

Turning a School From D to A

Janice Cover paced back and forth in front of the fax machine. It was the day Florida state test results were expected, and she was nervous. Her school, Pine Grove Elementary School in Delray Beach, wasn't expected to do well. Located in a poor neighborhood, it was one of the lowest-achieving in the state. Nearly half of its 350 pupils were ELL students and 9 percent qualified for special education services.

But Cover had high hopes. She had revamped her staff and spent hundreds of hours retooling the curriculum. She even had promised to dance atop the school roof if the students' scores improved. But she knew that progress sometimes took many years, and that district officials wouldn't be in a partying mood if Pine Grove's scores failed to show improvement.

They had given her the job in 1999 after an examination raised questions about the effectiveness of the city's magnet schools. Pine Grove had long featured visual arts, dance, and strings programs, and families had clamored to get their children in. But when Florida introduced a new school grading system, Pine Grove scored a D.

Cover found a divided staff unwilling to agree on a solution. "There were two schools—the arts school and the academic school," she says. To improve Pine Grove's academic performance, she decided to trim the arts program, removing the school's magnet status but retaining three teachers for dance and music.

Then Cover told the classroom teachers they would have to reapply for their jobs. "One of my goals was to attract teachers who wanted to stay at the school," she says. Cover required the reapplying teachers to make a three-year commitment and agree to actively work to turn the school around. She offered each of them a \$7,000 stipend to cover extra working hours during that period.

At first, the union was wary of her plan—especially Cover's request that teachers visit homes in risky neigh-

borhoods to talk to families and encourage school attendance. But ultimately it agreed and Cover hired 58 teachers, including 18 who had reapplied for their jobs.

Cover and her teachers went right to work. Pine Grove teachers spent the summer writing new lesson plans and designing a weekly testing program based on state benchmarks. They agreed to do home visits, to share ideas, and to examine student progress daily.

Gradually, the school's ranking rose. In 2001–2002, it went from a D to a C. But Cover and her staff weren't satisfied. Teachers intensified after-school tutoring and had third, fourth, and fifth graders chart their reading and math progress.

"I expected the children to make 85 percent or greater on their [weekly] tests," says Cover. "They would write me little sticky notes on the graphs to tell me what they thought of their performance for that week. They would see me in the hallway and say, 'Did you see how I did on my graph this week?' or 'Next week I will do better.'"

Now Cover's heart pounded as she stood at the fax machine. The white paper began inching towards her. Then she saw it: *Pine Grove in the A column!*

"I started screaming and jumping," she recalls. "I got on the P.A."

The phones began ringing. Flowers arrived, and so did reporters from two local papers. The turnaround earned Cover a promotion. She now is the district's assistant superintendent for quality assurance. But she isn't likely to forget Pine Grove. "I just visited the school and reminded them of our goals," she says. "We did it one year, and we can do it again."

—Ruth Sternberg

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While the term "turnaround principal" is new, some educational leaders have been successful in reversing the downward spiral of beleaguered schools for decades. But their numbers have been few. Not every principal is capable of turning a school around. The more I study principals, the more I realize that school leadership is not generic. The principal who is ideal for opening a new school or improving an already high-performing school may not necessarily possess

the qualities needed to turn around a persistently low-performing school.

Private industry for years has acknowledged the value of turnaround specialists, and the advent of state and federal accountability initiatives, with their emphasis on high-stakes tests, school performance report cards, accreditation standards, and sanctions for inadequate yearly progress, has compelled education policymakers to focus on the need for specially trained principals who can lead low-

performing schools into the Promised Land of high achievement and full accreditation.

Road Maps, Not Recipes

What turnaround principals need to accomplish their mission are road maps, not recipes. Recipes prescribe steps that must be followed to achieve a desired result. Road maps, on the other hand, indicate the starting point, the final destination, and various routes to get there. A good road