

**School Restructuring Options Under No Child Left Behind:
*What Works When?***

**Turnarounds With
New Leaders and Staff**



1120 East Diehl Road, Suite 200
Naperville, IL 60563-1486
800-356-2735 • 630-649-6500
www.learningpt.org

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About the Public Impact *What Works When* Team:

- *Turnarounds With New Leaders and Staff* coauthors: Julia M. Kowal and Emily Ayscue Hassel
- Contributing team members: Lucy M. Steiner and Matthew D. Arkin
- Editor: Bryan C. Hassel, Ph.D.
- Project manager and leadership section author: Emily Ayscue Hassel

Public Impact is an education policy and management consulting firm based in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Introduction to the *What Works When?* Series

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act has led to a seismic shift in how states and districts approach school accountability. Before passage of the law, most states and districts already had accountability systems based, in part, on standardized test scores. These accountability systems were tied to a variety of rewards and consequences for schools that did or did not meet student proficiency standards. The measures of proficiency varied, as they still do, based on each state's standards.

With the reauthorization of Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the passage of the NCLB Act in 2002, the federal government revised the existing federal accountability framework. Although this revision relied heavily on existing law—which included less frequent required testing, a less specific definition of adequate yearly progress (AYP), and less prescribed responses by districts and states to low-performing schools—it also introduced new measures designed to make schools more accountable for academic outcomes. Required annual assessment of student learning, a timeline specifying consequences for schools not meeting state-determined proficiency targets, consideration of significantly more dramatic school restructuring options, and a much stronger impetus for improvement from the federal rather than state level are critical aspects of the revised law.

Several years after the passage of NCLB, there are persistently low-performing schools in every state that face increasingly strong consequences for failing to improve student achievement sufficiently. In particular, schools that fail to make AYP for five consecutive years must engage in restructuring to improve student learning. Districts have several options for restructuring these schools. Although constrained to choose an option that is consistent with existing state law, districts can:

- Reopen the school as a public charter school.
- Replace “all or most of the school staff (which may include the principal) who are relevant to the failure to make adequate yearly progress.”
- Contract with “an outside entity, such as a private management company, with a demonstrated record of effectiveness, to operate the school.”
- Turn the “operation of the school over to the state educational agency, if permitted under State law and agreed to by the State.”
- Engage in another form of major restructuring that makes fundamental reforms, “such as significant changes in the school’s staffing and governance, to improve student academic achievement in the school and that has substantial promise of enabling the school to make adequate yearly progress.” (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002)

The *What Works When* series is designed to help district leaders understand what is known about when and under what circumstances each of these options works to improve student learning. The first four options are newer and more dramatic than most school reform efforts employed in the past. Each has high potential when large change is needed, but each also carries risks. The goal of this series is to help district leaders determine which change is the right change for each

school. The fifth piece in this series, *What Works When: A Guide for Education Leaders*, will help districts through the process of deciding when to use each of the five strategies.

Focus of this Paper: Turnarounds With New Leaders and Staff

This paper focuses on the second option, replacing school leaders and staff, which we will call “turnarounds.” Additional papers in the *What Works When* series explore the first, third, and fourth restructuring options in greater depth, and *What Works When: A Guide for Education Leaders* will help states and districts choose among the options for each school.

This paper examines what we know about when turnarounds may work for districts grappling with individual low-performing schools. The contents are organized into the following sections:

- Methodology
- What Is a Turnaround Under NCLB?
- What Is the Experience With Turnarounds?
- Why Have Districts Initiated School Turnarounds?
- What Do We Know From These Experiences? Key Success Factors and Key Challenges
- What Further Research Is Needed to Understand Turnarounds?
- Conclusion

