

Turnaround Leadership

How to Identify Successful School Leaders

A turnaround is a quick, dramatic, sustained change in the performance of an organization. Although teachers are the single most important school-based factor in student learning, in low-performing schools, the principal's role is paramount for dramatically improving student performance. Turnarounds do not happen without bold leadership. Bold leaders are necessary to take steps such as replacing ineffective teachers, lengthening school days, setting a high bar for achievement and attendance, or changing a curriculum that may be popular among staff, while at the same time garnering community and district leadership support.

How can districts and States find, develop and support these bold leaders? Several Race to the Top States are implementing new strategies for identifying and training turnaround leadership.

Selecting and Supporting the Right Principals for School Turnaround

Ideally, districts seeking to turn around their lowest performing schools could choose from a pool of proven turnaround leaders—principals who have already led low-performing schools to success. Current practices for choosing school leaders typically rely on degrees obtained, traditional career ladder years of service, or a history of success leading schools. This approach does not always produce a large enough candidate pool and it can be difficult to find qualified principals who are willing to move to a new location and take on an enormous challenge that carries a high risk of failure. Moreover, these principals may not have the characteristics necessary to lead a turnaround.

Key Actions of Successful Turnaround Leaders

Initial Analysis and Problem Solving

- Collect and analyze data
- Make action plan based on data

Driving for Results

- Focus on a few early wins in Year 1
- Break organizational norms
- Require all staff to change
- Make necessary staff replacements
- Focus on successful tactics; halt others
- Resist touting progress as ultimate success

Influencing Inside and Outside the Organization

- Communicate a positive vision
- Help staff personally feel problems
- Gain support of key influencers
- Silence critics with speedy success

Measuring, Reporting and Improving

- Measure and report progress frequently
- Require decision-makers to share data and solve problems

Consistent Actions Lead to Success

Cross-sector research on successful turnarounds shows that leaders who bring about dramatic gains in student achievement consistently take some combination of 14 actions within four general categories:¹

- Initial analysis and problem solving
- Driving for results
- Influencing inside and outside the organization
- Measuring, reporting and improving

These actions lead to a continuous cycle of planning based on data, implementing plans through effective communication and visionary leadership, monitoring to ensure actions are getting the desired results, and changing approaches as necessary.

Of these actions, the ones most consistently related to successful turnarounds involve breaking organizational norms and or discarding rules and routines that inhibit success. For example, turnaround leaders may set a significantly higher bar for student academic achievement or disciplinary standards than their predecessors. To reach these higher goals, leaders may shake up staff routines by holding teachers accountable to clear standards for performance, sharing classroom performance data publicly, or conducting frequent classroom observations. Changing structures—like the length of school day or year—can also provide room in the schedule for innovation to take place. But rather than changing everything at once, effective turnaround leaders focus on a few critical actions that will achieve dramatic, early results in key areas. Early wins show that success is possible and build momentum for further reforms.

Finding the Right Candidates: The Behavioral Event Interview

Traditional principal training often emphasizes meeting district requirements and following standard protocols, producing principals who often assume that

¹ Public Impact. (2007). *School turnarounds: A review of the cross-sector evidence on dramatic organizational improvement*. Lincoln, IL: Center on Innovation and Improvement. Available: <http://www.centerii.org/survey/downloads/Turnarounds-Color.pdf>

Competencies for Turnaround Success

Driving for Results

- ☑ **Achievement:** The drive and actions to set challenging goals and reach a high standard of performance despite barriers.
- ☑ **Initiative and Persistence:** The drive and actions to do more than is expected or required in order to accomplish a challenging task.
- ☑ **Monitoring and Directiveness:** The ability to set clear expectations and to hold others accountable.
- ☑ **Planning Ahead:** A bias toward planning to derive benefits or avoid problems.

Influencing for Results

- ☑ **Impact and Influence:** Acting with the purpose of affecting the perceptions, thinking and actions of others.
- ☑ **Team Leadership:** Assuming authoritative leadership of a group to benefit the organization.
- ☑ **Developing Others:** Influence with the specific intent to increase the short- and long-term effectiveness of another person.

Problem-Solving

- ☑ **Analytical Thinking:** The ability to break things down in a logical way and to recognize cause and effect.
- ☑ **Conceptual Thinking:** The ability to see patterns among seemingly unrelated things.

