



EXAMPLES OF ACTIONS TAKEN BY PRINCIPALS TRYING TO LEAD TURNAROUND

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About the Center on School Turnaround (CST). The CST is one of 7 national Content Centers in a federal network of 22 Comprehensive Centers. The U.S. Department of Education charges the centers with building the capacity of state education agencies (SEAs) to assist districts and schools in meeting student achievement goals. The goal of the CST is to provide technical assistance and to identify, synthesize, and disseminate research-based practices and emerging promising practices that will lead to the increased capacity of SEAs to support districts in turning around their lowest-performing schools. The CST is a partnership of WestEd and the Academic Development Institute, the Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education at the University of Virginia, and the National Implementation Research Network.

<http://centeronschoolturnaround.org/>

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Abstract

This report describes examples of actions that school principals have taken in trying to lead turnaround. Most principals have either not worked in a turnaround situation or have fallen short in a turnaround attempt, despite their best efforts. Not all of the principals highlighted in this report have successfully turned around their schools, but we intend for these examples to be helpful to other principals, teacher-leader teams, and principal supervisors who are looking to approach turnaround work with strategic, but less common actions in an effort to get new, better results. The authors draw on prior research to frame the examples. The report also draws on the observations of two organizations with deep experience in the turnaround field: Public Impact and the University of Virginia Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education. The examples of actions that are described in this report are organized into categories familiar to many principals in both typical schools and in turnaround schools, namely: vision, goals, data, change leadership, teachers and leaders, instruction, and strategic partnerships. These categories are also tied to domains and practices described in the Center on School Turnaround's *Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement: A Systems Framework*.

Introduction

The drive to achieve successful school turnarounds is deeply rooted in the moral imperative to ensure that *all* children receive an education that prepares them for success in life. School turnarounds can be characterized by quick, strategic changes in school culture and systems that result in dramatic improvement in student achievement in schools that had previously been persistently low-performing. After nearly a decade of school turnaround initiatives, efforts, and policy, successful turnarounds at scale remain elusive, with relatively few low-performing schools substantially increasing student achievement levels (Meyers, Lindsay, Condon, & Wan, 2012; Stuit, 2012).

We have created this resource to help school leaders — and those who train and support them — prepare for and undertake the important and challenging work of leading turnaround efforts. The *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* shifts responsibility for determining school turnaround interventions from the federal level to the state and local levels and continues to require states and districts to identify and intervene in persistently low-performing schools. Thus, the field has an increasing need for guidance on promising practices.

Schools that have successfully turned around have typically been guided by school principals who demonstrate high levels of turnaround leadership competencies, which are recurring patterns of thought and behavior that influence principal actions in turnaround settings (Steiner & Hassel, 2011). In this report, our aim is to provide clear examples of actions taken by principals who are attempting to lead school turnaround. The report builds on our previous work at Public Impact and the University of Virginia Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education (UVA/PLE), which has included conducting literature reviews on leadership competencies in the business, nonprofit, and education sectors (Kowal & Hassel, 2005; Meyers & Hitt, 2017; Rhim, Kowal, Hassel, & Hassel, 2007; Steiner & Hassel, 2011) and carrying out empirical analyses of interviews with successful school principals (Hitt, 2016; Hitt, Woodruff, Meyers, & Zhu, in press). Previously we also have jointly developed professional learning modules focused on using competencies to recruit, select, and support turnaround leaders (Hitt, Cornier, & Barbour, 2015).

From these efforts, we have learned that school leadership in a turnaround setting is much more challenging than in other settings, including maintaining high-performing, high-poverty schools. The actions that principals take — though not the only conditions needed for dramatic change in low-performing schools — have a direct impact on school improvement (Hallinger & Heck 1998; Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010). The principal's actions in turnaround settings can be differentiated from those in higher-performing schools in part by their urgency, strategic focus, and intensity.

We developed this report to highlight and give examples of actions we have observed principals taking as they attempt to lead turnaround. Although not all of the principals who are highlighted in this report have been successful at turning around their schools, we provide these examples to help other principals, as well as teacher-leader teams and principal supervisors, to potentially generate new ways to move their schools forward.

Overview of Our Approach

To develop this paper, we built on several lines of work and experience focused on school turnaround. One was Public Impact's reviews of cross-sector research (Kowal & Hassel, 2005; Rhim et al., 2007), which we used to identify leader actions that are associated with successful turnaround efforts. In addition, to find examples of the actions that turnaround principals take, we drew from Public Impact's work with states, districts, and schools on designing and implementing school turnaround efforts, and from UVA/PLE's partnerships with district education agencies and their lowest-performing schools to develop leadership across systems. Both Public Impact and UVA/PLE have worked extensively with and learned from many turnaround leaders, including principals, teacher leaders, and district and state leaders.

In addition, this paper draws on small-scale efforts that Public Impact and UVA/PLE have undertaken recently to learn from school principals who were attempting to lead school turnaround. Public Impact interviewed 10 principals attempting to lead turnaround in Colorado, Illinois, and Tennessee, to identify examples of actions critical to their turnaround initiatives. To develop case studies, Public Impact also interviewed principals, multi-classroom leaders, and team teachers in high-poverty Opportunity Culture¹ schools that achieved high growth after years of failure (Barrett, 2016a, 2016b). In separate work, UVA/PLE researchers reviewed transcripts of behavioral event interviews, which focus on evaluating past behaviors and associated competencies, that were conducted with 23 principals who were attempting to lead the turnaround of traditionally low-performing schools. The researchers also reviewed corresponding reports from site visits that were part of UVA/PLE support provided for these principals' schools.