Methodology

To identify what we know about turning around low-performing schools with new leaders and staff, we conducted a thorough literature review. As with many school reform strategies, there is a limited amount of research about the effects of replacing school leaders and staff. Most of what we know about this strategy in education comes from the limited experience with school reconstitution; we also use relevant information from the limited research about other school-restructuring approaches. We therefore reviewed the substantial body of cross-industry research about effective turnaround strategies and turnaround leaders in the business, nonprofit, and public sectors. This literature focuses on successful “bad-to-great” turnarounds, rather than incremental change and improvement. We briefly contrast this with incremental-change research. We also reviewed literature about noneducation organizations that successfully make large changes within one unit of larger organizations. We also examined reviews and leading research about school leadership, analogous noneducation leadership, and change leadership. Finally, we interviewed national experts who are familiar with school turnarounds and are involved in professional training of school turnaround leaders. Our interviews were conducted over the telephone and were guided by open-ended interview protocols.

Evaluating the Noneducation Analogies

Throughout this exploration of what we know about turnarounds in public schools, we draw upon lessons from the business, noneducation public, and nonprofit sectors, where research and experience are more abundant. Case studies and research about private sector turnarounds are particularly plentiful. There are many similarities across sectors regarding the factors that contribute to a successful turnaround, including governance, leadership, and environmental and organizational factors.

At the same time, there are several important differences between circumstances surrounding turnarounds in the business sector and turnaround efforts in schools, including:

- The failure that precedes turnaround in the business sector is often “existence threatening.” While a school’s failure has serious consequences for its students, only rarely does chronic failure have similar existence-threatening consequences for the school and its staff (Walshe, Harvey, Hyde, & Pandit, 2004).
- “Failure” has historically had a much more complex definition in public schools than in business. Most for-profit businesses define failure by purely quantitative standards, such as profit or market value. The goals of public schools are more multifaceted, and success or failure is less concrete (Paton & Mordaunt, 2004). Because states increasingly measure and report student learning success quantitatively, this is becoming a less important distinction between schools and other kinds of organizations.
- Practical and political challenges to turnarounds are more likely in public schools than in the private sector. Unlike private businesses, schools account to a multilayered community and cannot choose to withdraw from an unsuccessful “market” (Walshe et al., 2004). Districts may significantly alter how education is delivered (the topic of this series), but not whether education services *are* delivered to all children.

- Public school turnarounds are generally externally motivated while most for-profit turnarounds initiate somewhere within the organization. The external impetus in a school turnaround may affect school stakeholders' commitment to the change (Walshe et al., 2004).

In short, while turnarounds are difficult in the private sector, they may be even more challenging in schools. As we will examine here, none of these factors are complete barriers to success, but they indicate a high bar for the district and school leaders effecting turnarounds. Furthermore, these factors may make other public-sector turnarounds, which face many of the same conditions as school turnarounds, especially informative for understanding some complexities about when school turnarounds work.

Districts and school leaders will be familiar with these characteristics of the education sector and should keep them in mind when considering the best model for a turnaround. Overall, however, research on and experience with public-school turnarounds closely echo much of the research on turnarounds in the business, nonprofit, and other public sectors. Interviews with directors of the two known national and state-level turnaround leader training programs indicate that they use the noneducation turnaround literature as a major basis for their program content (T. Fairchild, personal communication, November 4, 2005; B. Sayeski, personal communication, November 4, 2005; G. Williams, personal communication, October 26, 2005). This lends confidence that this body of literature is highly applicable to the speedy, drastic change goals of leader and staff replacement in low-performing schools. Cross-industry analysis, therefore, contributes a great deal to what we know about when and under what circumstances turnarounds work.

What Is a Turnaround Under NCLB?

“I don’t know whether this is a turnaround. Ask me when I am finished.”
(Hoffman, 1989)

In this paper, we use *turnaround* to refer to a specific restructuring option under the NCLB Act: district-managed replacement of a school leader and staff relevant to the school’s failure (NCLB Act, 2002). Cross-industry literature about successful turnarounds—when organizations speedily transform from bad to great—forms the most relevant knowledge base for successful restructuring of low-performing schools through replacement of leaders and staff. In the past, replacement of staff and leaders in failing schools has been called reconstitution. Research about other private and public sectors consistently refers to successful bad-to-great improvements under new leaders (often with limited staff replacement) as turnarounds. Thus, we adopt turnaround here.

