

Turning Schools Around—Slowly

Those of us who love the “aha” moment when a child grasps a difficult concept can pinpoint the moment when a child turns a corner and the learning light turns on. But more often it takes month after month of teaching and learning to achieve a breakthrough. The same is true for turning around schools. As leaders, we have to seek improvement step by step.

Turning around a failing school takes strategic planning, community engagement, strong policies, a focus on teaching and learning—and unwavering commitment. There are no shortcuts, no one-size-fits-all solutions that a principal can pick up and use. The most effective principals are those who have a vision of what they wish to accomplish, and the ability to achieve it by using research and their own experience.

We know that effective schools have strong leaders who use every resource at their disposal in a never-ending quest to improve academic success for all students. A study of 26 high-achieving, low-poverty schools by the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas-Austin isolated these characteristics of effective schools:

- A strong focus on ensuring academic success for each student;
- Refusal to accept excuses for poor performance;
- Willingness to experiment with a variety of strategies;
- Intensive and sustained efforts to involve parents and the community;
- An environment of mutual respect and collaboration; and
- A passion for continuous improvement and professional growth.

For improvement to take place, schools need leaders who reflect these characteristics and can guide their school community in defining their school’s mission and developing goals and objectives. The real work is making decisions, day after day, that move the school closer to achieving those goals.

A New Breed: Turnaround Specialists

Increasingly across the country there is a trend to move principals from high-performing schools to work their “magic” in low-performing schools. In Maryland, select principals are offered pay raises to spend three years in Baltimore’s lowest-performing schools. In Virginia, the state has a pilot program to train 10 principals in business management practices, certify them as turnaround specialists, and assign them to low-performing schools.



But while we know that strong leadership makes a difference, we should be skeptical of “superprincipals” coming in with guns blazing and imposing business models on the education process. Children are not products and business strategies are not always the right solutions for sustained improvement.

What we need are experienced leaders who are willing to work in difficult schools and to take the time needed to address shortcomings and demonstrate improvement. Principals heralded as turnaround specialists are supported by significantly increased salaries, targeted professional development, and the resources and authority to make improvements. Shouldn’t all principals have this kind of support?

Help Is at Hand

If your school is “in need of improvement,” don’t look for a quick fix or silver bullets. But as a professional school leader, there are resources and knowledge that are available to help you.

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Professional associations. As a member of NAESP, you have access to a vast array of resources from publications in the National Principals Resource Center to online leadership courses offered through the Leadership Academy. This wealth of knowledge is at your fingertips at www.naesp.org.

Professional connections. While being a principal can be a lonely job, there are people out there who understand what you’re going through and can help you. Call principals you have worked with in the past; connect with some you met at an NAESP convention; reach out to a retired principal. Collective wisdom is a powerful resource.

Learning communities. Engage your greater school community in problem-solving by setting up study circles with teachers and parents. Create time and space for them to brainstorm and reflect. Assign tasks, grow new leaders, and develop shared decision-making structures.

Change Requires Courage

We know that great schools have great leaders, men and women who can create a climate in which teachers, students, and families have the courage to step out and take risks. Courage is no small matter. Richard Owen, an associate superintendent in Sacramento, California, asks school leaders, “If we were to be arrested and charged with trying to educate all students to high standards, would they have enough evidence to convict us?”

To turn around all of our schools and make them better, we need to take risks and be willing to be convicted for our success. ■