Showing Confidence to Lead

- ☑ **Self-Confidence:** A personal belief in one's ability to accomplish tasks and the actions that reflect that belief.

restrictions exist, even when they do not.² Successful turnaround leaders, to the contrary, often need to break organizational norms because the way things have always been done has not achieved results. An alternative to traditional sources of effective principals is finding individuals who have led organizational turnarounds in other sectors.³

The largest source of turnaround leaders, however, is the pool of individuals who are likely to take key turnaround actions but who have not yet had the opportunity to lead a turnaround. To find candidates with the characteristics to lead a turnaround, districts can look for individuals with the competencies—or patterns of thinking, feeling, acting or speaking—that turnaround leaders may need to take the strategic actions. These competencies can be measured through a specific type of job interview called a “behavioral event interview” (BEI). A BEI allows interviewers to rate the strength of the candidate’s specific competencies. Turnaround principals likely need strength in a combination of leadership competencies within four clusters that predict whether a turnaround leader will be successful in taking some combination of the 14 key leadership actions:⁴

- Driving for Results – the turnaround leader’s strong desire to achieve outstanding results and the task-oriented actions required for success.
- Influencing for Results – motivating others and influencing their thinking and behavior to obtain results. Turnaround leaders cannot accomplish change alone; they must rely on the work of others.
- Problem-Solving – including analysis of data to inform decisions, making clear and logical plans that people can follow, and ensuring a strong connection between school learning goals and classroom activity.

² Hess, F. M. (2009, October). Cages of their own design. *Educational Leadership*. Available: <http://www.aei.org/files/2004/07/02/24118.pdf>

³ Kowal, J. & Hassel, E. A. . (2011). *Importing leaders for school turnarounds: Lessons and opportunities*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Partnership for Leaders in Education. Available: http://www.darden.virginia.edu/web/uploadedFiles/Darden/Darden_Curry_PLE/UVA_School_Turnaround/Importing_Leaders_for_School_Turnarounds.PDF

⁴ Public Impact. (2008). *School turnaround leaders: Competencies for success*. Information about competency-based selection is available at <http://publicimpact.com/teachers-leaders/competencies-of-high-performers>

- Showing Confidence to Lead – staying visibly focused, committed, and self-assured despite personal and professional attacks that are common during turnarounds. This competency underlies the accomplishment of any turnaround leader action.

Together, these crosscutting clusters encompass the characteristics of individuals who can be successful in taking the 14 turnaround leader actions.

BEIs give candidates an opportunity to describe the actions that they have taken in the past, which are the best indicator of the types of actions they will take in the future. Conducting a BEI may help districts identify principals who are the best fit for the turnaround role. Several States have provided districts with training in the use of BEI. For example, through direct technical assistance and best practices conferences, **Georgia’s** Office of School Transformation is training local educational agency (LEA) staff in the use of BEI. **Rhode Island** is also providing districts with tools to identify turnaround leaders using BEI.

Training Turnaround Leadership

Using the latest research on successful school turnaround leadership, the **University of Virginia (UVA)** has developed a two-year School Turnaround Specialist program. The program works with teams of district and school staff to build the internal capacity necessary to support and sustain effective school turnarounds. Faculty from UVA’s business and education schools provide executive-level training to district teams, supporting them in identifying key problem areas and developing strategies specific to their unique set of circumstances. Over the two years of the program, ongoing support, resources and tools are provided for the district teams.

Tennessee’s Achievement School District (ASD), composed of low-performing schools from across the State, is working with UVA to train its personnel. UVA faculty worked with the ASD on site to facilitate the principal interview process and assist ASD staff in evaluating candidates using the rubric developed by Public Impact. The three principals of schools that will be directly run by the ASD will attend a weeklong

training, and UVA coaches will continue to work with them for three years to develop and implement turnaround plans for the schools.

Florida is expanding its efforts under Race to the Top to develop an intensive leadership pipeline for aspiring turnaround principals and assistant principals and is working with the Southern Regional Education Board to implement a program based on UVA's school turnaround curriculum. The primary objective of this initiative is to create a pool of the most promising candidates who can turn around low-performing schools through an innovative, problem solving-based program of study. The program is working with five LEAs to recruit and train a minimum of 80 to 100 aspiring principals and assistant principals and 20 charter school candidates to serve in the State's persistently lowest achieving schools, including charter schools and their feeder schools.

