



The School Leadership Pipeline Series:

Promising Leadership for School Turnarounds

PART **2**

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DONNELL-KAY
FOUNDATION

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Recognizing the central role that school leadership plays in advancing student achievement, the Donnell-Kay Foundation conducted a survey of Colorado’s superintendents and leaders of Colorado’s charter management organizations (CMOs) to better understand the school leadership landscape in our state. The goal of this project is to inform ongoing state and district efforts to build a robust human capital pipeline to educate our state’s students. Based on the results of the survey and subsequent research, the Donnell-Kay Foundation is releasing a series of policy papers examining Colorado’s school leadership pipeline.

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Overview



OVERVIEW OF COLORADO'S TURNAROUND SCHOOLS, 2012⁴

Out of Colorado's nearly 1,800 schools, **51** were assigned School Turnaround Plans.

10 schools, **2** districts, and **1** Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) are currently eligible for state-mandated turnaround interventions because they have failed to make substantial progress under current improvement plans.

The state estimates that **25-30** schools and **8-10** more districts will likely be assigned turnaround plans for several years, and therefore will be eligible for restructuring.

In the fall of 2012, the Donnell-Kay Foundation conducted a survey of Colorado's superintendents and charter management organization (CMO) leaders to understand the pipeline challenges faced by district and charter leaders in the state. The results of the survey found particular challenges with recruiting, supporting, and retaining qualified leaders for school turnarounds.¹ In light of these responses, this paper examines the promising research and national trends specific to school turnarounds.

In recent years, Colorado has struggled to successfully turnaround its lowest performing schools (*see side bar*). Despite some signs of short term success around the nation and in a few areas in Colorado,² large scale school turnaround efforts have largely fallen short.³

Increased accountability policies at both the state and federal level and additional resources, including a \$51 million influx of federal dollars for School Improvement Grants (SIG), appear to have little effect with regard to progress of large scale school turnaround efforts.

¹ School turnarounds are the lowest performing schools in the state according to the state's primary accountability tool, the District and School Performance Framework (DSPF/SPF) report.

² Colorado Turnaround Schools - Rays of Hope. A+ Denver Report, 2012.

³ Smarick, Andy. *The Turnaround Fallacy: Stop Trying to Fix Failing Schools. Close them and Start Fresh*. Education Next. Winter 2010. Volume 10, No. 1.

⁴ Baker, Robin, PhD; Hill, Paul, PhD; Hupfeld, Kelly, JD; and Paul Teske, PhD. *Turnarounds in Colorado: Partnering for Innovation Reform in a Local Control State*. February 2013.

Key Survey Findings

Survey Data:

Shortage of Qualified Principals to Lead School Turnaround Efforts. Survey respondents cited a shortage of quality candidates applying to work in school turnarounds, with about 60% of the superintendents and CMO leaders saying this was a problem. This concern over shortages for turnaround leaders is problematic in rural areas (65% reporting a shortage) and is especially acute in urban/suburban areas (with 70% reporting a shortage).⁵

Colorado is Failing to Train Principals to Work in School Turnarounds. There is the perception that current preparation programs are not preparing people well for working in school turnarounds. This perception is especially strong in urban/suburban districts, with 80% of respondents saying training programs were not preparing principals well for working in school turnarounds.

Principals in Turnaround Schools Lack Professional Development Support.

Principals newly appointed to turnaround or priority improvement schools are *least* likely to be identified for professional development support (43% are identified for support). Even when they are identified as needing help, principals often do not receive support.

Very Few Districts/CMOs Offer Incentives for Performance. Only 9% of respondents said they offered differentiated pay for student achievement gains. However, of the types of schools examined (turnaround, high-poverty, alternative schools, innovation schools) – leaders running school turnarounds were most likely to receive some type of incentive pay for working in this type of environment. This response was strongest in urban/suburban districts.

80% of respondents say training programs were not preparing principals well for working in school turnarounds



“At the macro level, many individuals with strong leadership potential elect not to pursue a principal’s position – especially mid-career and veteran teachers – because the compensation will be about the same, or in some cases lower, than what they would earn as a teacher. In high-poverty schools and those on priority improvement/turnaround, these challenges are further exacerbated by the heightened risk of being fired for not improving student achievement.”

