

# The TURN



# AROUND PRINCIPAL: High-Stakes Leadership

Daniel L. Duke

There are no shortcuts to turning around low-performing schools. They can only be turned around one student at a time.

**T**heir missions are painfully clear—raise test scores, reduce the number of dropouts, and narrow the achievement gap separating white and minority students. The consequences of failure are equally clear—denial of school accreditation, state takeover, school closure, and diminished hopes and dreams for struggling communities. Such is the world of turnaround principals.

#### IN BRIEF

The author describes the turnaround principal as a pragmatic leader who can use a variety of strategies and approaches to reverse the downward spiral of a low-performing school. Forsaking academic recipes, the turnaround principal concentrates on motivating teachers; assessing and refining their skills; increasing instructional time for struggling students; establishing and sustaining orderly learning environments; and using various data sources to continually monitor student progress.

# 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

map also displays the nature of the terrain and any obstacles that might interfere with travel. While recipes require relatively little judgment, sound judgment is essential if principals are to help teachers and students complete the journey.

Engaging the talents of a turnaround principal is only one of several strategies currently being explored to raise the achievement levels of low-performing schools. An alternative approach enlists the help of outside consultants to work on instructional improvement, classroom management, and organization development. Another option involves hiring a private firm to take over control of low-performing schools. The most radical approaches involve closing schools or reconstituting them, possibly as charter schools.

While these options are being tried in various localities, the focus of this article is the replacement of a low-performing school's principal with a

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turnaround principal. Although every school is unique, certain assumptions can be made about schools that require the leadership of a turnaround principal.

First, a variety of explanations usually will be offered to account for a school's low performance: lack of resources; inadequate leadership; ineffective instruction; unfair tests; dysfunctional families; and low expectations. Accounting for low school achievement invariably becomes a highly political process, with groups

competing to have their explanation accepted as the correct one. And for good reason. The group that has its explanation accepted is in a strong position to influence the strategies employed to raise achievement. Turnaround principals must realize that all groups need to be heard, but that no single explanation is likely to account for a phenomenon as complex as low school performance.

A second assumption is that the staff of a low-performing school is likely to feel that they have tried every possible way to raise achievement. As a consequence, they probably will not receive advice from outsiders with open arms. Staff members need help in realizing that part of their problem may be precisely the fact that they have “tried everything.” It is naïve and probably unethical to justify the “try anything” approach on the grounds that there is nothing to lose when students are performing poorly. No matter how desperate a school's circumstances, they can always worsen as a result of unwarranted experimentation.

No one enjoys being part of a low-performing school, so it is reasonable to assume that turnaround principals will find themselves working with a variety of staff emotions, from frustration and disappointment to anger and anxiety. Some staff members may blame parents and students for their plight. Others target administrators and elected officials. It is unlikely that a school can be turned around unless staff members are helped to confront their feelings in an honest and open manner. Turnaround principals may have to add a healthy dose of counseling skills to their repertoire in order to build an effective staff.

A fourth assumption concerning low-performing schools is that no school is a total failure. In every school, no matter how beleaguered, there are always resilient students, dedicated staff members, involved parents, and success stories. If the downward spiral is to be reversed, it is important to inventory these “assets”

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# A Home Away from Home

**B**rusha was only in kindergarten, but her temper was adult-sized. When she didn't get her way, she threw a fit. Like many of the school's 200 pupils, Brusha lived in government-subsidized housing near Julia Frazier Elementary School in Dallas. She had seen lots of violence, experienced neglect, and spent a lot of time in principal Rachel George's office.

George knew it was behaviors and attitudes like Brusha's she had to turn around if she were to make Frazier a high-achieving school. It seemed an impossible task. But then George realized that what Brusha and her peers lacked was what had bolstered George during her own childhood—an extended family who lovingly reinforced messages about right and wrong.

"A lot of our children come from single-parent homes, and there may be a grandmother in the house or a lot of other children," says George. "Everyone needs someone—one person who will applaud them for doing well. The children have to be told and led to believe that people do not always scream and holler at you."

George put a plan into place: Each classroom would be a family—the kids would even take the teachers' last names—and teachers in neighboring classrooms would be their aunts. It was more than a gimmick. Before long, children began competing to see whose classroom could behave better; whose test scores could be higher.

