SREB

Turnaround High School Principals: Recruit, Prepare and Empower Leaders of Change

Southern Regional Education Board

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Executive Summary

What does it mean to turn something around? We reverse direction and set a new course. We also prepare for the journey. We gather the resources and the people-power we need for what we know will be a long trek over rough terrain.

If we are going to turn a school around, our number one priority is to make sure that — right from the start — we do whatever it takes to create the long-term capacity for continuous improvement. But this is NOT what we’re doing in many of the lowest-performing high schools in America — even those that are the beneficiaries of federal School Improvement Grants (SIGs) aimed at producing a “turnaround.”

These are the 5 to 10 percent of public high schools where students are so disengaged and performance is so dismal that reformers call many of them “dropout factories” — places to churn out “dead-end kids.” Across the United States, we’re spending billions of dollars in an effort to transform these schools. Experts move in to work with faculties, students and communities. School districts implement a variety of strategies someone believes will create effective learning organizations. But as this report shows, there is little evidence that these efforts have produced positive results in most hard-pressed high schools.

To borrow the title from a new study on SIG implementation by the University of Washington’s Center for Reinventing Education, too many systems and low-performing high schools are “tinkering toward transformation.” Many decision-makers appear to have only the cloudiest idea about creating and sustaining a transformed school. One district SIG director, in fact, asked the Center’s researchers if they could provide him with information on how to successfully turn around a failing school. “He went on to explain that he was at a loss as to how to do this.”

This report tells how.

It reveals the fatal flaw in many well-intentioned plans to remake our worst American high schools into places where every student is fully prepared to pursue college and career training and live a successful life in the 21st century.

Turnaround schools must have turnaround principals. We cannot — as so many high school reform initiatives are trying to do — bypass the principal to save the school. If we are really serious about addressing the problems of high schools stuck at the very bottom of the performance chart, we must make sure we have an outstanding principal in each and every one of them — a superior leader with the special skill set to make a difference in highly dysfunctional circumstances.

We must back these turnaround principals — support them and give them the resources to fully exert their leadership capabilities. We must hold them accountable, allow them to hold the faculty accountable and expect the school district to also be accountable. And we must ensure that all of this is done in a positive atmosphere that places a high value on collaboration and student success.

Selecting and supporting a superior principal in every SIG high school is the single best investment we can make with our reform dollars. The right individuals will bring an enthusiasm, a sense of hope, and the confidence that they can, in fact, lead and engage the whole school community in a journey that will turn around what seems to be a hopeless situation. Through their skills, knowledge and unrelenting commitment to students and their success, they will lead others to transform a culture of failure into a high-energy environment where students are proud of their school and purposeful in their learning.
This report describes, in detail, how we can identify, prepare, place and support individuals who fully deserve the title of “Turnaround Principal.”

We pinpoint, through a policy lens, the elements that must be addressed to achieve an ambitious but reachable goal: Ensuring a steady stream of highly effective turnaround principals. And we underscore the critical role of state policymakers and education department leaders in making this happen. We agree with the Massachusetts education reform group MassInsight: “Most school districts ... do not have the resources themselves to develop...a specialized subset of principals with expertise in turnaround — so it must be a responsibility of the state, working with outside partners.”

State leadership will also be critical in helping overcome the barriers of traditional thinking, expediency and misplaced loyalties that have too often resulted in weak and ineffectual leadership in the lowest-performing high schools.

Improving these schools will require substantive and ongoing commitments and investments. From an economic perspective (as a recent McKinsey report points out), the loss of potential represented by dropouts and poorly prepared high school graduates is equivalent to a permanent national recession. That’s justification enough for the commitment and the investment.

Outstanding school leadership is within reach — if states, districts, communities and schools have the desire and the political will to prepare and empower the right individuals as turnaround principals.

SREB believes the following 12 district and state policy actions — in unison — can dramatically improve leadership in turnaround high schools.

1. **Create state or regional programs to select and train experienced principals to serve as turnaround specialists.** Except in the very largest and best staffed school districts, the resources to create these specialized training programs are best located and coordinated at the state level.

2. **Provide incentives for experienced principals to accept the turnaround challenge.** Include leadership incentives that reward improved performance and encourage longevity. If we can significantly reduce principal turnover, teachers, parents and community leaders are much more likely to commit to supporting the vision and change leadership of a new principal.

