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SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL TURNAROUNDS

Seven Steps For District Leaders

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President Obama and Secretary Duncan have called upon states, districts, and education leaders to change the lives of millions of children by dramatically improving the nation's 5,000 lowest performing schools. These chronically failing schools will require intensive intervention to turn around performance that has fallen short of expectations for many years.

States and districts are likely to try a variety of approaches to improve performance, such as contracting with external providers, who often bring in new leadership and staff; closing schools outright and giving students the option to attend nearby, higher performing schools; or bringing in a "turnaround leader" to carry out drastic improvements.

This last option is known in other sectors as a "turnaround" effort—a quick, dramatic, and sustained change driven by a highly capable leader. District leaders deploying this strategy in chronically failing schools can learn from the experiences of classic turnarounds that have worked. This brief draws from the cross-sector research base on successful turnarounds to offer seven steps for district leaders to support turnaround principals and maximize their chances of success.

1. Commit to Success

Turnarounds are one of the only proven strategies for quickly achieving success in very low-performing organizations. But they can be difficult and controversial. School board members and district leaders who commit to this strategy must prioritize student learning needs over custom, routine, and established relationships. They must view turnarounds not as a one-time solution but part of a sustained effort that ultimately eliminates chronic low-performance.

Across sectors, as many as 70 percent of major change efforts are unsuccessful (Beer & Nohria, 2000), because major change is typically a response to low performance and a challenging environment. Therefore, district leaders and the community must be prepared to stay the course even when some schools do not successfully turn around on the first try. Repeated attempts—with a new leader, for example—will be necessary to successfully turn around all of a district's low-performing schools. Ultimately, districts can ensure that no child attends a low-performing school by preparing school personnel and other stakeholders for an ongoing commitment.

2. Choose Turnarounds for the Right Schools

Dramatic change strategies—including turnarounds—are necessary in schools where student performance is extremely and chronically low and where incremental efforts to improve results (e.g., professional development, external coaching, or adoption of new instructional programs) have failed. Determining which schools fall into this “dramatic change” category is a critical step for district leaders.

Among the schools requiring dramatic change, districts must decide what kind of intensive strategy to pursue. Options include the classic turnarounds discussed in this brief, “starting fresh” with entirely new leadership and staff (often by chartering or contracting with external providers), and closing the school to disperse the students to higher performing schools.

The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement’s (The Center) *School Restructuring Under No Child Left Behind: What Works When?* guides district leaders through a step-by-step process for deciding what change strategy is most likely to succeed in each school (The Center, 2009). Some of the vital factors to consider are summarized here.

Supply of Turnaround Leaders and “Start Fresh” Providers

In other public and private sectors with greater turnaround experience, turnarounds simply do not take place without the right leader at the helm (Herman et al., 2008; Public Impact, 2007). The tenacity and influence skills needed to execute fast, dramatic improvements in failing organizations are exceptional. Successful turnaround principals are likely to differ from principals who succeed in maintaining better performing schools (Public Impact, 2008). Thus, even districts with large numbers of successful schools may face a limited supply of principals who can lead turnarounds in failing schools. Before adopting the turnaround strategy, district leaders should examine their talent pool—teachers, assistant principals, principals and district administrators, as well as proven change leaders from noneducation backgrounds.

Combined with a count of outside organizations equipped to start fresh in failing schools, this estimate will enable districts to determine how many turnarounds and fresh starts are feasible each year (The Center, 2009). In most districts, the combined supply of district staff and outside organizations will be insufficient. District leaders will need to pursue alternatives, such as prioritizing among failing schools or closing some schools and dispersing students to higher performing schools. A combination of these approaches may work best for many districts.

District Oversight Context

District leaders also must assess the capacity within the central office to oversee and support dramatic change. To achieve success, turnaround principals must depart from the way things have been done in the past, which in many cases directly conflicts with standard district policy and practice (Kowal & Hassel, 2005). District leaders must assess their commitment to ensuring that all staff members allow innovation and support policy changes in the key areas explored below, even if changes threaten established customs or initially appear to diminish the district’s efficiency. If not, the district may be better suited for fresh starts operated by external providers under a charter or contract. Fresh starts also require flexibility to do things differently but may be more politically or administratively palatable than district-managed turnarounds.

3. Develop a Pipeline of Turnaround Leaders

Up to 70 percent of successful turnarounds begin with a change in top leadership (Hoffman, 1989). Districts can actively build their supply of turnaround principals by seeking out, training, and placing candidates who have characteristics specific to turnaround leaders, including the ability to engage in consistent patterns of action to carry out the turnaround.