Intuitively and in the general literature, turnaround refers to a dramatic improvement in performance created by various changes within an organization. Turnaround research focuses on organizations that go from bad to great in a short period of time, most often by replacing a leader (and in some cases, other staff). This stands in contrast to the vast body of literature about change in general, which focuses on continuous, incremental improvement of satisfactory organizations over a long period of time with existing staff (e.g., Senge, 1990; Kotter, 1996; Collins, 2001; Fullan, 2001b; Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003). Organizations attempt turnarounds when they are failing by many measures and large improvements are needed quickly, not when small gains in already solid performance are desired. Successful turnarounds in the business sector almost always are defined by comparing an organization’s performance to its prior experience or industry norms (Brenneman, 1998; Gibson & Billings, 2003; Hamel, 2000). In public schools, a successful turnaround produces a dramatic increase in student achievement in a limited amount of time (T. Fairchild, personal communication, November 4, 2005; Malen, Croniger, Muncey, & Redmond-Jones, 2002; B. Sayeski, personal communication, November 4, 2005; G. Williams, personal communication, October 26, 2005). Because research and experience indicate that wholesale staff replacement is not necessary for successful turnarounds but that leader replacement usually is required, we focus here on leadership. A discussion of staff replacement is included in the Organizational Factors section.

What Is the Experience With Turnarounds?

Turnarounds in Other Sectors

There are many documented turnarounds in the for-profit sector—high-profile cases of huge companies that have dominated their industries and built their way to greatness over time. Frequently, a change in the market or an increase in competition forces change within these organizations, and both insiders and researchers clamor to provide the most comprehensive documentation of the turnaround process. This has led to dozens of case studies of individual companies that have made successful turnarounds such as IBM (Hamel, 2000); Continental Airlines (Brenneman, 1998); Best Buy (Gibson & Billings, 2003); Sears (Collins & Rainwater, 2005); Ford Motor Company (Wetlaufer, 1999); Harley-Davidson (Teerlink & Ozley, 2000); a major aerospace, automotive and engineering firm (Bossidy, 2001); a leading biotechnology company (Burbank, 2005); and a joint venture between Toyota and General Motors (Wilms, Hardcastle, & Zell, 1994). These and similar case studies form much of the experience base for turnaround research across industries. Because an estimated 70 percent of private turnaround efforts fail (Kotter, 1995), researchers have attempted to draw meaningful conclusions about when turnarounds work by empirical research based on large numbers of business turnarounds over several years (Barker, Patterson, & Mueller, 2001; Beer & Nohria, 2000; Gadiesh, Pace, & Rogers, 2003; Robbins & Pearce, 1992; Roberto & Levesque, 2005; Sudarsanam & Lai, 2001; Suzuki, 1985).

Although there are far fewer documented turnarounds in the public and nonprofit sectors, we have accounts of success in the New York City police force, the city of Atlanta, and the U.S. Postal Service, among others.

- **New York City Police Department.** William Bratton has an impressive history of leading turnaround efforts in the public sector. Most recently, he transformed New York from the “Rotten Apple” into the safest large city in the nation by turning around the city Police Department. Under his leadership, public confidence and employee satisfaction improved dramatically. Crime rates dropped during his tenure from 1994 to 1996 and continued to fall even after he moved on to Los Angeles (which recruited him to turn around the LAPD after his success in New York). The consistent methods he uses for his repeated successful turnarounds have been well documented, including these: clarifying the vision of success in personal terms for managers (how would they feel as the customer?) and continuing to communicate the vision in multiple ways; concentrating existing money to attack limited, rapidly solvable problems with big pay-offs rather than trying multiple changes all at once or scaling back the vision; choosing the targeted problems by analyzing hard data about results; using informal relationships to get a small number of key influencers on board for change, including one or more respected “insiders”; revealing hard performance and progress data about all key participants in meetings so no one can blame others and all must solve problems together; setting clear, attainable goals and continuing to clarify expectations for individual performance; identifying and silencing naysayers with indisputable facts about previous low performance and speedy improvement in the targeted areas (Kim & Mauborgne, 2003).

