School Turnarounds: The Cross-Sector Evidence

A summary of School Turnarounds: A Review of the Cross-Sector Evidence on Dramatic Organizational Improvement by Public Impact for the Center on Innovation and Improvement
Sources

Examining literature related to turning around low-performing schools and other organizations

- Limited research in education about school turnarounds
- More robust research in other sectors

Interviews with national experts and turnaround specialists
Turnaround

A documented, quick, dramatic, and sustained change in the performance of an organization

Though organizational reforms often result in varying levels of success, turnarounds happen. Examples from across sectors include:

- NYPD
- IBM
- Dozens of schools across the country
Turnaround Themes

**Leader Actions**

- School leaders have the greatest impact upon student learning among all school-level factors, second only to teachers.
- Across sectors, the right leader is a critical component of successful turnarounds.

**Environmental Context**

- The conditions and support that districts (and states) provide to enable school turnarounds are central to success.
Leader Actions

Concentrating on early, visible, meaningful wins

- Determine which actions will serve as the most effective levers for change and increase those activities.
- Early wins signal that positive change is possible and allow stakeholders to experience success.
- Examples:
  - **Attendance.** Assign truancy director to build relationships with parents and guardians to substantially decrease truancy.
  - **Environment.** Tear down fences, paint classrooms, repair lights, and replace broken windows.
  - **Instruction.** Concentrate resources to raise third grade reading scores by mid-year assessment.
Leader Actions

Implementing practices even when they deviate from norms

- Break with tradition, challenging long-standing internal practices when they do not serve the ultimate “client”
  - Align work schedule for city narcotics squad with times that most drug-related crimes occur
- “Bend” the rules and seek approval after the strategy has worked, rather than asking for permission beforehand
  - Redesign bus assignments to improve discipline
  - Skip the work order to paint over graffiti or transfer books
  - Shift designated resources to better meet need
Leader Actions

**Analysis and problem solving**

- Personally collect and analyze organizational performance data and develop an action plan based on key weaknesses

**Examples:**
- Clothing manufacturer
- Targeted interventions with students
Leader Actions

Driving for results

- Create a sense of the imperative to change: make it mandatory among all staff
- Funnel more time and money into successful tactics while halting unsuccessful tactics
- “Relentless discomfort with the status quo.”
- Make necessary but limited staff replacements
Leader Actions

Influencing inside and outside

- Communicate a positive vision, a turnaround campaign
- Win early momentum and silence opponents indirectly by showing early successes
- Help staff personally see and feel the problems their “customers” face
Leader Actions

**Measuring and reporting**

- Require staff to disclose results and problem-solve in frequent open-air meetings
- Make data transparent and public
- Examples:
  - High school data walls
  - Biweekly strategy meetings
Cycle of Leader Actions

Measuring and Reporting

Analysis & Problem Solving

Influencing Inside and Outside

Driving for Results

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Environmental Context

Leader recruitment and selection

- Cultivate supply
- Rigorous selection method
- “Diversified” approach across schools
Environmental Context

Timetable

- **Planning.** Under NCLB, largely dictated by law
- **Implementing.** Focused results in first year; time for completion varies
- **Sustaining.** Incorporate changes into lasting structures
Environmental Context

**Freedom to Act**

Turnarounds have a higher chance of success when highly capable leaders are granted freedom to implement necessary changes.

**Examples:**
- Scheduling
- Transportation
- Discipline
- Curriculum

Authority to hire and fire or alter staff working conditions greatly influences effective turnaround.
Environmental Context

Support and Aligned Systems

- Districts can signal that real change is a priority
- Provide timely access to data
- Financial resources
Environmental Context

Community Engagement

- Turnaround campaign common across sectors
- Build a sense of ownership
  - Consequences of failure
  - Possibilities of success
- Examples:
  - Recruiting parents and community members to serve on school leadership teams
  - Adjusting meeting times to accommodate parents’ schedules
  - Providing childcare during parent-teacher conferences
Resources


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