

No Time to Lose: Turnaround Leader Performance Assessment

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Effective leadership is critical to successful school turnaround efforts. Yet, district leaders have historically been hesitant to hold leaders accountable for bold change efforts. As federal and state dollars flow to districts and individual schools charged with embarking upon transformative change efforts, districts must adopt a laser-sharp focus on assessing turnaround leaders' performance on an accelerated timeline. The students enrolled in schools identified for targeted turnaround efforts have no time to lose. This brief presents the rationale supporting aggressive turnaround leader assessment efforts and outlines seven critical actions steps to increase the success rate of turnaround efforts.

Dramatically changing the course of low-performing schools is a national imperative.¹ Whether considered on moral or economic terms, as a nation we cannot afford to have students attend schools that do not prepare them to succeed.² Students assigned by geography to low-performing schools simply have no time to lose while adults tinker with incremental change efforts.

Bold school turnaround initiatives strive to dramatically change performance in 18-24 months and establish the foundation for the school to succeed long term. Distinct from incremental change efforts, turnaround efforts aim to provide a material educational benefit to students currently enrolled in the school. Effective turnaround efforts require the collaborative commitment of district and school personnel.³ Expecting mythical "hero principals"⁴ to turn around one school at a time absent ongoing collaboration with the district is not sufficient, sustainable, or scalable. Thus, a systemic approach and district commitment to the process is key to turnaround success.

The first critical step in an effective turnaround is to assess whether the existing principal has the skills to initiate a dramatic change effort. The decision to turn around a school should trigger a rigorous assessment of



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the existing principal analogous to a new hire. Longevity is not an acceptable reason to retain a principal to lead an ambitious turnaround. The key question is not, “do we have any reason not to retain” but rather, “does this leader have the skills and competencies necessary to lead a successful turnaround?” Skipping this essential step to avoid disruption or political flak can significantly undermine turnaround efforts; the right principal is crucial to implementing a successful school turnaround.

In determining whether to retain a sitting principal, district leaders must assess whether the principal has the core skills and competencies to set ambitious expectations and inspire and influence staff. The principal also needs to be able to lead disruptive change, rigorously assess and potentially dismiss personnel, and take risks to create a school culture that prioritizes high expectations and quality instruction.⁵

The best indicator of a principal’s ability to take these actions is the extent to which he/she has taken them in the past. While many principals express frustration with district rules and regulations, research on effective turnaround leaders documents that strong leaders can make critical change *in spite of barriers*.⁶ Decisions regarding whether to retain existing principals should be based on their past leadership and performance. There is no single formula to assess whether a sitting principal can lead a successful turnaround, but there are multiple measures and methods, such as behavioral event interviews that assess competencies, which indicate potential and can be used to notably increase the likelihood of hiring a leader who can successfully drive a turnaround.⁷

The principal’s track record at the school targeted for turnaround should be the primary basis for decisions regarding retention. For instance, if the existing principal has lead the school for eight years and overall academic achievement has remained stagnant or dropped, the teaching staff has been stable albeit uninspired, and enrollment has declined, it is a good indication that the leader is not willing or able to lead a disruptive change initiative. If, on the other hand, the principal has been at the school for three years and during that time demonstrated some gains, espoused high expectations for all students, changed unproductive routines, counseled out ineffective personnel, and stirred conflict with veteran staff reticent to change leading to limited staff turnover, these actions are indicators that with support from the district, the principal could lead a successful turnaround effort.

Having intentionally selected the leader—be it the existing or a new principal—to initiate the turnaround effort in partnership with the district, ideally schools will demonstrate measurable gains on external accountability measures (e.g., progress on annual state assessments) within the first 18-24 months. Short of these gains, at a minimum, schools should demonstrate tangible evidence of progress according to multiple metrics (e.g., student attendance, disciplinary referrals, teacher attendance and retention, school culture, and benchmark assessments) within the first 18-24 months. Improvements according to these metrics are clear indicators of positive change that should lead to improved academic outcomes.

Turning around a school involves substantively altering the way a school functions. To support turnaround efforts, school district leaders must articulate an explicit drive for success, identify the right leaders, outline ambitious expectations, provide relevant autonomy and assistance, and hold leaders accountable on an aggressive timeline.⁸ Given the urgency involved—many schools identified as the lowest performing have been underperforming for years⁹—district leaders need to not only carefully select the right leaders but thereafter rigorously assess them on a short timeline to determine whether or not they are successfully leading a turnaround. Initially or subsequently replacing the principal is not a magic bullet, but it is a very high leverage step that has implications for nearly every aspect of school operations (e.g., school culture, teacher hiring, instruction, supervision, and evaluation).¹⁰

Performance-based appraisals and potential dismissals of principals are different from whole-staff replacement efforts (e.g., school closure, restart and reconstitution) that remove school personnel absent a substantive assessment of skills. Rather, evaluations and potential removals or terminations are high impact strategies for districts to use to accelerate turnaround efforts in cases where the school leader has not or cannot take key actions and attain critical early wins that in aggregate will lead to organizational turnaround.