Leader Competencies

Research suggests that the competencies of successful turnaround leaders are different from those of successful leaders in already high-performing organizations (see Figure 1).

These patterns of thinking, feeling, acting, and speaking are important to understand so that districts can identify principals with the best chance of success and begin to develop these capabilities in their talent pool.

Leader Actions

Cross-sector research indicates that successful turnaround leaders take a common set of *actions* to dramatically improve organizations. These actions, summarized in Figure 2, almost always begin with a series of early wins with big payoffs, which build momentum for tougher changes later in the turnaround (Herman et al., 2008; Public Impact, 2007). The remaining actions occur in a fast cycle that involves trying new tactics, quickly discarding failed strategies, and doing more of what works.

The Pipeline

District leaders can build a cadre of qualified turnaround principals through proactive recruitment, targeted selection and training, and strategic placement in turnaround schools. Recruitment efforts will most likely require using new and alternate leadership pipelines. Successful school turnaround principals must have a solid grasp of the research about effective schools and the capacity to work with students from disadvantaged backgrounds. But in the turnaround setting, vast experience in education

is of secondary importance to the competencies outlined in Figure 1 and the ability to engage in the types of actions described in Figure 2.

A handful of leadership training programs—including the University of Virginia’s School Turnaround Specialist Program, New Leaders for New Schools and School Turnaround—focus specifically on the skills and tools that principals need to turn around low-performing schools. Districts and states can reach out to these groups or develop locally based programs to build the talent pool specifically for the turnaround setting.

In selecting turnaround principals, a district’s best guide will be candidates’ prior success leading a turnaround. The next best indicators are experience leading smaller rapid change efforts, a track record of engaging in the actions described above, and the right mix of competencies outlined in Figure 1 (The Center, 2009).

District leaders can extend the supply of turnaround principals by placing them in schools for limited periods of time. Once turnaround principals have achieved success, districts can replace them with principals who are better suited for “good to great” improvements, allowing turnaround principals to transfer to other low-performing schools. Some successful turnaround leaders may be able to take responsibility for

Figure 1. Competencies of a Turnaround Leader

- **DRIVING FOR RESULTS**—the turnaround leader’s strong desire to achieve outstanding results and the task-oriented actions required for success.
- **INFLUENCING FOR RESULTS**—motivating others and influencing their thinking and behavior to obtain results. Turnaround leaders cannot accomplish change alone, but instead must rely on the work of others.
- **PROBLEM SOLVING**—including analysis of data to inform decisions; making clear, logical plans that people can follow; and ensuring a strong connection between school learning goals and classroom activity.
- **SHOWING CONFIDENCE TO LEAD**—staying visibly focused, committed, and self-assured despite the barrage of personal and professional attacks common during turnarounds.

Source: Public Impact (2008). *School Turnaround Leaders: Competencies for Success*. The full list of turnaround leader competencies and information about selection is available at <http://www.publicimpact.com/turnaroundcompetencies.php>

more than one turnaround school at a time, leveraging their capabilities and mentoring new turnaround leaders in the process. Over time, this will make the best use of turnaround principals' talents while maximizing their impact in the largest number of failing schools.

4. Give Leaders the "Big Yes"

In chronically failing organizations, the changes required to turn performance around can be substantial. Successful turnaround leaders often achieve results by working around rules, notoriously asking for forgiveness after their strategy has worked rather than seeking permission beforehand (Duke et al., 2005; Public

Impact, 2007). One of the best ways for the district to support principals in their turnaround efforts is to give them the "big yes" over critical decisions up-front (Hassel & Hassel, 2009; Hess & Gift, 2009).

Staffing Autonomy

Targeted decisions about hiring and firing are more common in successful turnarounds than complete staff replacement or "reconstitution" (Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007; Herman et al., 2008; Kowal, Rosch, Hassel, & Hassel, 2009; Public Impact, 2007). Staff dismissals in turnarounds are typically small in number and focused on employees who cannot or will not make the types of radical changes that are necessary to dramatically improve performance.

