Common Elements of Successful School Turnarounds: Research and Experience

While we now know that it is possible to turn around low-performing public schools, the critical question becomes: how? Because schools are complex organizations composed of many different people, turning them around is not easy. It requires significantly changing the expectations, beliefs and practices of many diverse individuals, even though people are normally resistant to having to make major changes, as well as changing collective systems, structures and cultures.

Fortunately, research and experience have shown that successful turnarounds share a number of common strategies.[i] Although there are many different ways that these strategic elements might be labeled and organized, in the interests of clarity and potential legislative usefulness, we suggest the following:

I. Leadership: Principal, Teachers and Other Stakeholders

A. Principal Leadership – The typical starting point for school turnaround is a skilled, strong and committed principal who serves as the catalyst for change. The principal leads in developing a vision for the school to dramatically improve student learning and engages the teachers, staff, parents, students and community (i.e., "stakeholders") to share in developing, and buy into, this vision.[ii] The principal needs to function effectively in three basic roles:[iii] as "instructional leader," to help improve teaching and learning;[iv] facilitator of inclusiveness, to induce all categories of stakeholders to work together to carry out the vision;[v] and manager, to oversee the school's non-academic functions.[vi]

B. Leadership by Teachers and Other Stakeholders – In a successful turnaround, the principal alone typically does not, and cannot, provide all the leadership or make all the decisions. Other stakeholders, including key teachers, administrators, other staff, and even parents and community members, assume responsibilities for leading change in their own domains.[vii] They work closely together as "teams."[viii]

II. Instructional Improvement

A. Peer Collaboration/"School-Based Professional Community" – A central element of improving instruction is breaking down the traditional isolation of teachers in their own classrooms and getting them to work together on reviewing data on student performance, analyzing students' work, developing lesson plans and assessments, aligning curriculum, etc. Teachers model good teaching for each other and learn from each other. The faculty members together accept responsibility for all students learning and engage in a continual process of improving their own teaching.[ix] Such a collective capacity building undertaking is referred to as a "school-based professional community."[x]

B. Professional Development/Mentoring/Coaching - A second powerful strategy employed for improving instruction is individual mentoring or coaching by accomplished teachers or administrators, both for beginning and, where necessary, experienced teachers.[xi] More broadly, turnaround schools also provide other forms of professional development that meet the specific subject matter knowledge and pedagogical needs of a particular school's teachers.[xii]

C. System of Effective Teaching Practices and Assessments – Implementing a coherent school-wide system of effective teaching practices that engages students in higher-order thinking, problem-solving and communications, involves various kinds of student projects and work products, and effectively assesses student learning on each kind, is another key element.[xiii] Teachers regularly collect and analyze multiple sources of data on each student's learning, including classroom-based formative assessments, and adjust their teaching accordingly.[xiv]

D. Replacement Non-Participatory and Ineffective Teachers with Motivated, Capable Teachers – Principals closely observe teachers in their classrooms, help them improve their teaching and encourage them to collaborate with other teachers. Teachers who are not motivated to participate in the school's turnaround efforts frequently leave voluntarily to avoid close scrutiny; if not, and they are persistently ineffective, they must be removed.[xv] Schools seek capable teachers who want to participate in the school's reform.[xvi]

III. Curriculum: Challenging, Rich, Culturally Relevant and Aligned
To turn around students' learning, schools teach an intellectually challenging, rich curriculum, including art, music, physical fitness, history and science, one that is relevant to the children's culture and experiences and engages their interests.[xvii] The schools align the curriculum within grades and between grades, so that the higher the grade, the greater the challenge.[xviii]

IV. Climate: High Expectations, Respect, Support and Safety
The school climate is one of safety and orderliness, with a norm of high expectations that all students will achieve academically and behave properly, a challenging curriculum, high standards, pride in students' work, and a friendly, supportive, collegial atmosphere. Staff are devoted to continually upgrading their instructional capability, take shared responsibility for all students' learning, and provide extra personal and academic support to the students most in need.[xix]

V. Parent and Community Involvement and Support
     A. <u>Academic</u> - Programs, such as ones for enhancing parenting skills, strengthen parents' capacity to support their children's academic learning at home and engage parents to become involved with the school. Having the schools reach out to the parents increases the students' motivation to learn and assists their studying, as well as providing the trust between family and school that would facilitate solving any student behavioral problems.[xx] Community members provide valuable academic services as volunteer tutors, adult mentors and providers of enrichment programs for students.[xxi]
     B. <u>Non-Academic</u> - Finally, the schools have pupil services professionals who provide services directly for students with behavioral and other non-academic barriers to learning. And they work closely with community health, recreation, youth, police and other local institutions to address external student and family obstacles to students' learning.[xxii]

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[i] Indeed, a uniquely comprehensive, new, in-depth study contrasting more than 200 improving and stagnating Chicago public elementary schools over 7 years, found that "a sustained weakness in any one of [the five 'essential supports' it identified] undermined virtually all attempts at improving student learning." Anthony S. Bryk, Penny Bender Sebring, Elaine Allensworth, Stuart Luppescu, and John Q. Easton, <u>Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago</u> (2010) ("Bryk"), p. 198. Bryk characterized the common elements as: 1) "leadership;" 2) "parent-community ties;" 3) "professional capacity;" 4) "a student-centered learning climate;" and 5) "instructional guidance." *Id.* at 45-46.