From these bodies of Public Impact and UVA/PLE work, we selected examples to share in this paper of actions that principals have taken while leading turnaround initiatives in Arizona, New Mexico, Ohio, and Utah. We sorted the principals' actions into seven broad categories of work that are familiar to principals and representative of the relevant research literature: vision, goals, data, change leadership, teachers and leaders, instruction, and strategic partnerships. Experts from Public Impact and UVA/PLE met multiple times to share information and identify clear examples of actions that principals were taking that fit within these categories and to identify more specific focus areas within each category. The focus areas include those that have been identified in prior cross-sector research on turnarounds (Kowal & Hassel, 2005), in relevant case studies (Barrett, 2016a, 2016b), as well as in decades of research about high-performing, high-poverty schools. We illustrate each focus area with specific examples of actions that school principals attempting to lead turnaround have taken to make changes at the school and classroom levels.

¹ For an explanation of Opportunity Culture, see <http://opportunityculture.org>.

Turnaround Leadership in Action

The categories into which we sorted our examples of school turnaround leaders' actions are listed in Table 1 on page 4, with succinct focus areas that undergird each area provided in the second column. The focus areas help to narrow the discussion to more specific actions. In the third column, we tie these actions to domains and practices that are detailed in the Center on School Turnaround's (CST's) *Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement: A Systems Framework* (Center on School Turnaround, 2017). All of the categories and focus areas that we highlight in this paper are either direct extensions of the content in the CST framework's Turnaround Leadership domain or are principals' enactments of the other three domains: Talent Development, Instructional Transformation, and Culture Shift. Although these domains are not the explicit focus of this paper, we encourage the reader to use Table 1 to cross-reference this paper against the framework in order to develop deeper knowledge.

Table 1. How Principals Enact Efforts to Lead School Turnaround Initiatives

Category and Focus Area	Domain and Practice from CST's <i>Four Domains Framework</i>
Vision	
Establish and communicate a clear vision	1A
Help staff understand and embrace need for change	1A, 1B, 1C
Goals	
Prioritize goals and focus areas	1A, 1B, 4B, 4C
Make action plans based on data	1B, 1C, 2C, 3A, 3B
Identify and achieve a few early wins	1B, 2A, 3C, 4B, 4C
Reduce time focused on nonessentials	1A, 1B, 1C
Data	
Establish the expectations for a data culture	1A, 2C, 3A, 3B, 3C
Adjust instructional practice through visible data	3A, 3B, 3C
Use data continuously to solve problems	1B, 1C, 2A, 2B, 2C, 3A, 3B
Change Leadership	
Focus on successful tactics, discontinue unsuccessful ones	1B, 2C, 3A, 3C
Break rules and norms, take new action	1A, 3C, 4B
Change systems and structures	1C, 2C, 3B
Teachers and Leaders	
Make necessary replacements	1B, 2A, 2B, 3C, 4A
Attract, select, and retain top talent	2A, 2B
Build and lead a team of leaders	1A, 2A, 2B, 4A
Ensure ongoing professional growth opportunities	1B, 1C, 2B, 3C
Instruction	
Align instruction to assessments and standards	1C, 2B, 2C, 3A, 3B
Monitor and improve instructional quality	1B, 1C, 2A, 2B, 3C
Develop and deploy a team of instructional leaders	1A, 2A, 3C
Strategic Partnerships	
Gain support of key influencers	4A, 4B, 4C
Enlist partner organizations	4A, 4B, 4C

In the sections that follow, we provide more detail on the seven categories and accompanying focus areas. For each category, we begin with a summary that draws from relevant literature on turnaround. Then, in subsections describing the focus areas within each category, we provide more nuanced information about the category, drawing on the same literature that is cited in the category's opening paragraph and drawing from our own observations and experiences through Public Impact's and UVA/PLE's work. We end each subsection with an example describing a particular principal's action or actions taken that exemplify the focus area.

Vision

Turnaround principals send a clear signal that demonstrates a break from business as usual (e.g., Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011). They help the school community envision success for students and expect excellence. They clearly communicate the potential impact of the change on student lives (e.g., Aladjem et al., 2010), while recognizing the challenges students face and emphasizing that student learning needs will be prioritized (e.g., Jacobson, Brooks, Giles, Johnson, & Ylimaki, 2007). Successful turnaround principals share and repeat the vision to motivate others — administrators, teachers, staff, parents, and the community at large — to invest in and contribute to change (e.g., Ylimaki, Brunderman, Bennett, & Dugan, 2014).

Turnaround principals establish and communicate a clear vision and help staff personally feel problems and the urgency for change.

Establish and Communicate a Clear Vision

The vision in persistently low-performing schools is frequently vague and stale, lacking relevance for faculty and staff. Thus, turnaround principals craft a vision focused on student learning that is relevant, future-focused, challenging, and inspiring. The principal communicates the vision and uses it to guide and ground decisions and keep stakeholders inspired throughout the improvement effort.

Example

One principal sought to craft a vision that included input from the entire school community to increase buy-in and incorporate families' hopes for their students' education. The principal surveyed parents, students, and staff to get their input on what would make the school great. To ensure high response rates, the principal reached out to parents at community and cultural events, targeting different student populations, and incentivized participation with a small reward for students who turned in surveys. Survey data were analyzed and used to craft an initial vision. The principal shared the vision with the school community through a series of meetings in which input was solicited. The new vision guided a "rebranding" of the school that included developing a logo, tagline, and signage to communicate the vision on the interior and exterior of the school, as well as through website, newsletter, and email communications. The principal used the rebranded vision for the school to unify the school community around a common purpose, improving outcomes for students.

