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What Works in School Turnarounds?

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An important feature of the Obama administration's Race to the Top initiative is the call to turn around failing schools. The policy calls for persistently failing schools to be subjected to specific turnaround strategies, and \$3.5 billion in federal School Improvement Grant funds has been allocated to support the effort.

We applaud President Barack Obama's desire to address this pervasive problem. However, we are concerned that the approach prescribed by the U.S. Department of Education, while well intentioned, is misguided. Because of the vast sums of federal dollars that have been directed toward this effort and the narrow timeline under which changes are expected to be made, we are seeing a new industry of "turnaround experts" emerge, most of whom have no track record of helping struggling schools. We are concerned that desperate schools will waste scarce resources on efforts that will promise much but deliver little. Meanwhile, millions of children throughout America will continue to languish in failing schools.

There is, in fact, a knowledge base about how to transform struggling schools, and it is drawn from the small but significant number of failing schools that have been transformed into models of success. In the following, we point out the faults of the current approach and how lessons from "transformed" schools can be used to guide more productive efforts.

The first problem with the administration's approach is that it specifies the remedy rather than beginning with an accurate diagnosis of the problem. Firing staff members or rewarding them based on performance assumes schools are failing because the staff is lazy or uninterested in improving. The actual problem is always more complicated. Rather than firing teachers or the principal, it makes far more sense to carefully assess their strengths and weaknesses to determine which staff members should be removed versus which can be improved through professional development. Mandating mass firings or the closure of schools is disruptive and often makes it more difficult to improve results.

Additionally, schools with a record of failure typically exhibit signs of dysfunction. Discipline problems, tardiness and absenteeism, a lack of collaboration, low morale, and strained relations with parents are all common features of failing schools. These schools usually serve the most-disadvantaged students, who come to school with a variety of unmet social needs. Turning them around requires an ability to respond to some of these needs and to transform the school culture. This cannot be accomplished by mandate. Rather, positive learning environments develop through internal accountability, shared vision, buy-in around clear goals and procedures, and the development of community.

The two of us collectively have worked in dozens of struggling schools over the years. Consistently, we have found that when the proper support is provided, failing schools can become exceptional schools. There are several keys to a successful turnaround:

- A "new day" begins. Whether the change process begins with a new principal, a newly formed leadership team, or the entry of an external partner, the idea that things are going to change for the better is conveyed in very positive terms. The Jackie Robinson School in Brooklyn was struggling for several years when Marion Wilson was hired as the school's principal in 2006. She knew she would have to do something different and began by forming a small cabinet of people she trusted. Wilson used ideas from Alan's book *Failure Is Not an Option* as the foundation for building trust and cohesion among the staff.

- The school status is assessed. While there often isn't time for an in-depth external review, it is essential for the key agents of change to understand the internal dynamics driving the school. Interviews with each individual help build the relationships necessary for short- and long-term success, and for determining the best way forward.
- Early wins build credibility and the climate for more success. Principal Wilson initially adopted simple procedures to restore order. Fights were minimized, for example, by drawing a line down the middle of the hallway indicating two flows of traffic in between classes. Early wins build trust, and give confidence for the more intricate work to come.
- Create a new vision of what's possible: Provide opportunities to visit successful schools serving similar populations of students. This is important because it provides the staff with a clear sense of what success looks like. It also helps overcome the "normalization" of failure, in which there is a belief that the problem is that "our" students simply can't achieve.
- Engage and listen to your students. Students know which teachers are most effective in challenging them to learn. Schools cannot improve unless students are invested in learning. The hiring process in the Renaissance Middle School, another formerly low-performing school now winning accolades in New York City, includes students' receiving a lesson from the prospective teacher. Principal Harriett Diaz then asks the students: "Could you learn from this teacher?"
- There must be a clear and deliberate strategy for improving instruction. Professional development must be directly related to the skill areas where assessments show students are weakest. Professional development is effective when it is site-based, ongoing, and draws upon the expertise of the most effective teachers in the building. Creating a climate of collaboration among teachers is essential.
- Problem-solving becomes the norm. In Central High School in Newark, N.J., the school day was extended to provide more time for differentiated instruction for students who needed more support. If a teacher were having trouble meeting the needs of his/her students, the student would be reassigned to a class that was a better fit.
- Establish clear measurable goals, and avoid trying to do too much at once. There must be clear priorities and strategies and procedures for implementing them. Adopting a consistent approach to teaching is essential for changing student learning outcomes.
- Build partnerships with parents and community organizations. In many cases, schools can't address student needs by themselves. Nonprofits, businesses, churches, and civic groups will often provide support. A sense of accountability must be generated within the school to the parents and the community it serves.
- Sustain communication and collaboration. Often, low-performing schools are islands, and their interventions are administered in isolation from their neighboring schools. Just the opposite is needed. Sustaining a school's success includes processes for sharing strategies, support, and accountability across many schools.

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The list above appears long and time-intensive. Yet results can be seen early on. Within the first year of implementation of the School Improvement Grant, Central High School results from the New Jersey High School Proficiency Assessments show a 32.5 percent growth in English/language arts and a 25 percent growth in mathematics. The Jackie Robinson and Renaissance schools were headed for closing, yet within three years both received an A rating from New York City's board of education. In September, *The New York Times* reported that the Jackie Robinson School was among the top five highest-performing elementary schools in the city.

Our political leaders would do well to listen to the educators in the trenches who are getting results. There are many successful turnaround schools, but there could be many more. Closing schools should be the last option. We should instead focus on transforming schools by following the example of schools that have done so already.

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