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A Better Turnaround Strategy

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As Americans, we want our nation's children to experience success. The failure of some schools to reach our most challenged students, coupled with our frustration over the slow pace of change, creates a sense of urgency. Hence, it is understandable that individuals and organizations try to intervene in extraordinary ways to overcome obstacles to academic success.

The U.S. Department of Education's four "turnaround" models represent the latest of these bold responses. Clearly, it is a dramatic act to close a school; to release most of the faculty and recruit other teachers; to relinquish the school to an external organization promising better results; to offer financial incentives for raising test scores; or to bring in new leadership charged with generating the desired results. Occasionally, these measures have a short-term impact. For students struggling in the wake left by poverty and structural racism, there are no quick fixes, however. While high-profile solutions may create a sense of relief that action is under way, they have not produced turnarounds that are effective in the long term. They may even undermine more effective and sustainable practices.

There is a better strategy.

The way to turn schools around and transform the education of at-risk students is to invest in the professional ability of the faculty, making its members a mission-driven, skilled force for change. This strategy necessitates a reorganization built around faculty collaboration, intensive and embedded professional development, and personalized instruction. Working from this premise, the Jefferson County, Ky., public school system, which includes the city of Louisville, designed and implemented a fifth model that was fully operational by the 2010-2011 school year—a model not set forth by the Education Department, yet funded through a federal Investing in Innovation, or i3, grant.

We labeled this approach the "Investment Model" because it invests in the creation of a professionalized teaching culture and represents a conceptual shift in what teaching and learning are all about. It is built

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The advertisement features the SAS logo and tagline "THE POWER TO KNOW." at the top. Below this, the text reads "Take 8 steps toward a data-driven culture." in green. A white button with a green cursor icon and the text "CLICK FOR WHITE PAPER" is positioned above a pair of bright green sneakers. The SAS logo and tagline are repeated at the bottom of the advertisement.

on the belief that teaching is a collaborative rather than an individual practice, and that teachers take collective ownership of student learning. If a student doesn't grasp the concept, adults accept responsibility for not having taught it well enough. They make the time to reteach it until each student reaches competency in key academic standards. The district calls this approach Project Proficiency.

The model has three core elements.

- The first is the district's investment in providing substantial, consistent time for teacher collaboration. In the Investment Model sites, teachers collaboratively develop learning tasks that are designed to be accessible to all students and to reveal the range of student understanding. They observe one another, analyze student work, and formulate ways to respond to gaps in student understanding through feedback and design of new learning experiences. Teachers of the same course or grade meet regularly to focus on common challenges and solutions. Facilitated by teacher leaders and highly skilled coaches, teachers maintain a nondefensive focus on hard questions and challenging classroom issues while increasing their content and pedagogical knowledge. The result is shared responsibility for increased effectiveness and student success.
- The second element is an emphasis on formative assessment that prepares teachers to diagnose students' conceptual understanding of content matter and to provide feedback that advances learning. As a result, teachers adjust instruction to better reach students, and simultaneously connect with their students and personalize instruction. This personalization builds students' confidence in their own capabilities, sustains them in tackling more-challenging material, and motivates them to set higher goals.
- The third element is effective and flexible use of the school schedule to provide time for personalized student support and stronger connections with adults and peers. The Jefferson County high schools applying the Investment Model implement a five-block, trimester schedule. This schedule gives teachers 70-minute periods in which to actively engage students in learning, enables students to concentrate on only five subjects at a time, and reduces the student-to-teacher ratio. It also allows for remediation and acceleration so that students move forward at an appropriate pace and receive timely support. Classes are coordinated so that teachers can regroup students to address particular concepts. Weekly advisory periods, titled College Access Time, support students' social development, career interests, and preparation for college or postsecondary education and further personalize the school's culture.

The Investment Model is based on these four research findings:

- Teachers are most effective when they have significant, consistent, regularly scheduled time for professional collaboration with colleagues, focused on the assessment of instructional practices, the analysis of student work, the individualization of instruction, and the provision of just-in-time feedback to students about how to advance their learning.
- Students are academically successful when school schedules optimize time for in-depth, engaging, and challenging learning experiences while accommodating both remediation and acceleration.
- Students are most likely to graduate and be college- and career-ready when they have positive, personal connections with adults and the school, and they are engaged in their own learning.
- Schools with concentrations of high-needs learners are more likely to attract and retain effective teachers when there is a culture of collaboration, professional growth, effective leadership, and student support.

Jefferson County has 10 high schools identified as persistently low-achieving, or PLA. Paradoxically, it also has five of the highest-performing high schools in the state. These bifurcated outcomes are not due to variation in will, knowledge, or skill among teachers and administrators, but to differences in students' economic backgrounds. To turn around its socioeconomically challenged PLA schools, the district implemented the Investment Model in each of them. In addition, because the model held such promise, it was also implemented in many of the other comprehensive high schools.

The initial results of the Investment Model have been positive in terms of improved student performance on state tests, reduced retentions and dropouts, and increased graduation rates. In addition, the model has promoted stability among the faculty, who receive support and assistance to be successful.

Results on the 2011 state assessments are especially revealing. Overall, compared with the 2010 results, the 21 comprehensive high schools increased the percentage of students scoring at the proficient and distinguished levels from 40 percent to 54 percent in math and from 62 percent to 70 percent in reading, putting the district above the state average in both areas. Even more remarkable, all 10 of the PLA high schools increased their percentages of proficient and distinguished students in both math (with gains of 10 percentage points to 30 percentage points) and reading (with gains of 2 percentage points to 28 percentage points). In addition, the percentage of students scoring in the novice, or lowest, category was also significantly reduced. These results are striking improvements over prior years.

The Investment Model enables schools to enhance the stability and professional capacity of staff members and the academic performance and active engagement of students. Although not a quick fix, it presents a feasible and sustainable way to turn around student performance and school culture at persistently low-achieving schools. Indeed, the Investment Model can support improved student performance at any school. The quality and stability of a faculty are essential to student performance. This model is a way to ensure that teachers work together as professionals, inspired by the opportunity to transform the lives of children, and supported by a culture of collaboration and collegiality. The department's official support for the Investment Model as a fifth turnaround option would provide a positive opportunity to create lasting improvement in our most challenged schools.

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