Help Staff Understand and Embrace the Need for Change

Although the principal is the main driver of the vision and its execution, he or she engages staff, and often community members, throughout the process to build investment in the vision and commitment to the way forward. Turnaround principals ensure that staff members, through direct experience, have opportunities to understand and empathize with the challenges faced by students and their families, so that staff members have a sense of the potential real-life negative impacts of low-achievement for students. Principals make it clear that the school is one of only a few places that can effect change for students, and they inspire staff members to embrace the opportunity to improve student lives. Such engagement increases staff ownership for achieving the vision and creates urgency for change that is sustained.

Example

Realizing that many of the teachers at her school had not spent any time in the school's community outside of the school grounds and did not know the surrounding area, one principal took all staff members on a community tour, including a scavenger hunt to locate key neighborhood landmarks and organizations. She also had teachers pair up and conduct home visits prior to the start of the school year to get to know students and families in their own environments, identifying challenges that students may face related to homework and coming to school prepared to learn. This early engagement with students and their families outside of school helped create strong relationships and a sense of trust between the school staff and community. Teachers better understood their students' needs and felt a strong sense of urgency for change.

Goals

Successful turnaround principals not only have a clear vision of what success for the school looks like, they also have a strong understanding of the highest-priority goals that must be achieved to dramatically improve student learning on the way to achieving that vision (e.g., Duke, 2015). Successful principals work with their staff and school community to set high-impact, ambitious, long-term goals that could result in the school not only getting out of turnaround status, but reaching acceptable levels of achievement (e.g., Huberman, Parrish, Hanna, Arellanes, & Shambaugh, 2011). They also identify high-priority short-term goals for targeted "early wins" that can be used as proof points of success and build momentum for change (e.g., Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2012). Turnaround principals create action plans aligned with their vision by analyzing data to determine the current state of low school performance, identifying root causes for that low performance, and planning strategies to address root causes and achieve goals (e.g., Duke & Salmonowicz, 2010). To keep the focus on priorities, they reduce time spent on unrelated activities (e.g., Hitt & Meyers, 2017).

Turnaround principals prioritize goals and focus areas, make action plans based on data, identify and achieve a few early wins, and reduce time spent on activities that interfere with or distract from school priorities.

Prioritize Goals and Focus Areas

Needs assessments of low-performing schools typically identify a long list of problems to address, all of which seem urgent and necessary to ensure that students are attending a safe, affirming school environment focused on teaching and learning. Although it can be tempting to try to address all of these issues at once, turnaround principals recognize the need to prioritize, focusing on meaningful and achievable goals that will have the greatest and most immediate positive impact on students. As the school makes progress toward goals, the principal introduces new areas of focus to accelerate and expand the impact of changes.

Example

One principal who recognized the need to prioritize goals and focus on a few key strategies to reach each goal knew that the “nice to haves” could impede progress on the “need to haves,” especially given how much work there was to do for the school. He made strong basic instruction the school’s focus and rooted the academic program in a five-step lesson plan. He connected this instructional focus directly to teacher evaluation and student achievement goals. He intentionally postponed implementation of project-based learning, a key aspect of the school’s vision, in order to prioritize implementation of strong, direct, instructional strategies. Given his school context, he made the strategic decision to focus on having the instructional basics mastered first, prior to tackling more complex, interdisciplinary instructional approaches.

Make Action Plans Based on Data

Once turnaround principals have prioritized their data-informed goals and focus areas, they continue to use data to create action plans with clearly articulated strategies to achieve established goals. While most schools have “strategic plans” or “school improvement plans,” high-quality school turnaround plans are different in that they explain in great detail what each member of the school community must do for the school to succeed in meeting its goals.

Example

One principal hired a facilitator to work with all of the school’s staff to determine root causes of persistent low performance by analyzing student achievement and engagement data along with the findings of a school quality review. He kept the staff focused on root causes that the school could address and guided them to identify the top priorities for change: improving the quality of instruction and accelerating learning to meet high-level standards. As a team, the principal and staff developed an action plan to address these top priorities. The action plan included specific actions, responsible parties, timelines, expected changes in instructional practices and student outcomes, and a clear set of procedures for monitoring and adjusting actions in a rapid monthly cycle. One of the priorities that this leadership team identified was increasing the rigor of instruction. The team’s plan included creating a clear definition of rigor in instruction and a rubric to be applied to lesson planning and implementation. Instructional leaders used the rubric to review lesson plans, conduct classroom observations, and give teachers feedback on the rigor of instruction. School leaders also reviewed data on the rigor of instruction monthly to identify areas for teacher professional learning and coaching. The instructional leadership team evaluated the impact of the action plan by confirming the relationship between the level of rigor of instruction in classrooms and the level of student achievement on interim assessments.

Identify and Achieve a Few Early Wins

As turnaround principals prioritize goals, they identify and plan for a few high-leverage, early wins that they can accomplish quickly to motivate staff. However, an early win is not simply accomplishing any short-term, achievable goal. It is carrying out a high-priority, highly visible, essential element of change that aligns with the school's overall vision and goals for improvement. Savvy turnaround principals identify and drive toward early successes that will have immediate impact on the school and build toward achieving intermediate and long-term goals. In addition, the nature of the early win is relevant to the school community so that it is easily identified and supported while also silencing critics.

Example

One principal prioritized early wins in literacy achievement. He implemented a computer-based literacy curriculum that was aligned to end-of-year, standards-based assessments. The curriculum included frequent assessments of mastery of content. Short-cycle assessments measured interim progress and made student achievement data readily available to students, parents, and teachers. As individual students moved up through the levels of the curriculum, the strategic sharing of student progress was a clear signal to parents that change was happening. Teachers used the data to make adjustments and provided targeted instruction to fill learning gaps. The principal celebrated successes early in the school year, sharing student achievement gains with the broader school community and making it clear that literacy would continue to be the focus for the year. Achievement gains on the curriculum-embedded assessments were validated in the middle of the school year when academic results came in from interim assessments indicating that students had already achieved one and a quarter years of growth in literacy. Over the next four years, the gap between the school average and the state average proficiency in reading would shrink from 38 percentage points to 3 percentage points.

