A LEARNING POINT

What Experience from the Field Tells Us About School Leadership and Turnaround

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The Time for Change Is Now

The issue of effective school leadership has been pushed front and center with the availability of Race to the Top funding for innovative state education plans and School Improvement Grants (SIG) to turn around the nation's lowest-performing schools. And that is exactly where the discussion needs to be if we have any hope of reviving our nation's weakest schools.

Until recently, conversations about improving educator effectiveness focused nearly exclusively on teachers. Although standards and policies to recruit, develop, and train teachers have existed in most states for years, many states do not have equivalent policies for school leaders. However, policy makers are now beginning to address the issue more directly. This increased collective attention to strengthening the skills of school leaders leads to three important questions:

- What actions do successful school leaders take?

- Do the lowest-performing schools require a specific set of leadership skills?

- How do district leaders and school staff support improvement to sustain improvement when an effective school leader leaves?

Setting a Course for Turnaround and Transformation

Year after year, the lowest-performing schools continue to struggle. Students do not master critical concepts and perform poorly on achievement tests. Many students fail to graduate altogether. We must set a course for turnaround and transformation if we are to help these chronically struggling schools and radically transform the education and skills students receive. Leaders of these schools face daunting challenges: Improving student achievement requires effective leadership to transform school climate and culture, increase the effectiveness of teachers and staff, enhance the curriculum, engage the community, and gain parental support and trust. What are the steps to identify and set a course toward successful turnaround and transformation?

Defining Leadership

Researchers studying school leadership have identified several leadership approaches. Although each approach varies slightly at the core, they all highlight the importance of engaging others beyond the principal and district leaders in the success of the school. As Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) describe:

> Neither superintendents nor principals can do the whole leadership task by themselves. Successful leaders develop and count on contributions from many others in their organizations. Principals typically count on key teachers for such leadership, along with their local administrative colleagues. In site-based management contexts, parent leaders are often crucial to the school's success. Superintendents rely for leadership on many central-office and school-based people, along with elected board members. Effective school and district leaders make savvy use of external assistance to enhance their influence (p. 7).

The recently released expansive study—six years in the making—titled *Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning* from the Wallace Foundation's Learning from Leadership project, found that high student achievement is linked to the combined influence of educators, parents, and others. Effective principals encourage others, according to the research results, to join in the decision-making process in their schools (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010).

The leader balances being directive and focused in setting a vision, aligning time and resources to foster effective teaching, and establishing high standards for student achievement with distributing some of this authority to teachers and others within the school and allowing shared decision making. Likewise, leaders must work closely with district leaders to affect change.

Fullan (2001) describes the specific steps school leaders need to take to sustain change. Fullan's five components of effective leadership are:

- **Moral purpose.** Leaders must act with the intention of making a positive difference in the lives of stakeholders.

- **Understanding change.** Leaders should have knowledge of and an appreciation for the change process.

- **Building relationships.** Leaders must continuously work to foster relationships with diverse stakeholders for solving problems.

- **Creating and sharing knowledge.** "Turning information into knowledge is a social process" (p. 6) for which strong relationships, moral purpose, and favorable dynamic are crucial.

- **Making coherence.** The complexity of change in today's society is riddled with ambiguity and even chaos. A leader should be able to embrace uncertainty as a means for fostering innovation but also seek coherence to effectively organize for change.

The Effective Turnaround Leader

The U.S. Department of Education, through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) has made $3 billion in School Improvement Grants (SIG) funds available to the bottom 5 percent of schools across the nation. The federal government did not distribute all of this money when it was approved in fiscal year 2009. The undistributed 2009 SIG funds and the 2010 appropriations were combined to create a pool of approximately $4.5 billion under Title I 1003(g). This is an unprecedented amount of money for school improvement, equal in size to the Race to the Top funding. States began distributing these funds at the start of the 2010–11 school year. Schools receiving SIG funds must implement one of the four intervention models—turnaround, transformation, restart, or closure—identified by the Education Department. In both the turnaround and transformation models, the school must replace the principal. The transformation model permits keeping a principal if the principal has been on staff for less than two years and has overseen improvements in student achievement.

Persistently low-performing schools pose a new set of challenges for their new leaders. The stakes are higher, and the performance curve is steeper. The majority of the students are performing below grade level, there is poor instructional focus, low faculty moral, and weak partnerships with parents, families, and the community.

