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Identifying Competencies and Actions of Effective Turnaround Principals

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Summary

Effective principals are an essential element in improving student achievement and learning (Steiner et al., 2008; Marzano et al., 2005). Therefore, awareness of the competencies and actions of the turnaround principal may assist decision makers in selecting and preparing successful leaders.

Introduction

Research over the past 30 years has found that effective principals can significantly improve various components of student achievement and learning (Steiner, E. A. Hassel, & Hassel, 2008; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). In addition, there are few examples of improving student achievement that were not led by an effective principal (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). Research has also identified the need for the change to be systemic or comprehensive in the school turnaround process to ensure sustainability (Chrisman, 2005). Along with a systemic improvement process, Duke (2006), identifies 10 "essential" school components for the turnaround principal's focus and action as keys to sustained success for the benefit of all students. This briefing paper addresses the essential competencies and actions of the turnaround principal.

Identifying competencies and actions exhibited by the turnaround principal is crucial to guiding development of effective future leaders. It may help districts to improve their capacity to identify and select the best leaders for their schools. Competencies and actions of existing leaders could be compared to those identified in research, allowing methods for developing, supporting, and evaluating turnaround principals to be refined. These topics are discussed below following descriptions of the procedure by which resources were selected for this paper and the limitations of this paper.

Procedure

To identify literature for studies on school turnaround leaders, staff from the Southeast Comprehensive Center (SECC) and Texas Comprehensive Center (TXCC) at SEDL conducted searches of the Assessment & Accountability Comprehensive Center Web site, EBSCO's Academic Search Elite database, the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), and online search engines (i.e., Bing, Google, Google Scholar, and Yahoo). They used combinations of terms that included school turnaround leaders, turnaround leader training, turnaround leader preparation, turnaround leader selection, turnaround leader programs, turnaround leader strategies, turnaround leader development, turnaround leader traits, turnaround leader process, turnaround leader models, turnaround leader initiatives, turnaround leader support, turnaround leader evaluation, and selecting and identifying leaders for school turnaround.

SEDL staff reviewed resources from national content centers, such as the National High School Center and the former Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, as well as contacted state sources such as the Texas Turnaround Center to gather information about current practices regarding turnaround leaders. The searches focused on research conducted within the past 10 years, though older documents were included if they provided seminal information on the topic.

In all, 50 documents met criteria defined by the above search terms. Staff selected 19 of these if they also met the following methodological criteria: grounded theory based on data, case study research of principals in action, and/or examples of phenomenology methodology. Over half (11) contained research published by foundations, policy organizations, or governmental agencies. For example, the School Turnaround Learning Community was the leading source for documents used in this paper. Equal numbers of peer-reviewed journal articles (4) and books (4) were also reviewed.



Limitations

While the focus of this briefing paper is on strategies and approaches to identify, support, and sustain turnaround efforts in schools, with special emphasis on the principal, it is important to note that the “turnaround principal” role has only recently been identified. As such, the research base on this topic is limited, allowing for the inclusion of only four peer-reviewed journal articles and two case studies reviewed for this paper. What’s more, the largely descriptive and qualitative nature of the research conducted on this topic does not allow for conclusions to be drawn about underlying causal mechanisms behind the authors’ explorations of turnaround schools and leaders.

SEDL staff identify limitations to assist clients and other stakeholders in making informed decisions with respect to the information presented. SEDL does not endorse any strategies or programs featured in this paper.

What are Turnaround Schools?

The word *turnaround* is defined “as a documented, quick, dramatic, and sustained change in the performance of an organization” (Rhim, Kowal, Hassel, & Ayscue, 2007, p. 4). In the context of schools, turnaround would be where a pattern of low student achievement has been improved dramatically, usually in the areas of mathematics and literacy (Duke, 2006). The ability of turnaround schools to maintain the improvement in student achievement for a minimum of 2 years is vital in the process (Chrisman, 2005).

What We Know about Developing Turnaround Principals

The increased focus on turning around persistently failing schools by the Congress and U.S. Department of Education (ED) and the emphasis placed on the role of the principal under the federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) and the Race to the Top (RTT) grant programs have brought identifying and training candidates for this role to the forefront for national, state, and local leaders. This is reflected in the requirement to remove the principal in a persistently failing school in three of the four options available under federal guidelines for SIG and RTT grants. While research on turnaround principals is sparse, Kowal and Hassel (2011) in *Importing Leaders for School Turnarounds: Lessons and Opportunities*, report that across industries as many as 70% of successful turnarounds begin with change at the top.