Reduce Time Focused on Nonessentials

Turnaround principals intentionally reduce their time on practices, tasks, or policies that are not essential to student learning or organizational improvement. Moreover, they diligently protect their staff's time from distractions to ensure focus on goals pertaining to teaching and learning. This laser vision serves as a constant reminder to staff, students, and the community that anything peripheral or unrelated to student learning is unessential.

Example

One principal thought strategically about how teachers spent non-instructional time, such as when the teachers were participating in professional learning activities. She determined that the standard, whole-school professional learning sessions led by outside groups were not the most beneficial uses of the limited time that staff had for professional learning. So, she opted out of opportunities led by the district or other outside providers. Instead, the principal implemented school-based professional learning, led by her own teachers, tied directly to the school's vision and goals. The in-house professional learning was responsive to teachers' and students' needs and was therefore more likely to lead to immediate, meaningful impact on student outcomes.

Data

Turnaround principals create a school community committed to collecting and analyzing data to drive decisions across curriculum, content, and levels (e.g., Duke, 2015). In low-performing schools, teachers are often either unaware of the significant deficiencies in student learning (e.g., Thielman, 2012) or unprepared to respond effectively (e.g., Dodman, 2014). By making data highly visible and grounding organizational and instructional decisions in data, successful turnaround principals are able to clearly articulate reasons for poor organizational performance and low student achievement, model appropriate decision-making processes to address challenges, and determine appropriate organizational and instructional responses (e.g., Reyes & Garcia, 2014). They use data to acknowledge progress and celebrate indicators of improvement, but refuse to accept progress as a sufficient end (e.g., Steiner & Hassel, 2011). By engaging staff in open, continuous dialogue on school and student performance, turnaround principals establish a culture in which data drive decisions at all levels (e.g., Thielman, 2012).

Turnaround principals establish a data culture, adjust instructional practice through analysis of visible data, and use data continually to make decisions and solve problems.

Establish the Expectations for a Data Culture

The turnaround principal's initial task in building an open-air data culture is to establish and model the schoolwide expectation that data will drive decisions. In low-performing schools, organizational and instructional decisions are too frequently based on opinion without supporting evidence. The successful turnaround principal requires that all decisions are informed by data. This expectation is articulated clearly and often, and decisions that are not informed by data are rejected. By establishing expectations around data use early on in the school year and by modeling data practices, the school leader shifts school culture to one in which evidence drives decisions about how to best serve students. In this culture, teachers have a better understanding of where learning breaks down and are able to adjust instruction to close gaps between where student achievement is and where it needs to be.

Example

One principal recognized that a large number of students were being referred by classroom teachers for special education and interventions, but no data showed that the students had been provided rigorous instruction or that they had not made adequate achievement gains. Accordingly, the principal worked with classroom teachers and special education teachers to design a data-driven referral process. In it, teachers used a research-based reading assessment and other student performance data to determine which students were struggling in each class. Those students received differentiated instruction and classroom interventions. The classroom teacher monitored their progress weekly. After three to six weeks, for any student who continued to struggle more than other students receiving similar support, the teacher developed a referral that included a description of classroom interventions and progress-monitoring data for all struggling students in the class. Together, classroom teachers and special education teachers analyzed the data and decided on the next, more intensive level of intervention, including special education services when or if needed.

Adjust Instructional Practice Through Visible Data

Turnaround principals often prioritize making data visible in low-performing schools because the staff members seldom recognize how low the school's student achievement is relative to other schools in the district or state. Moreover, instruction often occurs behind closed doors in struggling schools, with little transparency. Turnaround principals facilitate data meetings with teachers to have purposeful conversations and discuss trends in learning across classrooms, as well as individual student progress. By making student data visible, successful turnaround principals not only make school and student achievement public (thereby increasing staff responsibility and ownership), they also provide teachers with the skills to use data to adjust instructional practices and address gaps in student learning.

Example

One principal established a leader board to display each class' progress toward reaching individual student achievement targets. Teachers uploaded data into a shared tracking system, and the school recognized the class with the highest percentage of students reaching targets in weekly whole-school community meetings. Teachers also created data walls to monitor student progress and collaboratively plan for grouping and instruction. Multiple data points were used to form a composite score for each student at each six-week interval. A large, whiteboard-sized display depicted the composite scores for all students in each grade level. Teachers were able to quickly determine the number of students needing remediation and the level of remediation needed for each student. Teachers used these data to develop lesson plans and interventions. In addition, each class visibly tracked student progress on a chart that students filled in each time they reached an individual target. Teachers worked to ensure that individual student targets were challenging, yet achievable, so that every student experienced a feeling of accomplishment and was recognized by peers.

Use Data Continually to Solve Problems

Turnaround principals understand that the creation of an open-air data culture cannot rest on increased data visibility alone. They constantly model making data-driven decisions, and they champion the continual use of data to solve challenges. As the data culture solidifies, the successful turnaround principal makes clear the expectation that instructional decisions and adjustments will be based on data, including assessments, student work samples, observations, and other evidence of student learning and achievement.