- **City of Atlanta.** Shirley Franklin, the first female mayor of Atlanta, turned around the city's financial crisis during her first term. Her administration addressed an \$82 million budget gap by laying off approximately 800 city employees and raising property taxes by nearly 50 percent. Using open and straightforward communication about problems (even when painful), solutions, and results, she helped raise employee morale and restore residents' faith in their city (Buchanan, 2003).
- **The U.S. Postal Service.** For nearly a decade starting in the 1990s, the nation's centuries-old postal service sought to transform itself from the source of jokes to a self-sustaining and efficient enterprise. The agency suffered from unprecedented increases in competition caused by the growth of technology and a legislative mandate that made it difficult to compete with new private delivery services. By focusing on its strengths and outsourcing to compensate for its weaknesses, the agency curbed its financial distress. It continued to face several challenges, particularly as a result of the terrorist attacks of 2001 (and more recently, the growth of the Internet), but its turnaround effort was recognized in 2001 by the National Performance Review of the Clinton Administration as a model of government strategy (Reisner, 2002).

Public-School Turnarounds

Approximately two thirds of the states have laws enabling districts or states to replace a school's leaders and staff, and several turnaround efforts were undertaken under state law before NCLB legislation was enacted. Most occurred during the late 1990s, and the vast majority was implemented by district officials (Ziebarth, 2002). In some schools, turnaround efforts have brought order and stability, as well as an increase in parent and community involvement. Academic progress among turnaround schools, however, is mixed. Well-documented examples of school turnaround efforts include those in San Francisco; Chicago; Houston; and Prince George's County, Maryland.

- **San Francisco.** The best-documented school turnaround effort began here in the 1980s. In response to a court order to improve minority student achievement, the district replaced the administration and staff at six schools in 1983. A review panel found in 1992 that school restructuring had enhanced students' achievement, and the panel recommended expansion of the restructuring policy in all chronically low-performing schools in the district. In the mid-1990s, the district pursued this turnaround method aggressively, replacing the majority of administration and staff at eight additional schools (Ziebarth, 2002; Goldstein, Kelemen, & Koski, 1998). These schools were required to implement the turnaround strategy more rapidly, however, and received fewer resources to help with the transition. Ultimately, they saw mixed results (Bacon, 1997). Since 1998, the district has largely abandoned its turnaround strategy in favor of less drastic reforms designed in partnership with the teachers' union and local communities (Hendrie, 1998).
- **Chicago.** In June 2000, as part of a citywide restructuring strategy under the direction of Paul Vallas, the Chicago Board of Education announced a takeover of five of the city's worst high schools. The district temporarily shut the schools down and reopened each with a new staff and principal, following summary firing of tenured teachers who were deemed incompetent by district management teams. Each school also reopened with a new school plan and a new focus. The turnaround effort followed two other similar

reforms at the same high schools, and it was met with strong local resistance. Overall, student achievement improved only marginally at these schools, if at all, and there was little change in instruction (Kelleher, 2000; Russo, 2005).

- **Houston.** In the early 1990s, Rusk Elementary School was one of Houston’s lowest performing schools, known for low test scores and animosity between parents and staff. District officials concluded that the school was too entrenched in a harmful culture to respond to normal intervention strategies. In 1993, the superintendent initiated a major turnaround at the school by reassigning the school’s principal and requiring all teachers to reapply for their jobs. Since then, the school has become a model turnaround, consistently gaining ratings of Acceptable or higher on the Texas grading system (Ziebarth, 2002; Olson, 1999).
- **Prince George’s County, Maryland.** Maryland instituted an aggressive accountability program in the mid-1990s that involved increased state monitoring of chronically failing schools. In 1997, anticipating a possible state takeover, the superintendent in Prince George’s County ordered the administration and staff at six district schools to reapply for their jobs. Five of six principals were replaced, as were approximately two thirds of teachers. The results of the three-year turnaround effort were mixed: Test scores at two of the six schools increased at a higher rate than the state average, but only one school performed well enough to exit the state’s watch list (Brady, 2003).