The characteristics that likely will set apart the effective turnaround leader are superior instructional leadership, attention to the system, and the capacity to identify and leverage (at the right time) key points within the system to advocate for and deliver a well-aligned, well-articulated transformation plan. A turnaround school leader will need series of "quick wins" to demonstrate that the school is on the path to improvement and build momentum for change (Herman et al., 2008).

Moving Beyond the Story of a Single, *Hero* Leader

What we know about how to transform chronically low-performing schools is driven primarily by case study analysis. The information is engrossing but insufficient to develop fail-safe strategies that work outside any given individual situation and apply to districts across the country. And the information has an even deeper flaw. The available case studies often focus—with a near zealot-like fixation—on a single leader, typically the principal. Lambert et al. (2004) comment that the field has constructed a leader as a mythic hero— a charismatic individual capable of doing wondrous things—but a person whose skills are not necessary teachable.

Given high principal turnover rates, already troubled schools risk losing hard-won gains when they invest in one leader but fail to develop leadership within the building and across the system.

Transformational leadership focuses on changing the conditions that prevent improvement rather than blaming the staff within a school. This in turn changes the perceptions and attitudes of teachers to become more engaged and invested in the school. Therefore, leadership becomes a shared entity within the school and not designated to only one person. Research on transformational leadership states that, by fostering a collaborative culture of decision making, the teaching staff become more committed to the vision of the school and are self-motivated to work toward the goals because they are invested in them, rather than being merely directed to achieve them (Hallinger, 2003).

Since the 1980s, a body of literature has emerged on instructional leadership that distinguishes between a school leader who focuses on managerial tasks and one who focuses on instruction. The latter type of leadership is a more desired model for school transformation. An instructional leader seeks to directly influence the curriculum and pedagogical methods of a school by setting goals and supervising teaching and learning. In the 1990s, trends in educational research began shifting toward more organizational models of leadership. It was then that the transformational leadership research emerged. Transformational leadership research shifted the role of the leader from an authoritative instructional supervisor to one who cultivates a collaborative culture of shared leadership focused around the schoolwide goal to improve the quality of instruction and support student learning.

Principal Leadership for a Turnaround School: A Ground-Floor View

Donna Warthan has been a principal for 13 years at three different schools. The 2010–11 school year finds her opening a brand new school called Hunter B. Andrews PK–8 in Hampton, Virginia. Hunter B. Andrews is not opening due to restart or closure as part of selecting a school turnaround model. Instead, the school is opening as a result of the district's decision to close an old, crumbling building and invest in a new school. Students attending Hunter B. Andrews come from previously low-performing schools in a low-income area of the city. Principal Warthan has the opportunity to start fresh, to build a professional learning culture and school climate with a new staff. She started working with her staff this past summer, and now the school has begun to chart a new vision and mission for student success that capitalizes on the resources and assets available in the school and community. Warthan's previous experience as a turnaround principal gives her insight into the key structural and cultural pieces that must be in place for this school to start off with success.

Warthan encourages teachers to hold open dialogues about student learning. She seeks to create a climate in which teachers feel comfortable to discuss data by talking about what is working and what is not. She said she especially likes how a more inclusive leadership model can make those conversations richer, more purposeful, and meaningful. Her teachers meet by grade level, with Warthan and her instructional leadership team in attendance, to assess and analyze student data using data walls. Grade levels bring benchmark results, by teacher, with student data printed on labels. Teachers post the data by score bands, with instructional leaders present to work with the team to analyze and to determine the next steps for improvement. The school has found this process so effective that they will be implementing the Data Meeting at the four-week mark and at the end of the nine-week grading period instead of at the end of every grading period.

Warthan includes the community by hosting Community Priority Workshops in which business leaders, community members, and students come together to identify the top three priorities for the school. She shared that these workshops give her a different perspective for the school and help her to understand perceptions of the community. She also hosts a Principal Advisory Group composed of all students; this group gives her a student voice to help improve the school climate and culture.

Warthan systematically applies a distributed leadership approach in which she expects and empowers her staff to act as leaders in the school. The benefits of a distributed leadership approach, she said, far outweigh anything else. She shared that, during her first six years as a principal, she thought she had to do it all and nearly burned herself out of the job. Warthan said she realized she needed to change her leadership style when she began contemplating quitting and working anywhere other than a school. She learned while working as a turnaround principal at her second school, Tarrant Elementary, that a leader can exercise a more inclusive, distributed leadership style while maintaining a set of nonnegotiables. This style provides latitude for teacher professional judgment to impact student learning. Warthan stated that exercising a distributed leadership approach has taken a huge pressure off her shoulders. "You don't have to know everything or be an expert in everything," she said. "When you grow your own school experts, you will get the best advice and guidance from them."