George credits her teachers for making it work. Many of the 23 teachers shared common experiences and it was their warmth toward each other that first gave her the idea of an extended school family. George built on their camaraderie by pairing teachers

and telling them to do nice things for each other. Their fuzzy feelings for each other spilled over to the children. Teachers now come in early to tutor students and some even pick up children to make sure they get to school on time. They also show up routinely at community functions—even funerals.

"I had a little girl killed last summer," says George. "The young mother said, 'I don't know what to do.' We took over." The Frazier staff bought burial clothing for the child and made lunch for the family after the service.

The school rewards parents who take active roles in their children's educations by checking homework, attending conferences, and returning signed forms on time. Each "Parent of the Month" gets a plaque. George recalls how one parent's eyes filled with tears as she said, "All through high school I never got anything. This is my first award."

The caring works. Frazier Elementary School has been labeled an exemplary school by the Texas Education Agency for the past three years. There are only five to 10 discipline referrals a year. And Brusha? After more than two years of discipline—lunches alone with the principal, isolation from peers who felt threatened, frequent shifts to different classrooms—she took the stage this spring for the annual awards ceremony.

"She got the 'most improved' award," said George.  
—Ruth Sternberg

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and understand what factors have contributed to their presence.

## Choosing a Destination

Turnaround principals obviously must guide their schools toward higher achievement, based on standardized tests. However, such a single-minded focus often is insufficient alone to save a school. Effective turnaround principals are acutely aware that students are more than test scores, that teachers are more than instruments for raising scores, and that the hopes and dreams of parents entail more than higher scores.

Consider how Rachel George led Julia C. Frazier Elementary School in South Dallas, Texas, from a low-

performing school to one whose students' achievement rivals that of peers in far more affluent neighborhoods (Benton 2002). (See "A Home Away from Home," above.) Before students could focus on academic improvement, they first needed to feel that teachers cared about them. George and her staff set about creating a family-like environment in the school, going so far as to have students adopt the last names of their teachers during the school day. Everyone made a concerted effort to see that Frazier was clean and safe, a place students wanted to be. By requiring students to wear uniforms to school, George eliminated the distracting influence of clothing.

Principals like Rachel George know that their ultimate destination must be nothing less than a learning environment in which relationships are as important as rules, where all students feel valued not for how they perform on tests, but because they are human beings worthy of care and respect. Turnaround principals understand the message that psychologist Abraham Maslow tried to convey decades ago—that people must feel cared for and cared about *before* they will take the risks necessary to achieve. In unsuccessful schools, unfortunately, students too often get the message that they must first achieve in order to be valued.

## Making the Journey

While turnaround principals must be crystal clear about where they begin their travels and where they are headed, what about the journey itself? By considering actual cases of schools that have been turned around, it is possible to identify some generally applicable "travel tips." While no two turnaround principals cover exactly the same route, most must contend with a number of predictable challenges.

**Beliefs.** What educators believe about themselves and the students they teach goes a long way to determining the effectiveness of their instruction. In almost every case that I examined, turnaround principals challenged their staffs to take an open and honest look at their beliefs. For example, Janice Cover, principal of Pine Grove Elementary School in Delray Beach, Florida, undertook this task in the context of asking each of her 55 teachers to re-apply for their jobs (Solomon 2003). (See "Turning a School from D to A," p. 14.) Only those teachers who believed that all students can learn, and who committed to working longer hours in order to raise achievement, were rehired.

But believing that all students can learn is insufficient alone to ensure success. Teachers also must believe in themselves and their ability to provide effective instruction to needy students. Teachers may have doubts about their ability to help needy students because they feel isolated and uncertain about their intervention skills. Here is where a turnaround principal can be invaluable. Teacher feelings of self-efficacy often depend on a principal's ability to recognize teacher growth and promote professional collaboration and continuous instructional improvement.

**Skills.** Besides confronting their beliefs, teachers need to assess their expertise regarding helping struggling students to learn. There are no shortcuts to turning around low-performing schools. They can only be turned around one student at a time. Consequently, the best way to assess

teacher expertise is on a student-by-student basis. Turnaround principals regularly monitor student progress and identify students who are falling behind. By meeting with the teachers of these students, principals find out how well teachers understand the nature of the students' problems and how prepared they are to provide corrective instruction.

In cases where teachers lack the skills to intervene, it is up to the prin-

icipal to arrange for timely staff development. This may involve hiring a per diem consultant to spend time with teachers in their classrooms as they work with struggling students, or convening a grade-level team to assist a teacher in developing an intervention plan. The most meaningful staff development often is that which is tied directly to helping particular students overcome particular learning problems (Duke 1992).