Example

One principal designed and facilitated a system in which the instructional leadership team members conducted one-on-one data meetings with teachers to discuss each student's progress on achievement targets. She set the expectation that teachers would analyze data prior to the meetings and would be prepared to share their strategies for reteaching concepts that most students had not yet mastered and strategies for providing targeted small-group instruction and individual support to other students. Instructional leadership team members engaged in structured problem-solving conversations with teachers, including: (1) asking questions about the data, such as, "What do you notice about student learning? Which concepts are difficult for all students? How might you reteach those concepts in a different way? Which students are not demonstrating mastery? What might you do to support those students?"; (2) providing

suggestions for instructional practices, such as, “In addition to your giving a hands-on demonstration of the concept that you are planning to reteach to the whole class, I’d like you to rework your lesson plans to include additional small-group instruction for the students who are not yet proficient. What strategies might you use with that small group?”; and (3) recommending resources or classrooms where teachers might observe others implementing effective strategies, such as, “You might find it helpful to see how Ms. Sample is teaching that concept to a small group. Let’s look at our schedules and find a time when I can fill in for you and you can go observe.”

Change Leadership

Successful turnaround principals initiate strategic organizational changes to break from past practices and promote alignment with the new, bold vision and priority goals (e.g., Duke, 2015). They end practices that do not support the vision, instead restructuring and repurposing as appropriate to identify and pursue new ways forward. They also determine which policies and practices are evidence-based and working, then routinize those policies and practices in order to orient staff to continue pursuing only instructionally effective practices (e.g., Aladjem et al., 2010). With evidence in hand and a vision articulated, turnaround principals strenuously pursue what is best for students, regardless of the hurdles and whether those hurdles come from tradition (i.e., how things have always been done) or policy (i.e., the district office says. . .) (e.g., Hess, 2013).

Turnaround principals focus on successful tactics and discontinue unsuccessful ones, break rules and norms to take new actions, and change systems and structures.

Focus on Successful Tactics, Discontinue Unsuccessful Ones

In contrast to many new principals, successful turnaround principals prioritize identifying policies and practices that work and then safeguard the continuation of those policies and practices. They understand that turnaround requires many changes, so they avoid making change for the sake of change. Where success is identified, they standardize the work and continue to monitor for efficacy. In their root-cause analysis of various organizational and instructional aspects of the school, they also determine and then discontinue the policies and practices that have not been successful. Successful turnaround principals refuse to endorse policies and practices that do not contribute to the vision or increase student achievement because, at best, such policies and practices sap teacher and principal time while distracting from real learning opportunities and, at worst, decrease instructional quality.

Example

Early in the school’s turnaround effort, one principal implemented looping, having teachers stay with the same students for multiple years, an approach that had been used in successful schools and seemed like it would offer teachers an opportunity to create stronger relationships with students and better understand their learning needs. Looping appeared to produce strong results in the first year. However, when the school tried it again the following year, the principal could tell early on from student achievement data and feedback from teachers and students that it was not working as well for

this set of students and teachers. Rather than continue this practice until the end of the year, the principal worked to change student and teacher assignments immediately.

Break Rules and Norms, Take New Action

Turnaround principals recognize when policies or norms are not in the best interest of students and take the necessary action to change the situation. They do not accept organizational or community norms as unamendable policy. Instead, they engage various stakeholders — staff, parents, district office, and so on — to enact the change that is necessary to prioritize students' needs. Successful turnaround principals are willing to break rules and norms in the best interest of students. They recognize that elements of the status quo have limited student learning opportunities, and they refuse to accept the continuation of those limiting factors. They encourage teachers to be innovative and establish systems that allow the teachers to take risks as they implement new practices, adjust, discard, and try again.

Example

In one school, veteran teachers had moved into the best classroom locations and had been teaching in the same spaces for many years. Students had classes on multiple floors and wings of the building, resulting in them either running between classes or being late to class. The principal rearranged the entire building, requiring every teacher to change classrooms. The principal reorganized so that grade levels and content teams were situated near each other, creating more of a small-community feel, increasing opportunities for collaboration across classrooms and flexible grouping of students, and decreasing students' hallway interactions across grade levels. Additionally, the move required teachers to clean out their rooms and determine what to bring to their new classrooms. After teachers moved out, classrooms were redesigned to reflect the vision of the school, with internet access, interactive whiteboards, a common format for the daily agenda, and collaborative work spaces.

Change Systems and Structures

As turnaround principals identify successful (and unsuccessful) tactics and take new actions that prioritize students, they also become purposeful in changing school systems and structures. They build on initial change efforts and restructure daily operations — roles, schedules, technology use, facility use, and use of materials, among others — to align with their turnaround vision. The new systems and structures provide students, teachers, parents, and others with clear guidance on the actions that will be taken to support student learning. Subsequent modifications build from the new, commonly shared and understood systems and structures so that all stakeholders understand why and how the changes will increase learning opportunities.

Example

One principal established new systems and structures for instructional planning and feedback. Prior to her tenure at the school, teachers had been working in isolation, without valuable common planning time and with only limited opportunities to learn from their peers. The principal redesigned the schedule to ensure that teachers had common planning time to meet as a team and provided them with a protocol to help them use that time efficiently. She also redesigned her own schedule and the schedules of her

instructional leadership team so that they had time to participate in weekly grade-level team meetings, conduct frequent observations and provide teachers with feedback, and meet weekly as a team to determine and plan to address teacher development needs. The principal and other instructional leaders observed and monitored teachers' change in instructional practices from the initial data meeting through implementation with students. As necessary, the principal triaged support from her instructional leadership team to follow up with teachers.

Teachers and Leaders

Instructional quality in low-performing schools is often lower than that in other schools, so good turnaround principals know that teacher quality must improve (e.g., Murphy & Meyers, 2008). They encourage out or even terminate teachers who refuse to prioritize all students, who will not or cannot take necessary steps to improve instruction, or who undermine the school climate (e.g., Aladjem et al., 2010). Successful turnaround principals also work systematically to attract, select, and retain top talent, including teacher leaders and other administrators (e.g., Hitt & Meyers, 2017). They also prioritize teacher development as critical to advancing instruction, growing a data culture, and improving school climate (e.g., Duke & Salmonowicz, 2010). To provide a depth of support that they cannot individually give each teacher, they mobilize a team of leaders to drive change schoolwide (e.g., Duke & Landahl, 2011).

