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Turnaround Times

The language of leadership catches up to the reality of practice

It often seems that Washington, D.C., movers and shakers speak a language all their own. Buzz words, acronyms, abbreviations, and verbal shortcuts come and go with each Congress and administration.

One verbal shortcut currently on the lips of nearly every legislator and education policy wonk is one I've always failed to understand. It's the phrase "turnaround principal," and it's bandied about at virtually every meeting I've attended in the past 18 months.

I understand well enough what policymakers mean when they employ this phrase, which they use to both admonish and praise principals. What I don't understand is why so many people in Washington seem to think that turnaround principals are a brand new species who have suddenly sprung up, like mushrooms after a rain.

They aren't. Principals have been "turning around" schools since Horace Mann sparked the national movement to create public schools in the United States. What is new, however, is the burden on such principals who face high-stakes challenges in pressure-cooker situations. There's no doubt that they're up to the task, however; they always have been. From the lone principal/teacher who taught every subject in every grade in a one-room schoolhouse to principals who nurtured entire school communities through the Great Depression to those who fought to keep the doors open for all students during the Civil Rights movement to those who are working heroically today to improve our nation's lowest performing schools, principals are the pivot point for turnaround schools.

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) tackled this topic in the September/October 2004 issue of *Principal* magazine in a series of articles that are remarkably prescient. Consider the opening paragraph of the first article:

"Their 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."

Today, we can add another "consequence of failure" for turnaround principals striving to raise up the nation's lowest performing schools: automatic or likely dismissal if their school is closed and reopened. Those are the final rules as set forth in the U.S. Department of Education's School Improvement Grant program. NAESP proactively suggested an alternate plan to the department's "ready, fire, aim" approach. Our position was clear and, we think, reasonable: Give principals the support they need to transform teaching and learning, hold all principals to high standards, and remediate or reassign those who are not able to measure up in the most difficult situations.

Like nearly every principal I've met in almost three decades, I'm a glass-half-full optimist. Here's why: I've talked with dozens of principals in the past few years, and many shared notable successes of school transformation. Every single one credited a driving force, including supportive communities, engaged parents, eager learners, and committed teachers. Not one spent a second patting himself or herself on the back. It's this degree of personal humility that makes principals' successes so compelling but so invisible—compelling because most principals focus on the best practice, not the best practitioner, and invisible because most principals simply don't seek the spotlight.

It's time to flip the spotlight's "on switch," and we're doing just that at the Association's annual convention, April 8-11 in Houston (www.naesp.org/2010). We've assembled a panel of outstanding transformational principals who will lead a conversation about the best practices they've incorporated into their schools.

These exemplary principals have also agreed to follow up the panel discussion by leading smaller, more focused group conversations to enable convention attendees to hone in on the approaches that led to student improvement.

This exciting initiative reminds me that principals are, at heart, teachers. The best are also lifelong learners who are profoundly committed to helping all children learn and enriching all schools—whether or not they are labeled "turnaround principals."