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# Training the Turnaround Specialist

An innovative program to train principals as turnaround specialists is underway in Virginia. The state-funded Virginia Turnaround Specialist Program, designed to apply successful business techniques to public education, has prepared a pilot group of 10 principals for temporary assignment to low-performing schools this year, with 10 more to follow next year.

The program, conducted by a partnership of the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education and Darden Graduate School of Business Administration, includes a five-day residential program focused on characteristics of high-performing organizations, personal leadership qualifications, turnaround leadership skills, and school turnaround planning.

The principals also attend a three-day program by

School Turnaround that concentrates on data analysis, decision-making, and creating action plans.

A one-day District Leadership Academy, in conjunction with the turnaround specialist program, brings together teams of school and community leaders from participating districts to discuss issues of concern and to provide support for the strategy proposed by their assigned principals, who would be certified as turnaround specialists based on outcomes after the first year.

"With strong leadership, even the most troubled schools can become centers of learning and opportunity," says Virginia Superintendent of Instruction Jo Lynne DeMary. "Our plan is to train a force of instructional leaders who will bring out the best in teachers and students."

**Time.** Highly skilled teachers can accomplish amazing things, but they are not magicians. Faced with a student who is performing a year or two behind his or her peers, even the most expert teacher may need additional instructional time to ensure that the student eventually catches up. Finding this extra time is the responsibility of the turnaround principal. In the case of Pine Grove Elementary School, Janice Cover found resources to reimburse each of her teachers for working 175 extra hours a year, tutoring students after school and on Saturdays.

Extended learning time also has been a key to the success of Fairfax County's Excel Schools (Duke, in press). (See "Turnaround Times Twenty," p. 24.) Principals of Excel Schools reduce pull-out programs that cut into precious instructional time and develop extended school calendars that may include periodic two-week intersessions. During these breaks, students in need receive additional assistance while other students take advantage of opportunities for enrichment and accelerated learning.

**Grouping.** To maximize the benefit of instructional time, teachers need to work with relatively small numbers of students. Once again, turnaround

principals have a crucial role to play. They see to it that staffing arrangements support small-group learning, especially for struggling students in key areas such as reading and mathematics. Additional strategies may involve parallel block scheduling; pairing regular education teachers with special education teachers and reading specialists; before- and after-school tutoring sessions; and short-term clustering of students by ability rather than age or grade level.

When Ben Sayeski confronted passing rates of only 40 percent on state standardized tests at Johnson Elementary School in Charlottesville, Virginia, he searched for ways to improve grouping for reading instruction. (See "Turning Around a Reading Program," p. 22.) He rejected mixed-age grouping by reading ability because older students resented receiving assistance in the presence of younger students. Instead, Sayeski opted to create larger groups for advanced readers, who were able to devote more time to literature. Consequently, teachers working with below-grade-level readers were able to concentrate on six students at a time. Within a year, over 70 percent of the third graders were passing state reading tests, and their success rate has held steady.

Patrick Durkin, who is credited for

helping to turn around Chicago's Goudy Elementary School, negotiated with his faculty to keep small class sizes in grades K-4. Teachers of higher grades agreed to work with larger numbers of students so that their colleagues in the early grades could concentrate on getting students to master basic skills (Ouchi 2003). Such collective accountability is a hallmark of turnaround schools.

**Order.** Visitors to low-performing schools often are struck by a pervasive lack of order. Classrooms and corridors are noisy, rules are not consistently enforced, and teachers seem to be unable to regularly command the attention of their students. The likelihood of raising achievement in such environments is slight. Turnaround principals know that order must be restored before substantial improvements in teaching and learning can be accomplished. Interestingly, though, they rarely resort to stricter rules and harsher punishments. Instead, effective turnaround principals focus on consistently enforcing existing rules and instructing students on how they are expected to behave. While they feel comfortable with the role of disciplinarian, these principals also expect teachers to handle most of the behavior problems that arise during the day. Teachers who are unable

# Turning Around a Reading Program

Principal Ben Sayeski wasn't sure whether to discipline or hug the girl who had been called to his office after arguing with a boy. As the girl recounted the incident, she said, "He called me the F-word," recalls Sayeski. "And then she said, 'He used a suffix: 'er.' I thought, man, she's really getting this!"

Sayeski had been working hard for three years to raise Johnson Elementary School's scores on the Virginia accountability tests, especially reading scores. When he arrived at the Charlottesville school, only 37 percent of third graders could pass the reading test.