Figure 2. Leader Actions in a Turnaround

- **FOCUS ON A FEW EARLY WINS.** Successful turnaround leaders choose a few high-priority goals with visible payoffs and use early success to gain momentum, motivate staff, and disempower naysayers. These wins relate to high-priority, not peripheral, elements of organization performance. In schools, examples might include achieving very high attendance and low disciplinary rates in the first two months of the school year; or huge leaps in learning progress in a targeted academic area, such as aiming by the end of the first semester to have 90 percent of fifth graders on track to make grade level by year's end.
- **BREAK ORGANIZATION NORMS.** In a failing organization, existing practices contribute to failure. Successful turnaround leaders break rules and norms. Deviating to achieve early wins shows that new action gets new results.
- **PUSH RAPID-FIRE EXPERIMENTATION.** Turnaround leaders press a fast cycle of trying new tactics, discarding failed tactics, and investing more in what works. They resist touting mere progress as ultimate success.
- **GET THE RIGHT STAFF, RIGHT THE REMAINDER.** Successful turnaround leaders typically do not replace all or even most staff at the start, but they often replace some key leaders who help organize and drive change. For remaining staff, change is mandatory, not optional.
- **DRIVE DECISIONS WITH OPEN-AIR DATA.** Successful turnaround leaders are focused, fearless data hounds. They choose their initial goals based on rigorous analysis. They report key staff results visibly and often. They require all staff who participate in decision making to share periodic results in open-air sessions, shifting discussions from excuse making and blaming to problem solving.
- **LEAD A TURNAROUND CAMPAIGN.** Leaders use a consistent combination of motivating and maneuvering tactics that include communicating a positive vision of success; helping staff personally feel the problems customers feel; working through key influencers; and silencing critics with speedy success.

Source: Hassel, E. A., & Hassel, B. C. (2009). The big u-turn: How to bring schools from the brink of failure to stellar success. *Education Next*, 9(1), 21–27.

To make these types of targeted decisions, turnaround principals need the freedom to hire and dismiss staff based on their specific goals for the turnaround. Districts may need to pursue special terms for turnaround schools that give principals greater staffing autonomy than districtwide policy allows. This may involve obtaining waivers for low-performing schools from tenure protections, seniority or “bumping” rights, and other job protections that typically apply to staff in all district schools (Kowal et al., 2009).

Operational Autonomies

Turnaround principals need flexibility to act based on what works for the school’s student population—including making decisions about scheduling, budgeting and other operational issues (Calkins et al., 2007; Public Impact, 2007).

Flexibility over scheduling of the school day and year is particularly important. Many schools that have succeeded with previously underperforming students have found that longer school days and years are critical. Teachers also may need to use time differently—for example, they may need to allocate more time for monitoring student progress, data analysis, joint planning, or professional development.

Autonomy over budget decisions also is critical. Research from other sectors suggests that successful turnarounds occur without additional resources. Indeed, the spattering of initiatives that often accompany additional funding can actually hinder the turnaround by diluting the leader’s attention (Kowal & Hassel, 2005). But turnaround principals need significant discretion to allocate resources within their existing budget to best meet students’ needs.

These types of autonomy may cause discomfort for some districts, which are often organized to promote consistency and economies of scale. One way to accommodate the needs of turnaround schools is to create a special space for them—a “turnaround zone” (Calkins et al., 2007). Several districts—including Philadelphia, New York City, Miami-Dade, Chicago, and Houston—have employed this strategy to consolidate and separate exemptions from

district policies and provide consistent oversight for schools in turnaround mode.

5. Hold Leaders Accountable for Results

External pressure for speedy results is a key factor in successful turnarounds (Public Impact, 2007). Districts must hold turnaround principals to high standards and a short timeline for results. School turnaround leaders who are likely to succeed will embrace this challenge.

Short Timelines

A rapid pace of dramatic improvement is the defining characteristic of a turnaround. The research literature does not indicate an exact timeline required to successfully turn an organization around. But in turnaround efforts that are ultimately successful, fast, focused changes occur in the first few months, and substantial improvements occur within the first year. District leaders should set clear expectations for turnaround schools to achieve large, visible improvements in student learning in year one, with substantial additional improvements in year two.

Monitoring and Reporting

Monitoring and reporting of results helps spur progress throughout the turnaround process (Herman et al., 2008; Public Impact, 2007). Districts should ensure that schools have the tools and technology to analyze student learning and other data, such as attendance and discipline rates, on a regular basis (weekly or monthly) during the first year of a turnaround. By enabling frequent analysis of this data within schools, district leaders can help principals and teachers make rapid changes based on what is and isn’t working. Districts also should establish a process for frequent, “open-air” sharing of school improvement results by all principals who are attempting turnarounds. In other sectors, this airing of results and discussion of problem areas is a critical element in successful turnarounds.

Public reporting of early results also helps build positive pressure for change and enables the entire school community to celebrate

improvements when they occur. Local media coverage, high-profile school visits, district press releases, and external research about results in turnaround schools can instill urgency and drive principals and school staff to remain focused.