Although a leadership change may be required or warranted in some instances, simply changing the principal has not been shown to guarantee the desired results if the new principal does not have the underlying competencies, skills, and strategies needed to effect the desired changes (ED, 2004). Throughout the nation, there are insufficient numbers of candidates to fill the need for “turnaround principals,” and disparity exists in the availability of qualified individuals, especially in rural areas and in low-performing schools across all states (ED, 2004). To meet the urgent need for effective leaders requires “preparation programs that strategically recruit and rigorously screen potential candidates, then immerse them in authentic coursework and integrated field experiences” (ED, 2004, p. 5).

In examining the literature describing the preparation of individuals who can fill these positions, there are multiple pathways for entry into the profession. Though not all routes require a traditional education degree (for example, see the Rice University Education Entrepreneurship Program referenced below), all do require significant experience in leadership roles to be accepted (Kowal & Hassel, 2011). Commonalities across the preparation programs include highly selective criteria for acceptance of candidates, learning experiences involving the knowledge and experience needed to lead in challenging circumstances, and providing mentoring and coaching by successful turnaround principals (Cheney, Davis, Garrett, & Holleran, 2010). These programs also hold their candidates accountable for student achievement results and see assessment as a learning tool to verify and validate the competency and readiness of candidates to lead change (Cheney et al., 2010).

Initial research suggests that successful leaders in a turnaround setting possess different competencies from leaders in already high-performing organizations. They demonstrate patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting that enable them to lead more dramatic change in a shorter period amid more controversy than leaders in other settings (Kowal & Hassel, 2011).



Refer to the chart for a description of the competencies of a turnaround leader.

According to Rainwater Leadership Alliance—a collaborative of district, university, and nonprofit providers of effective leadership programs—lessons learned across the affiliated programs related to the training and development process include the following:

- Focus on outcomes does not vary although the training and development methods may differ.
- Emphasize developing skills not found in the selected cohort and reinforce what is already intact.
- Ensure that both the school's operating context and the district environment will be considered.
- Engage fellows in authentic leadership experiences that involve real leadership of adults on behalf of students.
- Include modeling examples of leadership actions coupled with multiple opportunities to practice.
- Establish strong networks to provide regular and ongoing feedback that can also include a coaching model. (Cheney, et al., 2010, p. 91)

In 2004, ED's Office of Innovation and Improvement highlighted six promising programs for recruiting, preparing, and supporting new school leaders. Each of these innovative programs reported aligning their preparation program with state and national professional standards for educational leaders that emphasize instructional leadership and carefully defining their individual vision of what constitutes an effective principal. The programs focus on using assessment as a learning tool to address crucial gaps in knowledge and competency weaknesses of candidates and providing mentoring and coaching to assist individuals in meeting any deficiencies. In addition, each holds participants accountable for improving student learning in program internships and on the job after completion of the program.

The case study by Streshly and Gray (2010) identified three implications for improving programs that prepare principals: (a) depend on data and not myths to construct the curriculum, (b) emphasize the importance of and teach the skills needed for building strong relationships, and (c) promote the study of great principals and leaders (p. 122).

Examples of identified principal preparation programs that reflect the research of critical components for successful turnaround principals include those listed below.

District-Based Programs

Academy for Urban School Leadership—Turnaround School Model

<http://www.ausl-chicago.org/schools-turnaround.html>

Bankstreet Graduate School—Leadership for Educational Change (Bankstreet College of Education, New York)

<http://www.bnkst.edu/graduate-school/academics/programs/leadership-programs-overview/leadership-educational-change/>

Boston Principal Fellowship Program

<http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/news/boston-public-schools-announces-2006-2007-class-principal-fellows>

District of Columbia Public Schools—School Leadership Professional Development

<http://dcps.dc.gov/DCPS/Learn+About+Schools/School+Leadership/School+Leader+Professional+Development>

e-Lead: Leadership for Student Success—First Ring Leadership Academy | Cleveland State University in Partnership with the First Ring School Superintendents Collaborative