The drive to remove a leader who has not successfully initiated substantive change within 24 months is based on the:

- ⌚ established research that rapid and dramatic change is possible within two years;
- ⌚ urgency required given impact of leadership on students;
- ⌚ need to initiate bold change to catalyze turnarounds;
- ⌚ detrimental impact of tolerating poor performance; and

- ⌚ emerging research about how to effectively assess leading indicators of school turnaround.

Rapid and Dramatic Change is Possible Within Two Years

Existing and emerging research confirms that it is feasible to initiate and successfully implement changes that will result in dramatic improvements in the performance of an organization within 18-24 months.¹¹ Efforts to dramatically improve schools are arguably not new but, driven by the growing demands of the global knowledge economy and federal and state accountability systems, current efforts to turn around on a very aggressive timeline are distinct in recognizing that a different approach is required to effectively change the lowest performing schools (i.e., “transformation, not tinkering”).¹² However, turning around failing organizations is difficult work; research on major change efforts in the corporate sector documents that such efforts are only successful about 30% of the time.¹³ Evidence of failed school turnaround efforts confirms that it is equally if not more difficult than other sectors.¹⁴ Given the herculean nature of turnaround work, district leaders committed to turning around low-performing schools need to examine strategies to improve the chances of turnaround success. Assessing school leader performance on a short timeline with a sharp focus on examining their ability to improve the chance of success is critical to beating turnaround success rate odds [See textbox on following page].

Urgency Required Given Impact of Leadership on Student Achievement

Every day, hundreds of thousands of students across the nation attend public schools that do not prepare them to be successful as measured by students’ ability to thrive in post-secondary education or secure a job that provides a livable wage.¹⁵ Conventional wisdom supports granting schools, and their respective leaders, three to five years to implement major change efforts,¹⁶ but turnaround situations require expectations that are more

Cincinnati Public Schools Turnaround

In late fall of 2008, the Cincinnati Public Schools embarked upon a bold turnaround effort: *The Elementary Initiative*. After two years, 9 of the 16 schools improved their average reading and mathematics proficiency rates by at least 15 points; two of these schools increased their proficiency rates by more than 30 points in both subjects. Fourteen of the 16 schools improved according to the Ohio Performance Index, including six that jumped two categories in state accountability rankings. Unlike current turnaround and transformation efforts initiated under the federal school improvement grant that require replacement of the school principal, CPS initially made strategic principal replacements in eight of the schools and subsequently changed the leadership of five more. The leadership changes reflected an intentional effort on the part of the district to ensure that principals were equipped to lead turnaround efforts and careful tracking of leader actions and student outcomes.²¹

Source: Ohio State Department of Education. (2011). District report: <http://ilrc.ode.state.oh.us/Schools/Default.asp>; Rhim, L. M., (2011). *Learning how to dance in the queen city: Cincinnati public schools' turnaround initiative*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia, Darden School Foundation.

ambitious. For instance, we know from research in education as well as other sectors that successful turnaround leaders must quickly demonstrate a laser-sharp focus on results and early wins critical to establishing that positive change is possible.¹⁷

School leaders directly and indirectly influence student learning; analyses of the impact of leadership documents that leadership—effective or ineffective—accounts for 25% of student outcomes.¹⁸ Furthermore, leaders' impact

is greatest where needed the most: struggling schools.¹⁹ In the turnaround environment, leaders are the critical catalyst required to drive dramatic change.

Rate of teacher retention is an example of how leaders impact a school; a recent survey documented that 38% of teachers who intended to leave the profession would stay if they worked for a principal who would help them improve their effectiveness.²⁰ Strong leaders can have a long-standing impact on the performance of a school if they are able to retain skilled teachers. Conversely, ineffective leaders can have an immediate and enduring negative impact on a school by driving skilled teachers away.

District policy makers can affect school turnaround efforts by not only hiring and supporting school leaders embarking upon dramatic turnaround initiatives but very intentionally holding these leaders accountable on a short time line. While there has yet to be an in-depth analysis of how long it takes a turnaround leader to acquire the skills to successfully lead a turnaround, there is a plethora of research documenting that it takes time and discipline for individuals to develop new competencies.²¹ Moreover, there is ample evidence that every single year a child attends a failing school diminishes their trajectory of success.²² While a leader who has not been successful in the first 24 months may eventually be successful, the odds are slim that the leader will be able to lead the dramatic turnaround required, and students in the school cannot afford to wait for the leader to become effective. Every year students fall behind has a tangible impact on their future.