Turnaround principals make necessary replacements, attract, select, and retain top talent, ensure ongoing professional growth opportunities, and lead a team of leaders to drive changes throughout the school.

Make Necessary Replacements

Successful turnaround principals initiate the turnaround with a strong vision and set focused, high-priority goals, so that expectations for all staff are clear. Turnaround principals recognize that great instruction cannot wait for students in low-performing schools, so they urgently act to determine which staff members, if any, are unable or unwilling to make the changes necessary to increase student learning. When staff are either unable or unwilling to make the necessary strides to improve instruction, principals either coach them out of the school or dismiss them, if necessary. Similarly, turnaround principals do not accommodate teachers who undermine efforts to change the vision and goals or refuse to become part of an open-air data culture. The urgency of turnaround requires that staff contribute in all phases of the initiative, or the turnaround principal must take action to protect the process that can be derailed by staff who are not sufficiently committed to the cause of improving student outcomes.

Example

At another school, the newly placed principal found that not all of the school's current teachers were on board with her vision or had high expectations. She clarified her non-negotiables for the school and how she would hold every staff member, including herself, accountable. As a result, some staff members chose to leave. She had to dismiss others, including teachers who had demonstrated effective instruction but were not the

right fit for the school. Staff replacement was an expedient process because the principal was transparent about her expectations and plan for the school's improvement effort. She provided the opportunity for staff to decide for themselves whether to opt in and remain at the school, or opt out if they did not see the school's new direction as the right fit for their professional goals. For each subsequent year, staff turnover decreased and more high-quality teachers sought to work at the school. The principal credits this improvement in both retention and recruitment to the remaining staff's full commitment to the new vision for change.

Attract, Select, and Retain Top Talent

Effective school turnaround principals determine what skills, traits, and qualities they need in teachers, given the turnaround context. They then implement comprehensive strategies that include tactics for attracting, selecting, and retaining teachers who best fit the context, including those who have the skills necessary to close achievement gaps for students. Turnaround principals are creative in how they market their position openings, encouraging candidates to apply who want to make a difference for kids and/or have leadership aspirations. The principals might also reallocate resources to create individualized incentive packages to attract potential high-quality candidates. After quality candidates have applied, turnaround principals lead clear, rigorous selection processes with multiple measures to assess teacher effectiveness, competencies, and alignment to the school's vision for success. They also advocate for certain candidates, making persuasive cases to the district, often noting needs of the school that district human resources might not initially recognize. In addition, both veteran and new turnaround principals support and retain excellent teachers by providing a positive working environment, jointly developing professional growth goals, and identifying meaningful career growth opportunities.

Example

To expand the instructional team, one principal started by working with teachers to create a job description that outlined the characteristics of the ideal teachers for their students, school, and community. They decided that they did not have the time or resources to support teachers who were still in the first stages of learning to teach. Instead, they wanted teachers who had clear evidence of prior success in a high-needs school. They also wanted teachers who had goals and beliefs that aligned with the school's vision. To screen candidates who fit the school's definition of the ideal teacher, they conducted behavioral event interviews to evaluate past behaviors and associated competencies, and conducted observations, in person or by video, of candidates teaching in their current environments. The school's returning teachers, who best knew the needs of the students, made hiring decisions. The principal then supported newly hired teachers by providing regular professional learning and job-embedded time for collaboration and data-based professional dialogue and problem-solving. Teacher retention was high in this school because, although they had to do challenging work, teachers felt supported by the principal and their colleagues, had opportunities for increased leadership and collaboration, and had a sense of accomplishment that comes from working hard and improving at your craft.

Build and Lead a Team of Leaders

Once school turnaround principals have the right teachers in place, they build a team of teacher leaders from within the ranks of the school, drawing upon different strengths and strategically assigning responsibilities as the turnaround progresses and leadership capacity grows. By establishing a strong team of leaders, the principal can eventually leverage his or her time by supporting the team members, who in turn support teams of teachers and other staff.

Example

One principal restructured her staffing model, implementing an Opportunity Culture approach focused on developing a team of teacher leaders, called Multi-Classroom Leaders (MCLs), to lead smaller teams of teachers. After a year of implementing on a small scale and seeing positive results, she decided to expand the staffing model to more teachers and students. Rather than trying to reach all of her teachers directly, the principal shared the instructional leadership with her team of MCLs and assistant principals. Through the MCL selection process, the principal learned that even though her MCLs had clear evidence of impact on student learning, they lacked some skills related to leading adults. From the start of the school year, the principal and assistant principal implemented weekly, two-hour professional learning meetings for the instructional leadership team, which included MCLs, assistant principals, and the principal. The meetings focused exclusively on building team leadership skills. They modeled and practiced providing directive feedback to teachers, developed spreadsheets for monitoring, and built time into schedules to check in with teachers on their teams. As a result, MCLs took on increased leadership responsibilities, leading assessment selection and design, lesson planning, observation and feedback, data analysis, and instructional improvement decision-making. In the third year, the principal shifted from coaching teachers directly to coaching the two assistant principals who coached the MCLs who in turn coached the teachers. By structuring support to be cascading, the principal was able to build the leadership capacity of the team and oversee the instructional leadership, while not becoming mired in scheduling and delivering feedback to individual teachers.

