Making Sense of School Turnarounds

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Today, in a sector flooded with $3.5 billion in School Improvement Grant funds and the resulting improvement plans, there's great faith that "turnaround" strategies are a promising way to tackle stubborn problems with persistently low-performing schools. Unlike traditional reform efforts, with their emphasis on incremental improvement, turnarounds seek to take schools from bad to great within a short period. It's hard not to root for these efforts. Yet while turnarounds are an appealing idea, making them work is far more complicated.

For all the enthusiasm, I've been consistently underwhelmed by the coherence or historical literacy of the would-be turnarounders. While billions in cash and a new catchphrase—the term "turnaround" (can't you just feel the power?)—can thrill, it's fairly clear that no one actually knows what to do. More to the point, it's clear they've mostly ignored what we've learned from previous go-rounds.

Consider WestEd's big 2011 final evaluation of the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program (CSRD), "**Avoiding Déjà Vu: Lessons from the Federal Comprehensive School Reform Program for the Current School Turnaround Agenda**." First enacted in 1998, and wrapped into No Child Left Behind, CSRD required low-performing schools to implement eleven "school reform" components in return for federal funds. The eleven entailed: proven methods and strategies; comprehensive design; professional development; measurable goals; support from staff members; support for staff members; parent and community involvement; external assistance; evaluation; coordination of resources; and scientifically based research. Good stuff, right? Thoughtful, based on careful research, backed by new funding, yada yada.

The results? Dismal. While "states receiving CSR funds largely succeeded in passing them along to those schools most in need" (whoopee!!!), it was also the case that "schools receiving CSR awards made little progress in implementing...the 11 mandated components." Astonishingly, CSR schools were actually *less* likely to implement the various CSR elements than were matched comparison schools. A CSR award was not associated with improvements in math or reading. Five years in, achievement in CSR schools was no larger than that in matched comparison schools. Indeed, just 12 of 262 CSR schools made "significant improvements in reading and mathematics over the next two years."

These findings followed nearly a decade of policymaker frustration with the disappointing track record of No Child Left Behind's "remedy cascade." Public choice, supplemental services, corrective action plans, and reconstitution have all been implemented limply and to little effect. For a collection of terrific analyses on this count, check out the volume *No Remedy Left Behind* that Checker Finn and I edited a couple years back.

Turnarounds in Business

More useful may be looking outside of schooling. After all, the phrase "turnaround" may be relatively new to education, but the practice has been around for decades in other sectors. Its track record suggests a need for tempered claims and steely-eyed realism. Even in the business world, where management enjoys many more degrees of freedom and where competition can lend a sense of profound urgency, turnarounds are an iffy proposition.

Today, much of what experts know about turnarounds comes from private sector experience, where two dominant approaches to organizational reform—Total Quality Management and Business

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Process Reengineering—have prevailed for decades.

First introduced by Japanese firms in 1951, Total Quality Management is a turnaround strategy that emphasizes carrying out all jobs and practices correctly the first time. It treats workers as integral parts of a line and seeks to remove waste at every stage of the production process. Dishearteningly, research suggests that Total Quality Management has been largely ineffective at spurring successful corporate transformation.

Business Process Reengineering, developed in 1990 by Michael Hammer and James Champy, takes a slightly more aggressive tack. It differs from Total Quality Management in that it concentrates on tearing down and rebuilding the business process as a whole, rather than tweaking its functional tasks. Business Process Reengineering typically involves radical change or, to use Hammer's colorful language, "taking an axe and a machine gun to your existing organization."

Evidence suggests, on the whole, that Business Process Reengineering has fared about the same as Total Quality Management in spurring organizational improvement, with success rates of 25 to 30 percent.

Expanding on such findings, Barry Staw and Lisa Epstein of the University of California-Berkeley examined the outcomes of popular management techniques instituted at 100 of the largest U.S. corporations. Using informational reports on quality, empowerment, teams, and the implementation of Total Quality Management programs, they found that companies undergoing turnaround initiatives were perceived to be more innovative but showed no evidence of boosting economic performance. The researchers suggest these results provide grounds for taking a more skeptical stance toward turnarounds.

Four Key Lessons
All of this is not cause for undue gloom—just for sensible reassessment. Turnarounds can be a valuable tool for improving underperforming schools. However, the hope that we can systematically turn around all troubled schools—or even a majority of them—is at odds with much of

what we know from private sector efforts.

This is why it makes sense to look outside education to learn how to improve the odds of staging a successful turnaround. In a comprehensive search of business and management literature from 2000 to the present, we identified roughly a dozen articles that provided empirical analysis of major turnaround initiatives—namely, Total Quality Management and Business Process Reengineering. Our research suggests that experiences in the private sector offer four key lessons for making turnarounds work:

- Staging a successful turnaround entails setting high expectations and then being flexible with regard to how principals, teachers, and staff go about meeting them. Successful turnarounds are most likely where districts unravel bureaucratic constraints and permit educators great freedom in solving problems. This includes the ability to hold employees accountable within an accelerated time frame and allocate resources swiftly and optimally with few external restrictions.