In the model that fosters strong leadership with shared decision making, the leader is courageous about making quick and bold actions. For example, an effective principal may decide to eliminate the beloved choir program so that students can receive an additional hour of reading instruction. This decision will certainly upset some parents and others in the community. Another example may be the principal's decision to alter the school schedule midyear to give certain teachers time to work with a cluster of struggling students.

Courageous leaders also are flexible enough to welcome and embrace amorphous leadership arrangements within the school (Murphy, 2008). The innovative decisions made by teachers at the Animo Pat Brown Charter High School in Los Angeles provide a good example. The ninth graders coming into the school began with a 1 percent proficiency rate in mathematics. The teachers came to the school leaders with radical ideas to help their students with their mathematics skills. The ideas suggested by the teachers included integrating mathematics into every subject so that during the day, the students are presented with the same mathematics problem multiple times. The teachers made another bold request: to completely get rid of biology and replace it with physics because a primary requisite of physics is algebra. In this way, the students receive their science instruction while strengthening their mathematics skills. The school leadership allowed these initiatives, and in the first year of implementation, the mathematics proficiency rate of the students increased to 46 percent. As the school leader asserted, "We listened to the teachers. We allowed them to lead. We supported them" (Edutopia, 2009).

Transforming School Climate

Research conducted by Learning Point Associates, an affiliate of American Institutes for Research, indicates that teachers want principals willing to improve the effectiveness of teaching in their schools. The 2009 *Retaining Teacher Talent* study from Learning Point Associates and Public Agenda found that 38 percent of surveyed teachers who stated they intended to leave the profession definitely would change their minds if they worked with a principal who helped teachers improve their effectiveness. An additional 29 percent of surveyed teachers who stated they intended to leave the profession said a supportive principal might change their minds and keep them from leaving.

Changing the school climate to gradually embrace and practice a model of shared leadership takes time. However, the task of transforming our nation's lowest-performing schools provides a ripe opportunity to put this evidence-based strategy into practice. The principal has to establish an environment of high standards, foster the belief that all students can achieve, and impel everyone in the school to share the responsibility for achievement. Transforming the school climate is an essential element in improving schools that serve a high-minority, high-poverty, and high-special-education population (Herman et al., 2008).

School Transformation Requires District Support

Schools in crisis need support to build school-based capacity to permanently transform their learning culture and work conditions. The district can play an important role in developing a critical mass of high-performing teacher teams, school leadership teams, and networks of schools that contribute to capacity building and, expectedly, sustainability. In Virginia, the University of Virginia's two-year School Turnaround Specialist Program (UVA-STSP) draws upon graduate school training in both UVA's education and business schools to tackle the challenges of school turnaround. Whole districts must apply and then select a seven-member team—the participating principal, a three-person district support team, and a three-person school leadership team— to complete the program.

Data from 25 schools in the three cohorts that completed the UVA-STSP between 2004 and 2008 show:

- "Approximately 60 percent of schools demonstrated at least a 10 percent boost in reading proficiency;

- "53 percent of schools demonstrated at least a 10 percent boost in mathematics proficiency; and

- "Schools led by UVA-STSP principals demonstrated AYP [adequate yearly progress] at a greater rate than their peers in comparable schools" (University of Virginia School Turnaround Specialist Program, 2008, p. 1).

If the UVA-STSP data are any indication, school transformation requires district support, and successful programs know this. Much more research is needed to confirm what appears to be a positive, synergistic effect of district and school partnership (as opposed to the school working in isolation) to support school transformation.

Transforming District Leadership

School-level leadership is most productive when couched within a supportive and consistent district-level leadership that sets the vision and expectations but is willing to step back and take the risk of allowing the principal of the school to lead with some autonomy. School-level leadership necessitates district leadership

that not only allows a certain amount of autonomy and flexibility over school operations and instruction but also provides the necessary structures of support for each individual school that is being transformed. At the same time, evidence exists to verify the value of a district-led focus on a vision, standards alignment, and accountability (Herman et al., 2008). To summarize, focused vision, guidance, and support from district leadership are imperative.