– Survey Respondent

⁵ Note: survey respondents indicated that finding quality candidates to work in high-poverty schools across the state was the highest ranked reported shortage, with 63% reporting a shortage.

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HIRING THE RIGHT LEADERS

To successfully lead any school, a competency framework is important for identifying the set of skills, knowledge, and dispositions needed to drive student success (see *Competency Framework Sidebar*). In Colorado, the state standards for principals can serve as a baseline guide for principal knowledge and skills, but research indicates that leaders need specific dispositions to be successful.⁶

For school turnaround leaders specifically, research highlights that “turnaround school leadership requires a set of attitudes and skills not typically conveyed in traditional preparation programs or regularly needed in higher-functioning schools.”⁹ Research from the American Institute of Research (AIR) indicates that successful turnaround leaders must have:

- **Superior instructional leadership**
- **Attention to the system**
- **Capacity to identify and leverage (at the right time) key points within the system to advocate for and deliver a well-aligned, well-articulated transformation plan**
- **Ability to execute ‘quick wins’ to demonstrate that the school is on the path to improvement and build momentum for change¹⁰**

Schools in turnaround likely have a history of ineffective adult practices, so important leader strengths include the ability to “overcome the inertia of previous failures; promote the belief that all students can achieve at high levels; manage teachers effectively by helping them improve their practice; and support a change management process. If the leader is expected to replace significant portions of staff, strong interviewing and hiring skills are also critical.”¹¹

IDEAL ASPECTS OF A COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK⁷

Creates the guiding goals and provides the structure to coordinate and align all programmatic elements, systems, and processes.

Guides everything from building a candidate pool, to selecting candidates, to training and developing aspiring leaders, to supporting new principals.

Serves as the key evaluative tool.

PUBLIC IMPACT: TURNAROUND LEADER COMPETENCIES⁸

Driving For Results – enable a relentless focus on learning and results

- Achievement
- Initiative and Persistence
- Monitoring and Directiveness
- Planning Ahead

Influencing for Results – enable working through and with others

- Impact and Influence
- Team Leadership
- Developing Others

Problem Solving – enable solving and simplifying complex problems

- Analytical Thinking
- Conceptual Thinking

Confidence – enable focus and confidence

- Self Confidence

⁶ *School Turnaround Leaders: Competencies for Success*. Public Impact: June 2008. http://www.publicimpact.com/publications/Turnaround_Leader_Competencies.pdf.

⁷ A New Approach to Principal Preparation: Innovative Programs Share their Practices and Lessons Learned. Rainwater Charitable Foundation, 2010.

⁸ Public Impact: http://www.publicimpact.com/publications/Turnaround_Leader_Competencies.pdf

⁹ Baker, Robin, PhD; Hill, Paul, PhD; Hupfeld, Kelly, PhD; and Paul Teske, PhD. *Turnarounds in Colorado: Partnering for Innovation Reform in a Local Control State*. February 2013.

¹⁰ *What Experience from the Field Tells Us About School Leadership and Turnaround*. American Institutes for Research: A District and School Improvement Thought Paper. December 2010.

¹¹ Cheney, Gretchen Rhines; Davis, Jacquelyn; Garrett, Kelly; and Jennifer Holleran. A New Approach to Principal Preparation: Innovative Programs Share their Practices and Lessons Learned. Rainwater Charitable Foundation, 2010.

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A key question for those hiring turnaround leaders is: Does this principal (either sitting or new) have the skills and competencies to initiate a dramatic change effort? “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.” Further, “existing and emerging research confirms 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.”¹²

Creating a competency framework is also critical for helping districts and CMOs hire the right people for the work. There are several resources (see sidebar) on how to organize district systems and hire for success. To help ensure a strong leadership “fit,” entities both training and hiring leaders must deeply understand:

- The prospective leaders’ history of success and key competencies
- The specific school context and demands of the job
- The potential benefits to the school from a specific leadership profile



“District leaders must assess whether the principal has the core skills and competencies to set ambitious expectations and inspire and influence staff.”

