-off worthwhile?
Upon What Basis Should Judgments be Made?

- What is prescribed by law and policy
- What is regarded as ethical/moral
- What has been found to be effective
- What is feasible and affordable
Some By-Products of School Turnaround Initiatives

• Increased time spent preparing students to take state standardized tests
• Reduction in time for science and social studies in elementary school
• Increase in departmentalization in elementary schools
• Re-assignment of strongest teachers to tested subjects and grade-levels
• Increased focus on mid-level achievers ("bubble" students)
What Are We Learning About the Keys to Successful School Turnarounds?
Four Phases of the School Turnaround Process

1. Organizational diagnosis and planning
2. Quick wins
3. Ensuring first year achievement gains
4. Taking steps to sustain momentum
Turnaround Diagnostics

1. Distinguish school-based causes from external causes
2. Distinguish symptoms and causes of low achievement
3. Replace cause-and-effect mindset with challenge-and-response mindset
Turnaround Diagnostics

Begin with data on student achievement and behavior, including:

- Multi-year cohort data
- Data on high-achievers from low-achieving sub-groups
- Aggregate student achievement data minus recent transfers and chronic absentees
- Student course selection patterns (for high school)
Turnaround Diagnostics

To make sense of student achievement data, it is important to review the three most recent School Improvement Plans in order to learn about what has and has not worked to raise achievement.
Turnaround Diagnostics

To make sense of student achievement data, it is also important to gather data on

- Programs
- Personnel
- Policies
- Processes
- Practices
- Professional development
- Parent involvement
- Partnerships
Turnaround Diagnostics

Do you know...

How specialists on the faculty spend their time?

What professional development each faculty member has received over the last 3 years?

What special programs for struggling students are offered and how effective they are?

Whether school grading policies are self-defeating?

If teacher planning time is used productively?
The process of developing a School Turnaround Plan ideally begins before the current school year has ended. Gathering data before students and staff leave for the summer increases the productivity of planners over the summer months.
A Good School Turnaround Plan

Begins by addressing a small number of goals and objectives (in order to build momentum and boost confidence).

If we open the aperture of a camera too wide in order to include lots of subjects, we can lose focus on particular subjects.

Focus is one key to an effective School Turnaround Plan.
Other Keys To Effective School Turnaround Plans

Plans must be managed and monitored to succeed. Every objective in a School Turnaround Plan should have one Project Manager.

Each Project Manager should create a Project Management Team.

The Principal should not be a Project Manager. The Principal is the person to whom Project Managers report.
Other Keys to Effective School Turnaround Plans

Annual plans are not as effective as 90-day plans.

The ultimate goal is to establish a CONTINUOUS PLANNING process.
Quick Wins

Low-performing schools are often “demoralized” environments.

Self-efficacy, confidence, and faith in leadership are lacking.

Quick wins can restore faith in leadership and generate momentum and confidence.
Quick Wins

The groundwork for quick wins is accomplished during the summer. If you are a newly appointed turnaround leader, these critical tasks must be accomplished over the summer:

1. Negotiate central office support
2. Form your Leadership Team
3. Fill vacant positions
4. Meet stakeholders
5. Plan quick wins
Ensuring First Year Achievement Gains

Successful turnaround schools are characterized by:

- Teamwork
- Review of student achievement data
- More time for instruction
- Interventions for struggling students
- Professional development
- School improvement plans
Ensuring First Year Achievement Gains

But, *unsuccessful* turnaround schools are also characterized by:

- Teamwork
- Review of student achievement data
- More time for instruction
- Interventions for struggling students
- Professional development
- School improvement plans
First Order Strategies

First Order Strategies are the foundation of the turnaround process. They are the School-wide Drivers of Change that deal with the overall program of studies and general operational processes.
First Order Strategies

Alignment
Instructional focus
Teacher teams
Scheduling
Targeted professional development
Student behavior initiatives
Family engagement
Faculty building
Second Order Strategies

Second Order Strategies are Focused Drivers of Change. They address specific problems related to student achievement. Examples of Second Order Strategies include:

- Double blocking Algebra 1
- Summer orientation for rising 9th graders
- Credit recovery program
- One-to-one laptop initiative
Important Point

Second Order Strategies are unlikely to be effective if First Order Strategies have not been implemented or executed properly.
Second-Order Strategies

It is important to find ways of keeping up with new research on Second-Order Strategies. The following can be useful:

- Reading groups
- Lead partners and university partnerships
- Regional service centers
Second-Order Strategies

Recent research, for example, has found that

- Persistence, mindset, and goal-setting play key roles in academic success
- Student study groups can enhance learning
- Principal-student discussions of academic work result in reading achievement gains
- Early placement of students in Algebra does not lead to improved test scores
A Theory of Action for Instructional Intervention

In order for teachers to provide timely and targeted assistance to struggling students, teachers need to

1. be AWARE students need help
2. UNDERSTAND why students need help
3. be COMMITTED to helping students
4. possess the COMPETENCE to provide help
5. be willing to PERSIST in efforts to help
Facilitators of Change

First and Second Order Changes result in improved student achievement. Facilitators of Change enable First and Second Order Strategies to be implemented successfully.

Facilitators of Change are the “little things” that build relationships, inspire trust, and let people know they are valued.
Taking the Steps Needed to Sustain Success

1. Understand what factors cause schools to decline

2. Recognize the need for differentiated leadership

3. Sustaining a turnaround entails
   a) Strengthening the curriculum beyond English and math
   b) Developing a continuum of interventions
   c) Work on reculturing the school
   d) Recruiting and retaining a capable staff
   e) Distributing leadership/promoting project management
South Hills – A High School in Decline

- Negative community perceptions
- Rising percentage of students from poor neighborhoods
- Rising percentage of English language learners
- Toxic school culture
- Twelve of 21 tested performance areas below standard
- High staff turnover
- Low academic expectations
- Little planning
Nancy Weisskopf (Sticksel) – A Focused Turnaround Principal

First Things First

- Merge old and new staff in common cause
- Re-brand South Hills
- Continuous team-building, including projects for charity
- Re-think deployment of Assistant Principals
  - Co-locate 6 deans and Asst. Principals
  - Work Schedule: 3 days a week for discipline and assigned academic duties; 1 day a week in classrooms; 1 day a week to complete paperwork
Nancy Weisskopf (Sticksel) – A Focused Turnaround Principal

Engaging Students in Improving South Hills
- Videotape students discussing difficult courses
- Student input regarding after-school help
- Scorpion Student Leadership Council
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Keeping Students Moving Forward

- Student progress data walls
- Mid-year meeting with each department to identify students at risk of failing
- “Just Do It” days
- Extending spring semester for failing students
- No repeaters in class with first timers
- Gerry’s students
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First Line of Defense: Ninth Grade Success

- Engage middle school teachers and counselors
- Freshman Summer “Camp”
- Ninth Grade House with Core Subject Teams
- Requiring extra hour a day for students failing at end of grading period
- Asst. Principals assigned to monitor tutoring sessions
- High interest career programs
We need a differentiated view of school leadership. Leading the school turnaround process is different from other kinds of school leadership.
What Sets Apart Turnaround Leaders Like Nancy Weisskopf?

- The discipline to FOCUS
- The desire to MAKE A DIFFERENCE
- The WILLINGNESS TO LEAD
- The FLEXIBILITY to adjust
- The DEDICATION never to give up
Resources for Turnaround Leaders


Daniel Duke. DIFFERENTIATING SCHOOL LEADERSHIP. Corwin.