One of the first steps a district can take to support the turnaround of a low-performing school is to recognize that the equal distribution of resources across schools will never yield turnaround success. Persistently low-performing schools need more support—often fiscal, certainly human. This requires that district leaders assess the needs of individual schools within the district, prioritize, and then realign resources to support the weakest schools.

The New Orleans School District represents the kind of district support required for successful turnaround. New Orleans recognizes that turnaround mandates a new way of doing business. Before Hurricane Katrina, plans were in place to move the New Orleans Public Schools, which were "ranked 67th out of 68 Louisiana parishes in student achievement" (Perry & Schwam-Baird, 2010), under an umbrella agency called the Recovery School District (RSD). Following the storm, the RSD assumed near complete authority to reopen and run the schools. Each school has shown an average eight-point gain in School Performance Scores during the past three years (Pastorek & Vallas, 2010).

In September 2010, the RSD superintendent and state superintendent presented a recommendations plan for the New Orleans Public Schools to the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. They recommended that the schools remain under the jurisdiction of the RSD for another five years. Schools meeting specific benchmarks may choose to remain under the RSD or return to local control after two years. For those schools that elect to leave the RSD, the plan articulates an approach to ensure continued success. This approach is informed by the lessons implemented and learned in the course of transformation, which include the following (Pastorek & Vallas, 2010, pp. 6–7):

- "***Protect School Autonomy.*** Establish policies that protect schools' autonomy over their educational program, staffing, finance, and operations in order to support continued innovation and performance (i.e., a clear, well-crafted performance contract that legally binds the district and school board to grant the schoolwide authority; and that authority cannot be rescinded or amended except in specified cases of nonperformance or severe noncompliance).

- "***Set Clear, Ambitious, and Attainable Performance Expectations.*** Create systems to define clear, ambitious, and measurable goals for each school (including student-learning goals and those related to finance and operations); monitor their performance and compliance; reward positive performance; and hold schools strictly accountable for nonperformance. Where necessary, develop a rigorous process to make intervention, renewal (in the case of charters), or closure decisions with solid evidence.

- "***Tailor Voluntary Support to Returning Schools.*** Tailor voluntary support to schools in areas of weakness, while not mandating acceptance (e.g., create direct, personal relationships between individual central office administrators and school principals specifically focused on helping every principal become a stronger instructional leader). This support can come directly or through the use of third-party intermediaries (e.g., New Schools for New Orleans).

- "***Ensure Funding Follows Each Child.*** Implement mechanisms in which dollars (including local, state, federal, and other revenue streams) are tied to students, ensuring that funds are allocated by the leader of the school for specific student needs and only a limited and narrowly defined set of funds are retained by the governing entity.

- "***Assure Balance.*** Promote coordination and economies of scale where appropriate without impeding on the school's autonomy. Assure that schools are treated equitably in terms of enrollment, facilities, funds, and other services."

Incorporating Distributed Leadership at the District Level

The concept of leadership with "multiple sources," in which leadership authority does not lie with one single individual but can be transferred to others, can apply to teachers, parents and community members, and district leadership (Hallinger, 2003). Assigning elements of shared leadership to the relationship between districts and schools has shown to have benefits in creating a collaborative relationship between district and school leaders and, in turn, transforming schools. Although certain goals, standards, and assessments can be determined at the district level, removing the top-down approach in supporting schools to meet the goals and standards can promote the same type of self-motivation and autonomy on the part of schools. Therefore, we propose that the distributed, inclusive leadership model also can be applied at the district level.

The Southern Regional Education Board (2009) surveyed school principals in both high- and low-performing schools regarding the relationship between the district office and the school leadership. They found a more collaborative relationship existed for the principals in high-performing schools; the school principal was allowed more flexibility and control over decisions made for the school. Yet, the district office's responsibilities to these schools also expanded. In other words, in high-performing schools, the district office gave up some control but also took on more tasks to support their schools. In the low-performing schools, the principals complained of a very centralized district office; the school principals felt the district did not empower or develop their leadership capacity.

New York's Children First Reform Initiative under Chancellor Joel Klein illustrates the effectiveness of district offices empowering schools through increased autonomy. The Children First Reform Initiative created autonomy zones. Principals from these zones have reported that the initiative allowed them to make better use of their time and resulted in network meetings that were far more productive than the regional meetings they formerly attended. In addition, these schools have more discretion over budgeting, hiring, and curriculum choices (New York City Department of Education, 2010). Although it is unclear whether there are other mitigating factors influencing student performance, there appears to be a correlation between flexible yet accountable leadership at the school level and focused support at the district level.