Sayeski knew it wouldn't be easy to turn the reading program around. For one thing, he was 29 when he took the job, and many of his faculty had been teaching before he had even started college.

The teachers had grown comfortable with their long-standing system of reading instruction—using chapter books and focusing on reading skills, one element at a time. It wasn't a bad way of approaching reading, says Sayeski, but too many children were slipping through the cracks.

Sayeski wanted a reading program that would work for all readers. He checked out the research and decided on a two-pronged curriculum: the Open Court reading series and Reading Mastery, a direct instruction program.

The idea was to assign each of the school's Title I teachers about six students at a time for the more intensive Reading Mastery program. Each child would spend as much time as he or she needed with the program before returning to a regular classroom.

Sayeski also analyzed the teachers' schedules and

was surprised at what he found. "We used to have a 90-minute reading block, with kindergarten having two 45-minute reading periods and an hour of unstructured centers," he says. "Then you throw in gym and art, and that didn't leave a whole lot of time to teach."

Now, everyone gets two hours of reading each day—even the kindergartners. Not everyone on the staff was thrilled. Some objected to higher expectations for younger children. "You got into this argument about what was developmentally appropriate," says Sayeski.

A few teachers left. "They told me, 'I don't think this is for me,'" he recalls. "They'd just look at me and try to argue, and I'd say, 'This is non-negotiable.'"

Today, 73 percent of Johnson's third graders have passed the state reading test and the achievement gap is closing, with 60 percent of black students passing—compared to 25 percent three years ago. The school is a frequent stop for educators looking for model programs.

Now, Sayeski has a new, though not unwelcome, problem: The constant parade of kids who want to read to him. "They say, 'Mr. Sayeski! I'm a reader!'" says the principal, who invites them into his office and sometimes puts them on the speakerphone to read to their parents.

—Ruth Sternberg

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or unwilling to maintain orderly learning environments rarely remain on staff.

**Data.** Turnaround principals recognize the necessity for regular and reliable data on each student's progress. They expect teachers to use diagnostic instruments, practice tests, frequent in-class questions, and assignments requiring application of knowledge to continually monitor how students are doing. When the data indicate that certain students are experiencing difficulties, their cases are frequently brought to grade-level and schoolwide meetings, where participants are asked to analyze the students' problems and develop intervention strategies. Waiting until

students receive failing grades on their report cards is not a viable option. By that time, these students often have fallen so far behind their classmates that catching up is unlikely.

Turnaround principals make certain they know which students are at risk of failing and they personally see to it that help is provided both within and outside of class. In case after case of schools that have reversed downward spirals, turnaround principals have taken a personal interest in seeing that struggling students do not slip through the cracks.

## Applying Simple Wisdom

Academics are fond of focusing on

the complexities of school improvement and the change process, and never tire of isolating new and unusual "keys" to saving schools. Principals are urged to create professional learning communities, collaborative cultures, and shared governance structures. Buzzwords abound: distributed leadership; authentic assessment; full-service schools; accelerated learning; and so on. I do not intend to demean the well-intentioned efforts of my colleagues, which sometimes bear fruit. But for the turnaround principal, there is no substitute for simple wisdom.

Turning around low-performing schools is unlikely to occur unless principals enable staff members to:



- Confront their beliefs about teaching and learning;
- Assess and refine their instructional skills;
- Increase instructional time for struggling students;
- Improve how students are grouped for instruction;
- Establish and sustain orderly learning environments; and
- Use various sources of data to monitor student progress on a continuing basis.

For all the rhetoric about lifting our eyes to the horizon and letting our visions be our guides, the reality is that turnaround principals spend a good portion of their time looking at the ground to see where they can take their next step. ■

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#### WEB RESOURCES

The Rensselaerville Institute provides a School Turnaround Web site that includes a listing of key characteristics of turnaround principals.  
[www.schoolturnaround.org](http://www.schoolturnaround.org)

The University of Virginia's Darden Graduate School of Business Administration describes a partnership with the university's Curry School of Education to develop the state's Virginia Turnaround Specialist Program.  
[www.darden.virginia.edu/news/2004/043004curry.htm](http://www.darden.virginia.edu/news/2004/043004curry.htm)

The National Education Association offers a checklist for school improvement, based on the experiences of successful turnaround schools.  
[www.nea.org/priorityschools/psrguide/appendic/](http://www.nea.org/priorityschools/psrguide/appendic/)



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