

Helping School Improvements Succeed

Eight essential elements to consider in managing a school turnaround

By John F. Eller and Sheila A. Eller



New principals should be prepared to take stock of what happened during the year, look at what issues arose, think about what didn't go as planned, and identify what they would like to change in the upcoming school year. Many principals have formalized processes they use to work with building leadership teams to analyze data, examine trends, and set goals like these.

In our new book, *Flip This School: How to Lead the Turnaround Process*, we discuss strategies principals and members of their leadership teams can use to turn around schools where problems exist or students are failing. While the strategies are designed for schools that have major issues and require big changes, they can also be applied to schools where the problems aren't quite so serious.

Flip This School organizes its strategies into eight themes:

1. **Understanding school turnaround.** Even if your school isn't in need of major changes, you'll want to have an understanding of the process and identify the potential pitfalls you might encounter. For example, if a building leadership team identifies that change is needed in how you provide assistance to struggling students, people invested in the existing strategies might take offense at the change and work to undermine it. Understanding the turnaround process can help you anticipate and deal with such issues before they become a problem.

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- 2. Assess and develop your leadership skills.** Once you complete your initial year as principal, take stock of what you do well and where your leadership might need strengthening. For example, you might be uncomfortable with conflict or avoid difficult conversations. Once you identify your strengths and limitations, you can create a plan to develop the skills you'll need to be successful.
- 3. Gather data about the school.** Data that lets you and your building leadership team know what needs to be addressed is crucial to a successful improvement process. Not only will data help determine the plan's components and goals, says John P. Kotter in *Leading Change*, but it can also provide a sense of urgency that will help staff buy into the change. Involve a building leadership team, PLC group, or other teacher-led group in gathering the data; their input can validate its credibility and inform the eventual plan for change.
- 4. Obtain commitment from the district.** While schools can make many changes on their own, they will be more successful if they can get assistance from the district. School districts can provide support in areas such as staffing, professional development, and communications, helping the governing board understand and support the change. Principals should discuss their school's needs and

improvement plans with the superintendent or direct supervisor to ensure they are informed and on board with the effort.

- 5. Maintain a positive work climate and collaborative culture.** The school climate and culture will be key to your success. Even for small initiatives, principals need to work to keep the culture positive and encourage collaboration among staff to solve any problems that might arise. If implementing a schoolwide behavior management system, for example, principals should hold periodic updates and problem-solving meetings. When teachers identify elements that aren't working well, you can help them develop solutions and guide consensus.
- 6. Build capacity.** As the change project moves forward, look for ways to build staff capacity. For example, teachers who struggle with the strategies required for the new plan can build capacity with the help of professional development, instructional coaches, grade-level or departmental study groups, classroom observation, and other strategies. As the school moves ahead, everyone should be able to learn and grow in order to be successful.
- 7. Manage change.** Understanding the change process and people's needs during a change is critical to success in any school improvement. If the principal and the building leadership team understand the process, they can deal

proactively with any emotions experienced during a change. Identifying and adopting a change process also gives you and your staff a checklist to follow as the change unfolds.

- 8. Build structures and processes for success.** As the school improvement plan moves forward, principals must work to build structures that support continued success. For example, building the leadership team's skills helps ensure the new effort will stay on track. If a school is looking to implement professional goal-setting, a goals coach might be part of the structure. Structures and processes provide support for advanced skills and expectations that might come about in subsequent years of implementation, acting as forms of follow-up.

Most principals find things that need to be improved in their schools once they have completed their first year on the job. Whether the needed changes are significant or minor, the steps we have identified here will be helpful in guiding proposed changes to fruition. **P**

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