- Reformers should not hesitate to change principals and school leaders to jump-start the turnaround process. Some researchers have estimated that leadership disparities may explain almost a quarter of differences in student performance accounted for by schools. In a turnaround situation, despite the K-12 preference for professional development rather than termination, new leadership can yield both symbolic and substantive benefits. It also can convey a commitment to wholesale change and provide a leader with the skill set appropriate to the particular challenges at hand.

- Reformers need to view school turnarounds as an all-or-nothing proposition to avoid the pitfalls caused by unclear or conflicting objectives. To achieve success, they must be willing to invest the time and resources required to implement comprehensive measures. Turnarounds are not a time to cherry-pick the more popular or painless

components of reform or pursue them incrementally. Unless leaders, staff, and personnel are deeply and irrevocably committed to making a turnaround work, school reform efforts are likely to fail. "Schools must create a culture in which employees have two options: We either turn it around or we lose our jobs," says John Lock, a former private investor who now works with Boston's MATCH school. "Sometimes, burning the employee manual, making everyone reapply for their jobs, and then axing those structures that created the problem is the only way to convey that you're serious."

- Finally, once the decision is made to go forward with a turnaround, reformers should avoid forcing change on the school through organization-wide, top-down mandates. Instead, they should establish high goals for individual teachers and staff, while giving them the tools and flexibility they need to be successful. Based on our research, turnarounds require each individual employee to commit to their role. Teachers and staff cannot be content merely to take marching orders from administrators but must be ready, willing, and trained to drive the educational innovations that make a turnaround possible.

Where to Go from Here

A vast number of states and districts need expert assistance to fix their troubled schools. Most lack such skill capacity. This is not just an education problem, of course. Yet there's no sector—public or private—in which thousands of entities are each capable of assembling the know-how, talent, and organizational machinery to turn around troubled operations. Instead, such capabilities tend to be concentrated in a handful of organizations such as turnaround specialists and niche consultants.

If revitalizing low-performing schools is to occur with any consistency, we need to develop effective operators who can contract with multiple districts or states to provide the oversight, leadership, knowledge, and personnel to drive restructuring. Operating on that scale will permit specialization

and cooperation, while allowing providers to build deep expertise.

In schools or private firms, a successful turnaround requires transforming culture, expectations, and routines. That may not always be possible in organizations burdened by anachronistic contract provisions, rickety external support, and years of accrued administrative incompetence.

"While turnarounds are difficult in the private sector, they may be even more challenging in schools," Bryan Hassel, co-director of Public Impact, argues in his 2005 report, *Turnarounds with New Leaders and Staff*. "[No] factors are complete barriers to success, but they indicate a high bar for the district and school leaders effecting turnarounds."

When it comes to today's turnaround push, there's plenty of cause for concern. There's little reason to think that chartering these schools works, and charter operators aren't all that eager to take them on. The SIG transformation model looks to me a whole lot like CSR or corrective models that have never racked up much success. As for the "fire half of 'em" turnaround model, I'll just note that firing half your employees usually isn't a one-time solution. Most well-run outfits, private or public, don't fire half their folks in one big bonfire, replace them, and then enjoy a miraculous transformation. Rather, weeding out mediocrity is a natural, sustained part of how they manage their team. And school closure is swell if we think there's plenty of room at terrific schools to absorb these kids. Unfortunately, most of the targeted schools aren't in areas flush with terrific, under-capacity alternatives.

There are absolutely a bunch of awful schools out there that need to do better. The trick is that not every problem in the world is susceptible to a policy solution. When it comes to something like school improvement, something that's a matter of practice, fidelity of implementation, and on-the-ground commitment, the frustrating fact is that federal policymakers can't really do much. What can they do? They can provide data and transparency, research and evaluation, and political cover that permits local leaders to act, and they can scour their books to strike rules that hamstring hard-charging

principals and superintendents. But that may be it. As much as federal officials would like to do more, it may well be that dramatically improving lousy schools is simply beyond the purview of folks sitting in DC office buildings, no matter how smart and well-intentioned.

Ultimately, sometimes the best bet is allowing a failing concern to go dark. This may require shutting down a school, moving out administrators, faculty, and curricula, and "vacuum-sealing" it before allowing an accomplished operator to start fresh. Meanwhile, new organizations—freed from a rigid mentality about how things should be done—can crop up, more easily take advantage of new opportunities, and more nimbly tackle looming challenges.