<http://www.e-lead.org/programs/firstring/activities.asp>

TURNAROUND LEADER COMPETENCIES

Steiner and colleagues (2008) identified four competencies of a turnaround leader

1. DRIVING FOR RESULTS

Having a strong desire to achieve outstanding results and the task-oriented actions required for success

2. INFLUENCING FOR RESULTS

Motivating others and influencing their thinking and behavior to obtain results

3. SOLVING PROBLEMS

Analyzing data to inform decisions, making clear, logical plans that people can follow, and ensuring a strong connection between school learning goals and classroom activity

4. SHOWING CONFIDENCE TO LEAD

Staying visibly focused, committed, and self-assured despite the barrage of personal and professional attacks common during turnarounds (p. 8)



e-Lead: Leadership for Student Success—Principals Excellence Program | University of Kentucky and Pike County Public Schools
<http://www.e-lead.org/programs/pep/summary.asp>

Foundation for Educational Administration—NJ-EXCEL Expedited Certification for Educational Leadership
<http://www.njexcel.org/>

Gwinnett County Public Schools—Quality-Plus Leader Academy
<http://www.gwinnett.k12.ga.us/gcps-mainweb01.nsf/pages/DevelopingGwinnettsfutureleadersthroughtheQuality-PlusLeaderAcademy>

Long Beach Unified School District—New Principal Induction
http://www.lbusd.k12.ca.us/Main_Offices/Human_Resources/Leadership_Development/new_principal_induction.cfm

Nonprofit/Third-Party Programs

The Broad Residency
<http://www.broadresidency.org/>

Education Pioneers
<http://www.educationpioneers.org/>

New Leaders
<http://www.newleaders.org/what-we-do/>

University-Based Programs

Rice University Education Entrepreneurship Program
<http://business.rice.edu/reep.aspx>

University of Illinois at Chicago—Urban Education Leadership
<http://www.uic.edu/gcat/EDURED.shtml>

University of Virginia Darden School of Business—Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education
<http://www.darden.virginia.edu/web/Darden-Curry-PLE/>

What We Know About Turnaround Principals' Actions

The research of Steiner and Hassel (2011) has shown that a school will not be turned around unless it is guided by an effective leader whose actions find the route to a quick, dramatic, and sustained improvement effort. Even leaders who have been successful with other schools may fail in a turnaround situation.

In studies of newly established turnaround schools, four areas in which turnaround principals made changes included: (a) mission and focus, (b) leadership style, (c) re-culturing, and (d) distributed leadership (Duke, 2006, p. 7).

Turnaround principals bring a new and concentrated *mission and focus* for the school. Research has described this as a strong drive for outstanding results (Kowal, E. A. Hassel, & Hassel, 2009). Although the focus varied in the case studies of successful and sustained turnaround schools, significant advances in reading and literacy were the most frequently identified targets (Duke, 2006).

Successful principals directed a comprehensive data analysis and needs assessment to guide the development of an action plan. The plan served to detail to everyone exactly what was expected of them. These expectations were for all staff, with no exceptions. The principal provided a clear picture of the expected benefits of the changes in the plan and used these benefits to motivate staff (Steiner et al., 2008). Another critical issue guiding this new single-minded mission was that there was one primary focus at a time. This was a very important initial step that allowed the school staff to learn how to think and act to produce continual improvement (Elmore, 2004).



Leadership styles varied among effective principals, but commonalities existed in how they spent their time. Most spent a significant amount of time in the classroom monitoring new instructional practices (Johnson, 2007). They served as coaches to their teachers and were highly visible in the school. As one turnaround principal said (Johnson, p. 4):

At the end of the day, with high-needs schools, it's really about student achievement and the instruction. If we're not able to be in the classrooms to observe instruction and make sure . . . students are receiving high-quality instruction, then . . . [non-instructional action] is not going to do anything.

Research clarified the distinction between less effective principals who would “pop into classrooms” and were “visible” in general terms to principals that were more effective (Louis et al., 2010, p. 90). The successful principals were intentional about their regular classroom visits. These principals would plan follow-up conversations to engage teachers about instructional issues. The conversations were transparent in purpose and often data driven, to create changes in the classrooms that resulted in the improvement of learning and achievement for all students (Louis et al.).