*– Lauren Morando Rhim,
Researcher*

RESOURCES: BEST PRACTICES IN SCHOOL LEADER HIRING

Hiring Quality School Leaders:
“Challenges and Emerging Practices Report,”
American Institutes for Research.¹³

Hiring Effective School Turnaround Principals:
UVA, Public Impact, and Partnership for Leadership in Education.¹⁴

In-Depth Toolkits and Technical Assistance Around Best Practices in Hiring:
New Leaders for New Schools¹⁵
and The New Teacher Project.¹⁶

¹² Rhim, Lauren Morando. *No Time to Lose: Turnaround Leader Performance Assessment*. UVA, Partnership for Leadership in Education, and the Center on Innovation and Improvement. Spring 2012.

¹³ Clifford, Matthew. *Challenges and Emerging Practices Report*. American Institutes for Research 2012.

¹⁴ Hassel, Emily and Lucy Steiner. *Using Competencies to Improve School Turnaround Principal Success; Appendix B: Hiring Effective School Turnaround Principals*. UVA, Public Impact and Partnership for Leaders in Education 2011.

¹⁵ New Leaders for New Schools Urban Excellence Framework: <http://www.newleaders.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/UEF-ConceptMaps1.pdf>

¹⁶ The New Teacher Project. *Improved Principal Hiring*: <http://tntp.org/assets/documents/TNTP-ImprovedPrincipalHiring-Final.pdf?files/TNTP-ImprovedPrincipalHiring-Final.pdf>

Promising Research and Trends



LEADERSHIP PREPARATION AND PIPELINE

In addition to the competencies and dispositions needed for leaders to transform and improve schools, it is critical to examine what training and support is available for individuals choosing to take on this challenging work. There is limited research available on the quality of principal preparation in general, let alone specialty training for working specifically in school turnarounds. Given this, it is important to support further research in this area.

There are a few training programs showing promise:

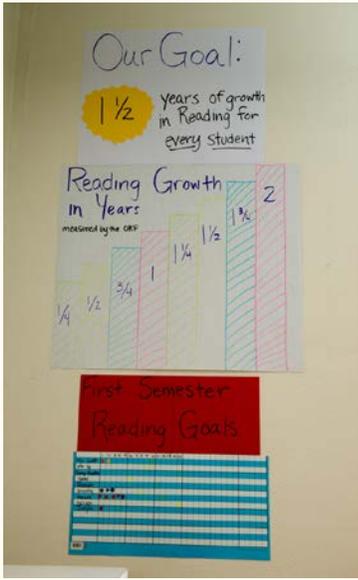
- **The University of Virginia School Turnaround Specialist Program** requires that whole *districts* (not just schools) apply and send a seven-member team to the Specialist Program — a 2-year program, that draws upon training in both UVA's education and business schools to train turnaround leaders.¹⁷
- **Mastery Schools** is a charter management organization that currently operates a network of ten turnaround schools in Philadelphia. Their turnaround approach integrates solid management and effective educational strategies. Successful turnarounds require high expectations and high levels of support. As a result, they have achieved impressive results around student growth and achievement.¹⁸
- **Scholar Academics (Philadelphia) and Lead Academy (Nashville)**, are CMOs that are making their primary growth investment in school turnarounds and are training leaders for this work.
- **Get Smart Schools**, is the only known principal preparation program in Colorado that has recently begun preparing principals to work as leaders in school turnarounds.¹⁹ Get Smart Schools is supporting veteran leaders with a track record of success who are interested in being trained to work as school turnaround leaders.

¹⁷ The Sheridan School District completed this program and representatives from Adams 14 and Ft. Lupton/Weld 8 are currently going through the program.

¹⁸ Mastery Charter School Website: <http://www.masterycharter.org/about/the-results.html>.

¹⁹ Districts may have their own training programs.

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“Two major factors affect turnaround success: the characteristics and actions of the turnaround leader, and the support for dramatic change that the leader and staff receive from the district, state, and/or other governing authority.”

CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

District Support: For school turnarounds, research suggests that the right operating conditions must exist for leaders to have the highest chance of success. UVA’s national experts on turnarounds claim that “two major factors affect turnaround success: the characteristics and actions of the turnaround leader, and the support for dramatic change that the leader and staff receive from the district, state, and/or other governing authority.”²⁰

Mass Insight – a national non-profit specializing in school turnaround work – has produced a research framework that encompasses nine strategies to illustrate how high-performing, high-poverty (HPHP) schools work best. One of these nine strategies, “resource authority,” asserts that school leaders need the ability to make mission driven decisions regarding people, time, money, and program.²¹

Ensuring school leaders have both district support, and the ability to operate with flexibility is paramount. Further examination from the American Institutes for Research indicates that “schools in crisis need support to build school-based capacity to permanently transform their learning culture and work conditions. The district can play an important role in developing a critical mass of high-performing teacher teams, school leadership teams, and networks of schools that contribute to capacity building and, expectedly, sustainability.”²²



²⁰ Hassel, Emily Ayscue and Lucy Steiner. *Using Competencies to Improve School Turnaround Principal Success*. UVA, Partnership for Leaders in Education and Public Impact, 2011.

²¹ *The Turnaround Challenge Executive Summary: Why America’s Best Opportunity to Dramatically Improve Student Achievement Lies in Our Worst Performing Schools*. Mass Insight, 2007.

²² What Experience from the Field Tells Us about School Leadership and Turnaround: A District and School Improvement Thought Paper. American Institutes for Research, December 2010.

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Opportunity for flexible conditions to exist at the school and district level are made possible under Colorado's Innovation Schools Act of 2008. Innovation schools (and districts) do have more control and flexibility around people, time, money, and program – making the leadership role potentially more desirable.

Some examples of effective conditions for success include:

- **Denver Public Schools (DPS)** worked with its turnaround partner, Blueprint Schools, to create innovation schools operating with more flexibility in the far northeast. In 2011-2012, the first year of the far northeast turnaround, most schools had high growth ratings. The 2012-2013 data shows a more mixed picture of success. DPS attributes much of the early strong growth scores to its partnership with Blueprint, which focused on excellence in leadership and instruction, increased instructional time, a no-excuses school culture of high expectations, the use of data to improve instruction, daily tutoring in the critical growth years, and greater flexibility to operate.
- **Denver Public Schools (DPS)** also recognized the value of using new schools and CMO partners to start new schools as part of its turnaround strategy. Local CMOs such as KIPP (at Noel) and Strive Prep (at Lake) have opened new schools – one grade at a time – in turnaround schools. These schools are showing signs of promise given their increased flexibility to operate and to build a new school culture focused on student achievement.
- **Louisiana's Recovery School District (RSD)** was created in an effort to turnaround and re-create many new schools. There are several school improvement strategies employed by the RSD, but one key aspect is greater operational flexibility for principals. The 2013 achievement data reveals strong growth scores relative to other Louisiana districts.

Leadership Teams: The role of the school leader needs to evolve to meet the demands of leaders working school turnarounds. The contemporary principal role has grown. Not only are principals expected to perform the traditional tasks of ensuring school operations around managing students, staff and grounds run smoothly, but they are also expected to deeply engage in instructional and community issues.

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Many school leaders burn out quickly and don't stay in the principalship for long. In Colorado, the annual principal turnover rate is one in five, and the annual turnover rate for priority improvement and turnaround districts is nearly one in four.²³ Research shows negative effects of principal turnover on student achievement, with “frequent turnover of school leadership resulting in lower teacher retention and lower student achievement gains. Frequent leadership changes are particularly disruptive for high poverty and failing schools.”²⁴

There is increased discussion of moving beyond the story of a single, heroic leader. This is especially important in challenging school environments such as school turnarounds. At a school turnaround forum examining early success within the Summit Schools Network, Assistant Superintendent of DPS, Antwan Wilson said that the notion of identifying a “superstar” principal, putting such a person in place, then simply expecting “magic to happen” is not the answer. “That has played out several times in Denver, and not been successful across the board,” Wilson observed. “There are other conditions that need to be put in place.”²⁵