Beyond these documented turnaround initiatives, of course, individual schools throughout the United States have made dramatic improvements with mostly preexisting staff working under new turnaround leaders. We could identify neither cross-site analyses nor published case studies about individual schools that documented successful turnaround processes in schools. Experts from the two known state and national turnaround leader training programs confirmed this gap in the published research literature (T. Fairchild, personal communication, November 4, 2005; B. Sayeski, personal communication, November 4, 2005; G. Williams, personal communication, October 26, 2005). They also report that individual school successes may not be very widespread for two reasons: They typically have not been replicated by other school leaders, and the changes have proven challenging to sustain after the turnaround leader leaves (T. Fairchild, personal communication, November 4, 2005; B. Sayeski, personal communication, November 4, 2005; G. Williams, personal communication, October 26, 2005). Relatively new programs have arisen with a mission to grow cadres of leaders who can lead and sustain school turnarounds (T. Fairchild, personal communication, November 4, 2005; B. Sayeski, personal communication, November 4, 2005; G. Williams, personal communication, October 26, 2005). More information about these programs is provided in the companion document *What Works When: A Guide for Education Leaders*.

Why Have Districts Initiated School Turnarounds?

Across industries, turnarounds are often a strategy of last resort, used when less drastic intervention strategies have failed to improve performance (Doherty & Abernathy, 1998). The strategy is typically used when an organization suffers from a combination of challenges: The organization's "ultimate results" are abysmal, and its internal structure has proven inadequate to improve them. The ultimate results include profit in for-profit organizations (Gadiesh et al., 2003; Sudarsanam & Lai, 2001), measurable service quality in nonprofits and the public sector (Boyne, 2004; Paton & Mordaunt, 2004; Walshe et al., 2004), and measured student learning results in schools (Doherty & Abernathy, 1998; Hendrie, 1998). In each of our profiled districts, turnaround schools suffered from dreadfully low student performance, with as few as 10 percent of students scoring at grade level on state standardized tests.

Researchers and experts have found that organizations unable to improve ultimate results typically exhibit both internal and external indicators of failure (Hoffman, 1989; Walshe et al., 2004). Internal indicators include ineffective leadership and low staff morale (Finnegan & O'Day, 2003; Paton & Mordaunt, 2004). These schools, as with other organizations, must improve results quickly to avoid dire consequences for students, but they lack a clear strategy focused on the most necessary—and rapidly attainable—reforms (Kotter, 1995). Just as their business and nonprofit counterparts, these schools typically suffer from staff and leadership that have become accustomed to such consistently low performance that they cannot envision better results and are unable to create the sense of urgency necessary to initiate dramatic changes (Brenneman, 1998; Kotter, 1995; Walshe et al., 2004). For example, before the turnaround at Rusk Elementary in Houston, a state accreditation team described the atmosphere—due in part to the limitations of the school's principal, who fostered negative energy within the school—as "so poisonous the teachers couldn't teach and the pupils couldn't learn," (Doherty & Abernathy, 1998, p. 4).

External indicators of failure include loss of "customers" to new sources of competition or low performance on newly instituted measures that highlight preexisting weaknesses in the organization (Hoffman, 1989; Walshe et al., 2004). The NCLB Act reflects just this type of new policy focus in education, revealing low performance by many schools that had long gone unnoticed.

What Do We Know From These Experiences? Key Success Factors and Key Challenges

Research and experience indicate that there are several factors influencing the success or failure of school turnarounds, other public-sector turnarounds, and turnarounds in the business sector. We have organized them into four categories.