Ensure Ongoing Professional Growth Opportunities

Turnaround principals recognize that even the best teachers need support to provide consistent, strong, differentiated instruction that meets the needs of diverse learners. Successful turnaround principals set high expectations for staff and establish systems and structures to support the staff's professional growth, allow the staff to work collaboratively to learn from their colleagues, and give them opportunities for increased leadership and career advancement. Successful turnaround principals also provide teacher leaders with the support they need to effectively lead their teams. In this way, the principal builds a culture of growth and development that appeals to highly effective teachers and keeps them motivated to continue to lead challenging turnaround work.

Example

One principal implemented several initiatives to help her teachers increase their instructional effectiveness. She started by requiring every teacher to observe and be observed by a colleague from another grade level. She provided a clear format for the observation. The observing teacher would provide constructive feedback and identify one positive practice they observed that they wanted to use in their own classroom. While the

peer observations started as a compulsory activity, not long into the school year many teachers proactively asked for more observations and opportunities to go into other teachers' classrooms to learn. The staff culture shifted from one in which struggling teachers tried to hide their challenges and never asked for help to a more collaborative culture in which teachers took on increased leadership, opened their doors, and actively sought support when they needed it. In addition to initiating the peer observations, the principal supported teachers by adjusting the weekly schedule so that school dismissed early every Wednesday for professional learning time. During this time, teachers analyzed common assessment data, collaborated on lesson planning, and engaged in differentiated professional learning with others in similar roles. The principal participated in these development activities and used feedback from teachers to make adjustments to the professional learning content and process throughout the year.

Instruction

The importance of instructional leadership is elevated in a turnaround environment because the quality of instruction must improve appreciably and rapidly (e.g., Meyers & Hitt, 2017). Turnaround principals place an intense and intentional focus on improving instruction by building systems and a leadership structures that give teachers clear up-front direction for lesson planning, teaching, and assessment of learning aligned with high standards (e.g., Reyes & Garcia, 2014). Turnaround principals also build systems that help teachers achieve expectations in these areas, such as putting systems in place for continuous monitoring of student progress and ensuring that midcourse adjustments in teaching are made when student achievement gains are not on track to reach high levels (e.g., Duke, 2015).

Turnaround principals facilitate processes that align instruction to assessments and, ultimately, to standards. They also monitor and differentiate support to improve instructional quality, and develop and deploy a team of instructional leaders to support teaching and learning.

Align Instruction to Assessments and Standards

Turnaround principals accelerate the strength of the instructional program by establishing a system in which classroom-level and grade-level lesson plans and instructional units move urgently toward alignment with the state standards-based assessments. The examination of lesson plans and instructional units typically illuminates gaps in the quality of the delivery of instruction. Accordingly, successful turnaround principals begin with the end in mind and facilitate the following: (1) individual teacher and grade-level team understanding of standards and assessments; (2) school- or district-developed formative testing or benchmarks aligned with standardized testing to examine student progress toward mastery of the standards; and (3) skill-building to help teachers plan appropriate instruction aligned to the rigor of summative and formative assessments. Alignment of instruction to standards-based assessments ensures that students in turnaround schools are held to high expectations and are receiving the rigorous teaching necessary to make strong achievement gains, though doing so requires intensive and focused efforts to identify and support skill areas where teachers individually and collectively have the biggest gaps.

Example

One principal tackled assessment and instruction alignment by requiring teachers to closely examine their lesson and unit plans and provide justification for how all facets of their instruction would support student understanding and mastery of learning objectives. The principal found that teachers often were unable to clearly articulate how their lessons would achieve those goals. To assist in the refinement of instructional planning, the school's instructional leaders created a schedule with common planning time and required grade-level teachers to collaborate on lesson planning and reach consensus on how instructional time would be used consistently by all members of the team. Through calibrating lessons and units across all teachers in a grade level, a peer review process was developed for instruction of students. In it, teachers worked together to align lessons to assessments of learning objectives and content standards, implemented common instructional pacing plans, and used assessment data to measure the effectiveness of instruction, reteach concepts that were not mastered, and adjust future lesson plans.

Monitor and Improve Instructional Quality

Turnaround principals establish systems and routines to continually monitor instructional quality and provide teachers with differentiated development and support. Working with a team of instructional leaders, successful turnaround principals ensure that teachers are regularly observed and that those observations, along with data on student learning needs, inform cohesive schoolwide efforts to determine what components of instructional delivery most need to be improved and monitored each quarter. (Turnaround schools cannot address all teacher instructional needs at once but must determine which practices are foundational and require urgent attention.) Leveraging a cohesive plan, teachers are provided with relevant, customized, timely, and actionable feedback on instruction and with appropriate professional learning opportunities. Principals structure teacher schedules to provide time for collaborative analysis of student work, lesson planning, peer-to-peer learning, and differentiated professional learning. Before determining which teachers to replace for lack of adequate improvements in instruction, turnaround principals first ensure that less effective teachers receive more intensive coaching, modeling, and support from instructional leaders to enhance the teachers' instructional rigor and classroom management practices.

Example

One principal noticed that some teachers had success in teaching reading concepts while others did not. To ensure that every student was learning from the start of the school year, he quickly devised a job-embedded development plan that met the needs of the struggling teachers and showcased the strengths of successful teachers. During planning periods, struggling teachers were assigned to observe and reflect on the practices used by their successful colleagues. Then, the principal or instructional coach debriefed the observations to develop a concrete action plan for changing teacher practices. Video recording was utilized when live teacher observation was not an option. In some cases, the principal combined classes and had the successful teacher serve as lead teacher for all students while the developing teacher observed and supported instruction across the two classes. By devising creative and fluid scheduling alternatives, this principal prioritized on-the-job learning and support for teachers because student learning gains had not been sufficient. Carrying out this strategy meant disrupting order and predictability in

schedules and instead prioritizing the learning needs of students *and* teachers. The system that the principal implemented for supporting teachers in changing their instructional practices included monitoring the impact of those changes on student outcomes.