Additionally, research found that successful principals concentrated on achieving a few tangible and visible wins during their first year (Rhim et al., 2007). This was important, as it was motivating to others to continue changing. In addition, these early and obvious wins would often reduce resistance among staff. These successful leaders also built relationships among the staff and community to facilitate the influence of an expanding network of supporters for school turnaround changes (Steiner & Hassel, 2008).

Re-culturing or changing beliefs was a frequent action of the turnaround principal. Changing beliefs often changed staff behavior. Among the culture changes found in turnaround schools were an increased (a) belief that all children can learn, (b) value placed on teamwork and collaboration, and (c) commitment to data-driven decisions (Duke, 2006, p. 9).

Many turnaround principals were aware of leaders who seized troubled schools and directed actions from the top down. These directive principals would replace staff, established new rules, and firmly ruled all that happened in the school. However, few successful turnaround principals in one study followed this route; nearly all these principals believed that consensus building, rather than shake-up, was the best approach (Johnson, 2007).

Distributed leadership becomes crucial in turnaround schools. A principal cannot provide all the leadership actions required in a systemic process (Elmore, 2004). The turnaround principal must be effective in building “teacher leaders who can” align what is taught with what is tested, who can “monitor student progress”, and who can actively reinforce key school beliefs (Duke, 2006, p. 28). In addition, research indicates that distributed leadership influences student achievement more than individual leadership (Louis et al., 2010). To the surprise of some, research supports that principals do not lose influence as others gain it (Louis et al.).

Turnaround Components for the Principal's Actions

In the *Keys to Sustaining Successful School Turnarounds*, Duke (2006) identified additional turnaround components for the principal to address, including school policies, staffing, classroom practices, and facilities (p. 2).

School policies were targets for changes in turnaround schools. Some of the changes allowed for an increase in instructional time and “included adjustments to the school calendar and the daily schedule” (Duke, 2006, p. 10). The increase of instructional time was usually for mathematics and literacy instruction or for providing common planning time for staff.

According to Duke (2006, p.16), *organizational processes* were important to the turnaround process. The processes included the following:

1. Collaborative planning and intervention
2. Data sharing
3. Curriculum alignment
4. Quality control
5. Focused staff development

Successful turnaround principals consistently implemented these five organizational processes. Data and student achievement were no longer the private concern of the individual teacher, but through collaborative planning and communication, the entire school staff became involved in and responsible for all students' learning. The alignment of the curricula to what was tested



was a crucial process. Then, principals had to continually verify the effective delivery of the aligned curricula. If indicated, staff development opportunities, targeted to the teachers' needs, had to be identified and delivered in such a way as to ensure changes in instructional delivery were made in classrooms (Duke, 2006).

Staffing changes were a necessary action in many of the turnaround schools. In most cases, principals had to remove staff that could not raise student performance (Duke, 2006). Principals accomplished these staff changes by initiating transfers, counseling staff out of teaching, encouraging retirement, and recommending contract nonrenewal. Simultaneously, turnaround principals often created new positions, targeting an instructional focus with mathematics or reading specialists. These successful principals adjusted existing positions to increase student learning, which included having the strongest educators teaching the lowest performing students. Some principals also had these outstanding teachers remain with students for multiple school years, a practice known as looping (Association for Middle Level Education, 2009). There was also a drop or elimination of pullout programs, with federally funded and special education teachers working in the classrooms.

Classroom practices, especially those that affect student learning, may go untouched as a school implements many highly visible changes. One research conclusion was that to transform teaching, principals must increase a teacher's knowledge and skills (Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthey, 1996). Consequently, providing access to new learning becomes an action of the effective principal and includes the following:

- Focusing intensely on student learning and building meaningful relationships with all students;
 - Placing learning at the center of all change efforts;
 - Leading teacher learning;
 - Modeling professional learning; and
 - Building a culture of learning.
- (Psencik, 2011, p. 48)

In addition to a focus on a school's internal processes and factors, Fullan (2006) indicated three areas of change in the area of *parent and community engagement* that are common actions of turnaround principals: (a) improved communication, (b) parent involvement, and (c) community partnerships. He explained that the turnaround principal must include teachers in these outreach efforts. He also found that as teachers' capacity for building good parent and community relationships increases, the more they see parents and the community as part of the solution and not as part of the problem.