3. **Develop and continuously improve principal selection tools that can predict success in turnaround settings.** Turning a high school around requires a special set of character traits, skills and beliefs that go beyond those required of principals in high-performing high schools. Many skills can be developed, but the necessary core beliefs, character traits and entrepreneurial spirit must be present at the start and evidenced through previous performance.

4. **Increase per-student funding for principal preparation.** Acknowledge the greater costs associated with the intensive internships necessary for turnaround leaders. Field-based experiences are critical and time intensive.

5. **Support ongoing, individualized professional development specifically for turnaround leaders.** Turnaround leaders face unique challenges and significant demands on their time. Highly supportive districts provide individualized mentoring and coaching and opportunities to learn with other turnaround principals within their state and across the nation.
6. Create “enterprise zone” rules for turnaround high schools, providing expanded authority over personnel decisions, schedules, and improvement strategies. A turnaround principal needs to be able to create the team that can implement his or her vision for the school and then to implement the strategies needed to achieve that vision. In particular, incentive policies are needed to encourage great teachers to remain in or join the faculty of low-performing schools. Turnaround principals should have as much discretion as possible in terms of all staff members who serve the school and come into contact with students. Turnaround principals also need flexibility in extending the school day; creating common staff planning time; providing tutoring opportunities for students; and implementing strategies necessary for turning schools around. Allow turnaround principals to adopt such policies even if they are not in place in other schools in the district. Turnaround principals should also have opportunities to present district leaders with well-conceived budget requests that support school improvement.

7. Support the development and deployment of high-quality formative assessment lessons. Formative assessment lessons that check for understanding can improve teaching by quickly identifying students’ gaps in knowledge, understanding and writing skills. Well-developed formative assessment lessons are essential in turnaround settings. They should be timely and strategically integrated into instruction throughout the school year. Waiting until the end of the year to see if students have been learning and teachers have been effective is too late.

8. Provide principals with regular data “snapshots” about the culture and climate of their schools. Perceptual data that are regularly collected, analyzed and reported can give principals information and insight they need to build relationships in the school and community. The success of a school turnaround is dependent on the strength of these relationships.

9. End seniority-based layoff policies that disproportionately impact schools in need of turnaround. In schools where instruction is already weak, there can be no excuse for releasing effective teachers or requiring principals to take weak teachers who have been subject to forced reductions at other schools. Schools in need of turnaround should be exempted from staffing decisions based solely on seniority.

10. Provide incentives to encourage veteran teachers and promising novice teachers to work in turnaround high schools. A school can only be as good as its teachers. Principals play a necessary role in inspiring, coaching, attracting, retaining and supporting teachers; but it is the teachers who carry the responsibility for quality day-to-day instruction. Low-performing schools need to systematically improve their human capital. That includes recruiting first-rate teachers and providing quality professional learning opportunities that enable all teachers to reach their maximum potential.

11. Change the toxic “scoreboard” mentality that currently surrounds high stakes testing results. Data help identify problem schools and define their specific challenges. But much of current discussion based on narrow measures of student achievement is causing more harm than good. School accountability must include positive steps to build the broad support needed to make lasting improvements in how students are engaged in challenging assignments and supported to complete them. Districts and states need to shift away from punitive policies and recognize their own responsibility to do everything necessary to change the conditions in their persistently failing high schools.
12. **Create pathways for success in high schools — particularly turnaround schools.** Principals cannot be expected to turn low-performing schools around if they do not know how to create access to authentic instruction that will engage students and motivate them to succeed. Principals must know how to engage the faculty in creating pathway programs of study that link academic and career/technical learning, require students to use academic skills to complete authentic projects and problems related to their interests, and connect students’ learning to their goals beyond high school. When principals are able to help students find a reason for learning by providing pathways of success through high school and connecting learning to students’ interests, they will be better able to turn low-performing schools around.

We won't turn around high schools without turnaround principals.

They must be strong instructional leaders. Everything they do must focus on improving curriculum, instruction, student achievement and graduation rates. Every decision they make about personnel, about new programs and structures, about guidance and advisement must be connected to improving learning in the school.

They must be organizers and inspirers. They will need to rally every resource in the school and the community to bring order out of chaos — not to regiment, but to create a hugely inviting educational environment where students are engaged *intellectually* in learning, *emotionally* as they see the connection between school and their own lives, and *socially* as they join a genuine community of learners in the school.

It’s a school that has a signature feature — a culture where teenagers begin to adopt those habits of behavior and mind that make for successful students and for successful adults. It’s a school led by a Turnaround Principal.

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