Develop and Deploy a Team of Instructional Leaders

To significantly increase student achievement in low-performing schools, instructional improvement must occur quickly on a wide scale. Turnaround principals lead this charge but also recognize that wide-scale change cannot be accomplished alone. They quickly identify strong instructional leaders and enlist them to help spread excellent instruction. Turnaround principals build instructional leadership capacity in others through expanded leadership opportunities, professional learning, leadership coaching and feedback, and the development of collaborative instructional leadership teams. Turnaround principals also figure out how to selectively tap into district-provided instructional supports to align with and accelerate the work of their on-campus instructional leaders.

Example

One principal identified an instructional team of highly effective teacher leaders and assigned each of them to lead a small team of teachers. The teacher leaders were paid more for their additional responsibilities and each was accountable for the outcomes of all the students of the teachers on his or her team. The principal selected teacher leaders who were excellent teachers that others would want to emulate. She then worked with them to learn how to lead a team of adults. These teacher leaders worked collaboratively to push for fast, meaningful improvement in instruction across the school. At the beginning of every week, the teacher leaders met with the principal and the assistant principal for an hour of intensive discussions about each team's student data and progress, and another hour of "instructional rounds" in which the team rotated through a team teacher's classroom, observing and returning to dissect what they saw, leaving the teacher leader with next steps for the team discussion. Customizing instruction to meet student needs was easier with the instructional team of teacher leaders because an entire team of instructional experts was monitoring each student's progress and providing guidance for teachers on how to meet the needs of all students.

Strategic Partnerships

Changing the trajectory of a struggling school in a short time period is challenging work, especially if key influencers and partners are not engaged. Successful turnaround principals solicit the support of key influencers within their school community (e.g., Brinson & Steiner, 2012). They silence critics by achieving quick success and celebrating it publicly (e.g., Herman et al., 2008). They operate with the understanding that progress is an indicator that things are heading in the right direction, but is not ultimate success (e.g., Brinson & Steiner, 2012). Successful turnaround principals identify other organizations aligned with the school's vision for success and partner with them to bring additional resources and support to the turnaround effort (e.g., Huberman et al., 2011).

Turnaround principals gain the support of key influencers and forge partnerships to increase resources and expand learning opportunities for students.

Gain Support of Key Influencers

Turnaround principals need to garner the support of key influencers in the school community. Achieving dramatic change in a low-performing school requires stakeholders to acknowledge previous shortcomings and invest in a new vision for excellence. Some members of the school community, including parents and teachers, may be reluctant to support turnaround efforts due to negative past experiences or fear of change. Successful turnaround principals identify key influencers, such as trusted teachers, family members, and influential community members, and enlist their help to build support and decrease opposition.

Example

One principal entered his new job informed by research and driven by a theory that parents could create a demand for lasting change. He was bothered at how easily the rapid success of so many school turnaround efforts faltered when the charismatic leader departed. He believed that parents were the key, and that if parents demanded quality education for their children, the school's improvement would not dissipate when he left. He noticed that parent demand had a great influence on higher-performing schools. So, through parent engagement classes, he taught parents how to engage with the school and how to hold the school accountable. This principal viewed this effort as so crucial to his turnaround effort that he defined it as his first and highest priority: engaging parents to set the culture and climate of the school. After multiple parent engagement efforts, the school culture as well as student achievement improved.

Enlist Partner Organizations

Students in persistently low-performing schools often face academic and nonacademic challenges that require more support than the school can provide on its own. Turnaround principals recognize that they need to partner with mission-aligned organizations to meet students' social, emotional, physical, and mental health needs so that students are ready to learn each day. Moreover, they understand that partner organizations can provide additional enrichment programming so that students have opportunities to participate in interesting, creative, and varied activities, similar to those available to peers in higher-performing schools. Therefore, successful turnaround principals identify potential partner organizations, both locally and beyond, to determine what services can be obtained. Successful turnaround principals select partnerships that help principals achieve key goals of the turnaround, rather than distracting leaders or soaking up teacher and student time with efforts that do not help meet urgent goals.

Example

One principal left no stone unturned when reaching out to potential partners to support the school's turnaround efforts of engaging students, providing support for whole-child development, and increasing opportunities to learn through enrichment experiences that build motivation and aspiration. He reached out to state and local health and mental health providers to identify community resources for students and families that could be provided at the school or in the neighborhood. He reached out to community-based youth groups and after-school providers. He also reached out to businesses in a variety of industries, including science and technology, and explored opportunities for experts to volunteer to teach enrichment courses or serve as mentors to students. He reached out to arts and cultural organizations and athletics and recreational organizations to identify opportunities for partnerships. As a result of this extensive outreach, the principal leveraged partnerships and secured grants and donations to provide extended day enrichments, after-school activities, and wraparound support to students. He also hired a coordinator to manage partnerships and programming.

Conclusion

Principals leading school turnaround initiatives and those who support them are eager for concrete guidance and examples to point them toward actions that are likely to produce success. In this report, we have highlighted purposeful actions taken by principals who are attempting to lead turnaround. The actions relate to seven well-known components of the principal's job. We have provided many specific examples of actions that these principals have strategically undertaken to try to increase student achievement. We encourage readers to reflect on the categories and the actions highlighted, think more strategically about their own work in turnaround, adopt or adapt examples as applicable, and generate new ways, as necessary, to meet the learning needs of all of their students.

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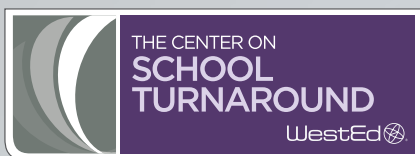
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EXAMPLES OF ACTIONS TAKEN BY PRINCIPALS TRYING TO LEAD TURNAROUND