There is not extensive research or literature on the effectiveness of co-leadership or shared leadership models, for principals working in school turnarounds, however, there are a few promising examples (*see sidebar*). The few studies that have looked at different school leadership models found that co-leadership models may reduce the burdens of leadership generally but don't necessarily result in more instructional time since the model requires more time for the leadership team to reach consensus. The model does “encourage more academic risk-taking and quality decision making, but is largely dependent on the synergy, shared values, and trust between co-principals.”²⁶

EXAMPLES OF PROMISING CO-LEADERSHIP STRUCTURES

- **Roxbury Prep** is a charter middle school in Massachusetts that was started in 1999 and has become one of the top performing middle schools in Boston, serving a high-poverty population. The school used a co-directorship model, where one co-leader led the curriculum and instruction work at the school (including teacher mentoring, coaching, supervision, and evaluation), while the other co-leader was the Chief Operating Officer (responsible for data analysis, financial and operational issues). This school is now part of the Uncommon Schools Network.
- **Teach Plus** is a national non-profit that has several initiatives, one of which is an innovative program (the T3 Initiative) that recruits, develops, and supports cohorts of highly effective and experienced teachers to help lead turnaround efforts. Having a critical mass of excellent teachers (along with a quality leader), has helped change the culture of some of the lowest performing schools. T3 is now working in Massachusetts, Memphis, and D.C. Public Schools. While specific to teachers, this model could be used for developing effective leadership teams.
- **The Denver Green School** is a DPS innovation school that practices a shared leadership model, with three lead partners taking on shared responsibility for the main administrative and educational functions of the school. Similar to a partnership model in a law firm, it is centered on a distributive leadership model.

²³ Colorado Department of Education.

²⁴ Beteille, Tara; Kalogrides, Demetra; and Susanna Loeb. *Stepping Stones: Principal Career Paths and School Outcomes*. Stanford University, March 2011.

²⁵ Donnell-Kay Foundation. *Policy Forum: Early Lessons from the Far Northeast Turnarounds*. Fall 2012.

²⁶ Paynter, Susan Ph.D. *A Study of the Co-Leadership Model in Charter Schools*. Dissertation candidate for Seton Hall University, 2003.

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Incentives: A few larger districts in Colorado (including Denver Public Schools and Douglas County Public Schools) offer performance pay for demonstrating academic success (often in high-poverty schools), but financial incentives are not common in Colorado’s school turnarounds. National examples of successful incentive programs include:

- **DC Public Schools**, through the federal Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grant, will be offering performance raises to principals. All high-performing administrators will be eligible for salary increases of up to \$5,000, while those working in the district's 40 lowest-performing schools will be eligible for a raise of up to \$20,000.
- **The “Strategic Staffing Initiative” in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg, NC School District** recruits top principals, with proven track records of success, to pick a seven-member teaching and administrative team to lead a turnaround effort. This team receives salary increases and bonuses in exchange for committing to their new school for at least three years and to producing strong student achievement gains. To date, nearly all of the 24 of the participating schools are on track to successfully be turned around.²⁷
- **Teach Plus’ T3 Initiative** focuses on turnaround efforts that seek teams of highly effective teachers to go into turnaround schools. This is largely done through providing a series of incentives such as “leadership opportunities, structured peer learning, and increased pay.”²⁸



²⁷ *Districts Matter: Cultivating the Principals Urban Schools Need*. The Wallace Foundation. February 2013.

²⁸ Sawchuk, Steven. *Teacher-Leader Corps Help Turnaround Schools*. Ed Week. April 20, 2011.

Recommendations

Many of the recommendations made in the first part of the Donnell-Kay Foundation's School Leadership Pipeline Series, *Meeting Colorado's Demand for Excellent Leaders*, are applicable to school turnarounds. The following recommendations however, are specific to finding, supporting, and retaining quality leaders to operate in school turnarounds. Information gathered in the survey, as well as research into national trends and promising practices on school leadership for school turnaround, serve as the basis for the report recommendations.