    Bryk "found that schools having strong indicator reports [which are measures of the five 'essential supports'] were up to ten times more likely to improve students' reading and mathematics learning than were contexts where three or more of these indicators were weak. Moreover, a low score in even just one indicator reduced the likelihood of improvement to less than 10 percent." *Id.* at 197-98; see 81, 93, 95-96 (meaning and selection of the "indicators"). And the five essential supports are highly interactive. *Id.*, at 197.

    Similarly, an analysis of disparate schools nationwide, serving many poor and minority students, which have unexpectedly high student achievement found that the schools "all share … some characteristics." Karin Chenoweth, <u>It's Being Done: Academic Success in Unexpected Schools</u> (2007) ("Chenoweth"), 213; accord, 4. The characteristics found by Bryk and Chenoweth overlap to a great extent.

    The weight of this evidence is enhanced by the fact that many of the same individual elements that Bryk and Chenoweth identified have previously been found to improve student learning by themselves, see, e.g. Gershon M. (Gary) Ratner, "Why the No Child Left Behind Act Needs to be Restructured to Accomplish Its Goals and How to Do It," 9 Univ. Dist. Columbia Law Review 1, 25 and n. 145 (Winter 2007) ("Ratner"). Further, the persuasiveness of these elements is strengthened because their effectiveness comports with common sense and common experience. (For a good summary of the Bryk, *et al.* findings, see Anthony S. Bryk, "Organizing Schools for Improvement," *Phi Delta Kappan,* 23-30 (April 2010).)

[ii] Bryk, 45-46, 61-64, 197, 199, 204-205, 207, see 6 (example).

[iii] *Id*. at 61.

[iv] *Id*. at 47, 62-62, 197, 199, 204-205, 2070208; Chenoweth, 219, 222-224.

[v] Bryk, 45-46, 63-64, 199, 204-208; Chenoweth, 221-222, See 225 (office and building staff feeling part of mission).

[vi] Bryk, 61-62, 208-209; see Chenoweth, 225 (having committed maintenance and office staff reduces need for leadership to spend time on management), see generally, 6-7 (example of particular principal effectively carrying out multiple roles).

[vii] Bryk, 63-64; Chenoweth, 222-223, 225; See Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley, The Fourth Way: The Inspiring Future for Education and Change (2009) ("Hargreaves"), at 96-98.

[viii] Chenoweth, 222-223, 226.

[ix] Id. at 223-224; Ratner, 40-41 and nn. 209-212; Bryk 4 (example); see Michael Fullan, All Systems Go: The Change Imperative for Whole System Reform (2010) ("Fullan"), at 7 (example), 71-72 (power of building "collective capacity"); McKinsey & Company, "How the world's best-performing school systems come out on top," (September 2007) ("McKinsey"), 28, 31-32 (includes peer collaboration in Finland and Japan); cf. Hargreaves, 92-94.

[x] Bryk, 55-57.

[xi] Ratner, 41-43 and nn. 213-217; Chenoweth, 224; see McKinsey, 28-29.

[xii] Bryk 6 (example), 54-57, 199, 206; Chenoweth, 223-224; Fullan 6-7.

[xiii] Bryk, 50-54, 199, 205.

[xiv] Chenoweth, 134-135 (example), 217-218; Bryk, 52, 54; see Hargreaves, 103.

[xv] Bryk 2-3, 7 (example), 55, 208; Ratner, 27 n. 150.

[xvi] Bryk, 54-55, 206; Chenoweth, 97-98 (example); see Hargreaves 67, 69 (same element as part of district-wide reform)

[xvii] Chenoweth, 3-4, 216-217; Bryk, 52-54; Ratner, 38-39 n. 198 (example).

[xviii] Chenoweth, 216; Bryk, 52-54, 58.

[xix] Bryk, 59-61, 197-198; Chenoweth, 217-218, 221-222, 225. School disciplinary practices support positive behaviors and focus on social services and other assistance to children and families to address serious behavioral problems. See Chenoweth, 220-221.

[xx] Bryk, 57-58, 195-196 (example); Ratner, 47 n. 239.

[xxi] Bryk, 58; Chenoweth, 96-97 (example); Ratner, 47 n. 242.

[xxii] Bryk, 58-59, 195 (example); Chenoweth, 220.