The district can support schools in many ways. Research shows that the strength of successful districts lies in a consistent alignment of state standards to the curriculum and assessments. In addition, these districts share with schools their vision and philosophy, and they aim to align their achievement efforts with their vision. In this way, they are creating coherence, which is useful especially in districts with high intra-district mobility and also for long-term sustainability of improvement efforts (Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2009a, 2009b).

Action Opportunities to Support School Transformation

With so many of our nation's schools labeled as chronically low performing, an overhaul in the quality and approach of school and district leadership is necessary to transform the schools. States and districts can borrow from two decades of research on transformational leadership combined with best practices of today, which show how a more inclusive, strategic approach to leadership can move schools toward improvements. And even though much more rigorous, evidence-based research needs to be done, district and school leaders should consider the following action opportunities to develop school and districtwide policies to support school transformation:

- **Replace an army of one with a platoon of many.** Building leadership capacity requires that multiple stakeholders be engaged in the work and decision making of school transformation. The school leader should seek greater engagement among building stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and students in the development of school goals and objectives. District and school leaders should set clear goals and expectations for increasing student achievement; lead the alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; ensure that time and resources are maximized to support instructional improvement; and then provide principals at the building level and teachers at the classroom level with flexibility and autonomy to meet their goals given their school or classroom context. District and school leaders also may develop partnerships with external organizations that will support the implementation of the transformation plan. Shared leadership and strategic delegation can help ensure that instructional and cultural goals for transformation are implemented while efficient management of day-to-day school operations continues without either suffering due to limited leadership capacity.

- **The leader must operate as a strategic thinker.** The school principal must continually examine school turnaround from a systems perspective. The principal must focus on instructional improvement at the school level (integrate data analysis for instructional improvement into the day-to-day practice among faculty), ensure quick wins to build momentum and signal to the school community that the school is on a course for improvement, and mobilize and leverage resources across the system to meet the school's needs (Herman et al., 2008).

- **District leadership must embrace inequitable distribution of resources to support the weakest schools.** District leaders must be in tune with and supportive of the needs of turnaround schools. This necessitates frank discussion about priorities and the realignment and distribution of fiscal and human resources. District leadership must be able to speak with one voice about its decision-making criteria and be able to design and implement a no-holds-barred transformation plan.

- **Apply knowledge gained from leadership and instruction research to support transformation.** The research consistently shows that instruction and leadership are central to school transformation. Hence, teachers must be given adequate opportunities to fully contribute to the transformation plan. They also must be empowered to voice their needs to implement the plan. This results from a systemwide investment in transformation efforts. Research indicates that the practices described in this paper can provide significant return on investment. The trade-off is that, with resources in place, open lines of communication, and a healthy work environment, teachers must agree to take instruction and learning to the highest levels for all students. Again, the evidence on how to build strong learning communities is not new, only underutilized in too many schools. We know that teachers need multiple and routine opportunities to engage in high-quality, intensive, and sustained professional development that apply data, formative assessments, and research-based practice to improve instruction. Given these tools and conditions, teaching professionals are highly equipped to stamp out chronic low performance.

Conclusion

The research bears out that successful school transformation is characterized by strong school leaders who achieve dramatic results by intensely focusing all available resources on improving student learning. Until now, we have not seen such singular focus across the system (federal, state, and local) on the twin components of school transformation: leadership and instruction. The federal investment in turning around chronically low-performing schools signals a commitment to give states, struggling districts, and schools the funding support to reinvent models for building effective leadership and instructional capacity. States and districts, in turn, are urged to marshal all available resources (e.g., time, funding, and human capital) at the district and school levels to support the transformation of our most distressed schools. This mission-driven approach is supported by district leaders and involves teachers in focused, sustained, data-driven, and collaborative work that engages all parties in the school's mission to improve student achievement.

It takes a skilled leader to be able to walk the tightrope of balancing authority with shared leadership. More importantly, school and district leaders must be able to transform processes, practices, and procedures to sustain the vision of high standards for student achievement in a supportive climate long after the leaders are gone. Truly successful leadership is measured by the endurance of improvement efforts. When an inclusive, strategic leadership approach is practiced at both the district and school levels, the possibilities of wide-scale improvements and sustained student achievement are attainable.

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