STATE

1. The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) should plan for staffing needs for school turnarounds to ensure a pipeline of quality leaders.

- Provide annual reports to the legislature, districts, schools and the public around its capacity to support turnaround efforts across the state. The reports should contain specific information, including how many turnarounds leaders Colorado needs now and in the next 3-5 years, as well as specific strategies undertaken by CDE to support the recruitment and training of such leaders.

2. The Governor and Legislature should strengthen principal preparation and licensure for school turnarounds by reducing barriers of entry into the profession for non-traditional candidates and increasing freedom for principal training programs.

- Focus less on inputs for principal candidates and more on outputs. Open up the profession to qualified applicants from all professions and backgrounds, as some charter schools currently do.
- Enable and support CDE to reduce regulation and rules around educator preparation programs and licensing to innovate based on what professionals know works best, with a focus on performance.

3. The Legislature and CDE should fund quality partnerships with organizations that can provide quality training to leaders for school turnarounds.

- Invest in high quality leadership training providers with a proven track record of success training leaders to work in school turnarounds.
- Operate or contract out for short-course training for veteran leaders with a proven track record of success to lead school turnarounds.
- Support the creation of an elite corps of leaders trained specifically for work in these challenging schools. The program should enlist turnaround teams to head successful turnaround efforts in exchange for higher pay and better working conditions. (e.g., Charlotte-Mecklenburg Strategic Staffing Initiative and Teach Plus T3 Initiative).

Recommendations

4. The Legislature and CDE should provide incentives and conditions to attract the best leaders and leadership teams to run school turnarounds.

- Incent districts and school leaders to create more quality innovation schools and favorable operating conditions.
- Provide financial and facility incentives to recruit quality CMOs to lead school turnarounds, including the elimination of exclusive chartering authority for districts in turnaround.

DISTRICT

1. Districts should ensure qualified leaders are working in school turnarounds.

- Revamp district hiring, evaluation, and support practices to ensure that competencies and skills – not degrees and experience – serve as the main basis for hiring effective leaders for school turnarounds.

2. Districts should provide school turnaround leaders with the flexibility and conditions needed to operate schools effectively.

- Grant school turnarounds, with capable leaders, charter or innovation status, which would include waiving schools from collective bargaining agreements, allowing flexibility in hiring and firing staff, permitting increased budget authority, establishing school culture, and giving more control over use of time to implement rapid change.
- Experiment with innovative leadership models that might prevent rapid principal turnover (e.g., co-leadership models and/or CMO leadership models).

Conclusion

District and CMO leaders across Colorado cited the importance of ensuring quality leaders to run school turnarounds. Having excellent leadership for these hard-to-staff schools is key for helping these students and schools succeed.

While finding leaders to successfully run school turnarounds remains a challenge for superintendents and CMO leaders across Colorado, it is clear this must be a state and local priority. As author Rick Hess rightly points out, “high-performing schools and school systems are uncompromising when it comes to seeking talent.”²⁹

Colorado must continue to seek great talent and provide that talent with the flexibility and support needed to transform our lowest performing schools. It is time to create more turnaround success stories here in our state. We can set a national example for how to find and support turnaround talent. The Donnell-Kay Foundation looks forward to supporting such efforts.

During the fall of 2012, the Donnell-Kay Foundation conducted an online survey among all superintendents and charter network leaders in Colorado. As people who both hire and oversee school leaders, many superintendents and charter network leaders from across the state graciously shared their perceptions about school leadership issues. The final sample of 56 (31% response rate of 51 district superintendents and 5 EMO/CMO leaders) was a representative mix of Colorado superintendents and charter leaders by district size and setting. This paper is part of a series based on the survey and subsequent research.

The Donnell-Kay Foundation welcomes ideas, feedback, and partnerships around this work. For more information, please contact **Kim Knous Dolan** at kknousdolan@dkfoundation.org.

²⁹ Hess, Frederick M. *Cage-Busting Leadership*. Harvard Education Press, February 2013.

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