The school's physical environment is another area of concern for the turnaround principal. Well-maintained facilities that are used effectively can reinforce the achievement mission of the school. For example, repainting and cleaning a campus can generate the message of a new beginning and a new focus, and the appropriate use of physical space can increase academic focus. Turnaround principals can delegate space for student work displays that include examples of work that highlight increased learning, in contrast to displays that would only include highly rated papers (Duke, 2006).

Sustaining the Turnaround School

Even unsuccessful turnaround schools can produce some short-term improvements. Yet, too often, the school reverts to its old condition—achievement regresses, process improvements did not stick, and dysfunctional behaviors return. In short, the turnaround process did not change the core nature of the organization. Research suggests several key components to prevent this reversion to past ways and to increase the chances of sustainability in a turnaround school. One such component is the district's support and its alignment of systems to support the school, which could include providing data, assisting with staff transfers, and monitoring for the effective use of federal funds (Rhim et al., 2007).

Systemic change promotes sustainability in a turnaround school. However, manipulating a few components will not do the job. Research on turnaround schools indicates that principals made significant changes in programs, organization, staffing, classroom practices, and their parent and community engagement efforts. Most, but not all, turnaround schools in one study also made changes in policies and facilities (Duke, 2006).

Customization of turnaround changes is important in sustainability, since each turnaround school may be in a different phase in the process. In addition, the literature indicates that their community context varied as did their policies and state regulations. Due to these differences, it is not likely that one design for school turnaround would be appropriate for all schools (Duke, 2006).



In their case study, Duke and Landahl (2011, pp. 108–111) found that sustaining change through the third year could be even more challenging than the initial turnaround. Four themes identified in the unsuccessful Year 3 of one school included the following:

1. Continuing to make changes even when student learning is improving—although teachers were expressing their concern
2. Changing the way the turnaround process was led—creating new committees with teacher leaders
3. Considering trade-offs in the turnaround process—such as giving more time and support to reading and mathematics and not to social studies and science
4. Promoting team-based work—while not emphasizing the impact of individuals

School-Level Differences for Turnaround Leaders

Time for instructional leadership is severely constrained in secondary schools, as contrasted to elementary schools (Louis et al., 2010). Secondary leaders often rely on a multitiered framework and delegate instructional leadership to department chairs. Although principals were at least one step removed from being the instructional leader, most secondary principals still thought of themselves in that role. However, a “leadership deficit” was often identified in secondary schools; the authors found that department chairs provided no indication of instructional leadership.

In addition, secondary teachers stated that administrators observed them 1–2 times per year and did not provide feedback that affected their teaching process. The study found that high school staff was less likely to trust the principal, involve parents, and serve in distributed leadership roles (Louis et al., 2010).

Districts and secondary principals must consider their roles as instructional leaders carefully in light of the research. According to Louis and colleagues (2010), principals must arrange for time to have regular and meaningful conversations with teachers for instructional purposes. Furthermore, they indicate that the role of department chair should include a new emphasis on instructional leadership and most importantly, the principal must monitor, coach, and reinforce those delegated in the distributed leadership roles.

The positive consideration of these changes is that Valentine and Prater’s (2011) case study found that the leadership behaviors of high school principals could influence student achievement. Three transformational leadership factors in their study were most closely related to student achievement: (a) providing a model, (b) identifying a vision, and (c) fostering group goals (p. 23).

Essential Changes

As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, Duke’s (2006, pp. 26–27) turnaround school research identified 10 changes that were key to success and therefore essential to school transformation:

1. Collaboratively defined focus or mission
2. Collaboratively agreed-upon set of core beliefs, including the belief that all children can learn, an allegiance to teamwork and decisions based on data, and concentrated attention toward sharing responsibility and student learning
3. Shared leadership
4. Emphasis on literacy
5. Initiatives that provide extra learning time for students
6. Teams become the source for planning, analyzing student learning, aligning curricula, and implementing interventions
7. Data used in all decision making
8. Focused staff development
9. Frequent review of instructional content and assessment
10. Reformed efforts to engage parents and community members



Conclusion

The turnaround principal is a complexity of competencies and actions. However, with careful analysis of the research and recommended strategies, decision makers can identify and hire school leaders with the potential to turn around low-performing schools. Districts can then design support structures to develop and evaluate the principals' efficacy. Currently serving principals can engage in an analysis of their actions, and through deliberate and focused support, potentially increase their effectiveness in raising the achievement level of all students.

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