Rapid “Retry”

District leaders must not wait five to seven years to see results in a turnaround school. In other sectors, successful turnaround efforts are marked by strong improvements in the first year. One or two years without dramatic improvements in student achievement should prompt districts to retry major change. Other options include making significant changes to district practices that hamper turnarounds, replacing some school leaders again, starting fresh via contracting or chartering, or closing the school and dispersing students to better-performing schools. By rapidly retrying major change in schools that are not initially successful, districts can substantially increase the cumulative success rate of turnarounds across the district within a relatively short time (Public Impact, 2009).

6. Prioritize Teacher Hiring in Turnaround Schools

A critical district role to support successful turnarounds is to prioritize teacher recruitment, hiring, and placement for turnaround schools. Staff replacements in a turnaround tend to be limited; but when they occur, principals must have a ready pool of qualified candidates to replace them.

Like principals, teachers who are successful in the turnaround environment may have skills and abilities that differ from those of peers in higher-performing schools (Public Impact, 2008). Districts can draw on existing tools such as *School Turnaround Teachers: Competencies for Success* (Public Impact, 2008b) to prescreen a pool of teacher candidates with these competencies who will then be available to take positions in turnaround schools.

Priority recruitment at the district level—including special recruiting fairs for low-

performing schools that are scheduled earlier in the year than fairs for other district schools—will provide turnaround principals access to high-quality teacher applicants (Levin & Quinn, 2003). District leaders also can increase the pool by offering special performance incentives for teachers who demonstrate great results with students in turnaround schools (Kowal, Hassel & Hassel, 2008). Because turnover and dismissals can happen at any point during a turnaround, districts also should maintain a pool of qualified replacements throughout the school year so that new teachers can join turnaround schools when they are needed.

7. Proactively Engage the Community

Turnaround efforts can be very controversial. The community in which a school is located—parents, community leaders, partner organizations, and other stakeholders—can play a pivotal role in supporting or undermining turnaround efforts (Calkins et al., 2007; Herman et al., 2008; Public Impact, 2007). The literature indicates three potential strategies districts can use to positively engage the community in turnarounds.

Provide a Stark Look at Current Failure

As part of a turnaround “campaign” for public support, successful turnaround leaders help others personally feel the problems that students face (Public Impact, 2007). Districts can use a similar strategy by publicly acknowledging and taking responsibility for dismal achievement results in schools slated for turnaround. When launching a turnaround effort, district leaders should call attention to what this failure has meant for students’ learning and future success.

Create a Vision for the Future

District officials also should communicate a positive vision for the future. This may include conveying stories of other schools that have turned around, the nature of the turnaround strategy, the high-performance expectations to which the school will be held, and the time span in which community members can expect to see results. District leaders also should encourage the surrounding community to become part of the

changes in the school rather than mere observers (Calkins et al., 2007; Public Impact, 2007).

Publicize Early Wins

Early results that occur in each school's turnaround efforts serve as a powerful message that change is possible and turnarounds can work, undermining the claims of "naysayers" who oppose dramatic improvement strategies (Herman et al., 2007; Public Impact, 2007). As part of their measuring and reporting, districts should arrange school visits by community leaders, encourage local media coverage, and publicize early successes to build and harness public opinion in support of turnarounds that are on-track.

Priority Actions for District Leaders

These seven steps no doubt present a tall order for district leaders. They will require new ways of thinking about school improvement, the principalship, district operations, and community engagement. Although each of these steps is necessary to support the dramatic change required to turn around chronic low performance, district leaders should prioritize three in particular.

- **First, take action to build the pipeline of qualified turnaround principals.** Experience has shown that true turnaround leaders are in short supply, and so vigorous recruitment and well-designed training programs will be necessary to meet the needs of all students in chronically failing schools.
- **Second, establish structures within the district office to accommodate the deviations from standard policy that turnaround schools will require.** Whether this takes the form of a "turnaround zone" or another design, it must provide real authority to turnaround principals—the "big yes"—over staffing, budgeting, and other operational decisions.
- **Third, commit to turnarounds as part of a complete and relentless strategy to eliminate chronic low-performance from the district.** Develop a detailed plan to intervene in turnaround schools that are not successful the first time around. And prepare educators, parents, and the broader community to expect

continued vigilant efforts to turn around low-performing schools despite challenges that will undoubtedly arise.

As Secretary Duncan has expressed, we cannot continue to take the path of least resistance if we are to bring about change in our nation's lowest performing schools. Fortunately, district leaders can learn from the experience of turnarounds that have worked to help foster the same success for their students.

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