New Leaders is developing a program that provides district leadership with tools to identify successful principal candidates. During the 2010-2011 school year, New Leaders worked with Washington, D.C., Public Schools; Memphis City Schools; and Friendship Public Charter Schools nationwide. Among the goals of the leadership development services are improving the selection and ongoing development of effective principals by principal managers, strengthening principal evaluation and supervision methodologies, and increasing retention of talented leaders. See <http://www.newleaders.org/what-we-do/leadership-development-services/>.

Supporting Turnaround Leader Success

Finding the right candidates to lead schools is the first step to turnaround success, but districts and States can also support school turnarounds by creating environments conducive to dramatic change.

Although turnaround principals often find ways to work through the challenges they face, districts can support these leaders in ways that allow principals to focus their energy on getting big, fast wins that build momentum for further change.⁵ Turnaround leaders who have district leadership support—sometimes called “the big yes”—know the superintendent and board support dramatic change and are prepared for the fallout that can initially result when parents and students, teachers or the community resist changes.⁶ Turnaround interventions require much of everyone involved in a particular school, and change can be difficult when, for example, children have to be in school longer, are held back, or otherwise face significant academic challenges. District support can take the form of waivers from some existing policies that might inhibit change, or could include extending staffing, budgeting and operational autonomies to turnaround principals. Districts can support turnarounds, and turnaround leaders, by communicating to families and community members that they are committed to dramatic improvements despite challenges that might arise.

Conclusion

Successful turnaround leaders take certain bold actions, enabling them to set high expectations for increasing student achievement that lead to dramatic gains. Finding the right principals who will take these actions in low-performing schools is difficult, but not impossible. Through a behavioral event interview, districts can identify candidates who have the right blend of competencies, or characteristics, that increase their chances for turnaround success—whether those candidates are seasoned school leaders or new to the profession.

⁵ Kowal, J., Hassel, E. A., & Hassel, B. H. (2009, September 15). *Successful school turnarounds: Seven steps for district leaders*. Washington, DC: The Center for Comprehensive Reform and Improvement. Available: <http://www.centerforcsri.org/files/CenterIssueBriefSept09.pdf>

⁶ Hassel, E. A., & Hassel, B. H. (2009, Winter). *The big u-turn: How to bring schools from the brink of doom to stellar success*. Available: <http://educationnext.org/the-big-uturn/>

Practical Resources to Help Identify School Turnaround Leaders

School turnaround leaders: Competencies for success

http://publicimpact.com/images/stories/publicimpact/documents/Turnaround_Leader_Competencies.pdf

This guide provides leader competency definitions, school examples, and detailed levels of increasingly effective competence.

School turnaround leaders: Selection toolkit

http://publicimpact.com/images/stories/publicimpact/documents/Turnaround_Leader_Selection_Toolkit.pdf

Public Impact has developed a companion toolkit that is a step-by-step guide for districts and other organizations seeking to hire turnaround principals or teachers. The toolkit features detailed levels of increasingly effective competence, selection questions, guidance on how to conduct interviews that reveal information about competencies, and scoring rubrics.

Using competencies to improve school turnaround principal success

http://www.darden.virginia.edu/web/uploadedFiles/Darden/Darden_Curry_PLE/UVA_School_Turnaround/School_Principal_Turnaround_Competencies.pdf

This paper describes how using competencies that predict performance can improve turnaround principal selection, evaluation, and development. It also provides guidance for organizations on how to use competencies to select, evaluate, and develop effective school turnaround leaders.

Importing leaders for school turnarounds: Lessons and opportunities

http://www.darden.virginia.edu/web/uploadedFiles/Darden/Darden_Curry_PLE/UVA_School_Turnaround/Importing_Leaders_for_School_Turnarounds.PDF

This report, prepared by Public Impact for UVA's Partnership for Leaders in Education, explores when and how organizations in other sectors import leaders. It informs efforts by State and local stakeholders to import talent for failing schools by discussing how other sectors attract prospective leaders from outside their field, train them, and foster their success.

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