Bold Change Required Early to Catalyze Turnaround

The literature on turnaround documents that turnaround leaders take strategic actions leading to “quick wins” that signal that change is possible.²³ These actions not only move the organization forward in ways that contribute to improved outcomes, but they silence naysayers and serve to catalyze change efforts.²⁴ A

leader's inability to achieve quick wins not only inhibits long-term positive change but, potentially more paralyzing, it reinforces old habits and emboldens naysayers.²⁵ That is, stakeholders invested in resisting change gain traction when a new leader is unable to deliver on expectations for change. Disciplined tracking of key turnaround leader actions can provide district leaders with the data required to determine whether the school leader can effectively implement bold change on the short timeline necessary to drive a successful turnaround.

Detrimental Impact of Tolerating Poor Performance

In addition to potentially contributing to resistance, failure to remove leaders unable to initiate substantive changes undermines turnaround efforts because it contradicts the explicit commitment to change on a tight timeline. By tolerating a leader's inability to initiate change, the district central office and the school board are implicitly communicating that change is optional; if it were mandatory, they would not tolerate lack of ability to drive change on the part of the school leader. Resistance to teacher and principal terminations has rested, among other factors, on concerns about the impact on morale.²⁶ Yet, research does not support these fears. In fact, research on the impact of performance-based dismissals documents that removing ineffective personnel can actually boost morale of high performers because it is tangible evidence that the system is committed to change and that their skills are valued.²⁷

Furthermore, while leadership instability can undermine effective school reforms,²⁸ leadership stability is only desirable if the leader is able to move the school forward. While potentially disruptive in the short-term, leadership change is beneficial long-term if the existing leader is ineffective.²⁹

A secondary effect of tolerating poor performance is undermining or inhibiting the development of other professionals in the building. A core competency of turnaround leaders is the ability to develop others.³⁰ There are notable long-term opportunity costs associated with not providing other professionals (e.g., assistant principals, department chairs, and teachers) with strong leadership role models and mentors.

Research Emerging Regarding Leading Indicators of Successful Turnarounds

The growing body of research on turnaround efforts serves as a foundation to identify leading indicators of effective turnaround.³¹ These indicators provide school districts with a framework to assess turnaround leaders within the first 18-24 months of an initiative.

Robust early assessment of progress can notably increase the success rate of turnarounds. Using innovative mathematical modeling, Public Impact analysts project that school turnaround success rates can improve exponentially if districts simply embark upon “rapid retry” (i.e., assess and change turnaround approach if there is not evidence that it has traction within the first two years) rather than allow efforts to continue for the traditional three to five years before expecting outcomes.³²

Assessing leadership is an essential aspect of rapid retry. In practice, change in leadership is warranted if after 18-24 months the school is



not making progress toward the critical turnaround according to the leading indicators of turnaround. To be clear, the leader may be effective in a different school, but absence of tangible progress toward turnaround within the first 24 months is a red flag that indicates—potentially for a variety of reasons—the individual is not able to initiate dramatic change in the organization at this time. Rather than holding the entire organization hostage to the evolving skills of a single administrator, removing the leader gives the district the opportunity to assign the low-performing school a new leader who may be more effective and can substantively change the school’s culture and performance.

Conclusions

Developing expertise requires time and practice, and while districts should create intentional principal pipelines to recruit, select, assign, support, and evaluate all principals, the urgency involved with school turnaround necessitates an accelerated approach. The students attending schools identified as persistently low performing simply cannot wait for their principals to develop the skills and competencies to turnaround the school on the job. Rather, turnaround leaders should be selected based on specific competencies and thereafter held accountable for taking key actions that will generate tangible improvements benefiting students currently enrolled in the school. The conventional wisdom of granting school principals three to five years to improve a school contradicts the very goals of turnaround efforts. Given the growing database of examples of successful turnaround efforts (e.g., Baltimore, Cincinnati, Hartford, New York City, and Philadelphia), turnaround is possible, and holding principals accountable for improvements within the first 24 months is critical to boosting turnaround success rates.

Critical Action Steps to Improve Rate of Turnaround Success

Successfully turning around a school requires strategic action on the part of district and school leaders committed to improving

outcomes for students. Drawing on the established and emerging research related to the role of leadership in effective turnaround, the following action steps related to turnaround leaders can improve the rate of turnaround success.³³

1. Intentionally recruit and assign school leaders with demonstrated turnaround competencies.
2. Identify key priorities and clearly outline specific performance expectations.
3. Establish an infrastructure that allows for consistent collaboration with turnaround leaders and the capability to hold leaders accountable for meeting performance expectations as well as to provide support necessary for leaders to initiate and sustain effective turnaround.
4. Collect data related to leading turnaround indicators, including key turnaround leader actions.
5. Assess leader performance according to identified expectations at 18 months and again at 24 months into turnaround initiative.
6. Decide whether to retain school leaders based on tangible evidence of performance.
7. Reward and support successful leaders to build foundation to sustain turnaround.

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