Governance. This is management of the turnaround process at the district level, including identification of schools that will use a turnaround strategy, selection of turnaround leaders, and ongoing support and management of turnaround schools. What governance role should the district play during a school turnaround effort? How should the district oversee and support the turnaround leader? How much freedom to act should the district give turnaround leaders?

Environmental Factors. In addition to district governance, many factors outside the control of an individual school's leader and staff affect the success of a turnaround attempt. How should the district and the school best engage the surrounding community in the turnaround effort? How much time should be provided for the change?

Leadership Factors. Research suggests that the turnaround leader is often the determining factor for a turnaround's success or failure. Most often, a new leader is required for a successful turnaround. Recognizing the limitations of the school's current leadership and selecting the right replacement are essential to the turnaround process. What are the characteristics to look for in a school turnaround leader? What specific actions do successful turnaround leaders take once they are on the job? How should the district assess a potential school leader's qualifications?

Organizational Factors. One of the largest challenges of turnaround efforts is galvanizing staff members—old and new—under a new school leader. What do research and previous experience teach us about how to do this well? How important is replacing existing staff? How should remaining staff be managed and new staff trained to create a school culture that supports learning? What elements of school design are most important in turnaround schools?

The following sections offer emerging answers to these questions in light of the research and experience base on turnarounds across industries and in public schools.

Governance

Turning around a low-performing school by replacing leaders and staff involves ongoing district involvement that is different from other drastic restructuring options such as chartering and contracting, in which the relationship between the district and school becomes contractual. In a turnaround, the district manages the school leader directly and maintains ultimate power over all systems in the school, such as staff management, finances, and schedule. Thus, district management policies and support can be critical to the success of the turnaround effort.

Research indicates that the district's most important roles are to choose the right turnaround leaders (see Leadership section), set expectations for school turnarounds within an accelerated timeframe, provide support and aligned systems to turnaround schools, and allow school

turnaround leaders freedom to implement necessary changes at the school level. Smaller, poorer districts with a smaller local labor pool or recruiting challenges may find that selecting a leader outside the traditional mold is difficult. Districts with acute staff shortages may find the same for staff replacement; however, wide scale staff replacement is rarely needed, and so staff shortages may not be a barrier to trying this restructuring option.

- **Accountability within an Accelerated Timeframe.** The district must hold turnaround schools with new leaders and staff accountable for learning results. What is ultimately expected for student performance in such schools is typically the same as for other district schools. However, when a school’s performance has been very low, the goal of restructuring is to make large improvements quickly (G. Williams, personal conversation, October 26, 2005; T. Fairchild and B. Sayeski, personal communication, November 4, 2005). Thus, accelerated timing is needed for improvement when current school performance is very low. Districts choosing this option must decide how much improvement is acceptable in how short of a timeframe and what actions – such as replacement of the school turnaround leader – will be taken if a school does not improve rapidly. Timing issues are discussed further in the Environment section of this paper below.
- **Support and Aligned Systems.** Most organizations in which turnarounds are successful have a supportive governing body that provides assistance to new management while giving the organization freedom to initiate real change (Hoffman, 1989; Mordaunt & Cornforth, 2004). A great turnaround leader can effect a turnaround without district support, but a sustained turnaround may be more likely when the district is involved in the turnaround from the start (T. Fairchild, personal communication, November 4, 2005; B. Sayeski, personal communication, November 4, 2005; G. Williams, personal communication, October 26, 2005).

Support may take one of several forms. It may be project managers who are assigned to each school to help them incorporate changes and serve as a liaison between the school and the district accountability office (Consortium for Equity in Standards and Testing, n.d.). This may also include support for ongoing communication between the school and other central-office functions. Support may be a business manager assigned to the school to allow the new leader to focus on instruction (Doherty & Abernathy, 1998). Support may include changes to align other district systems with a turnaround school’s needs, which may be critical for sustaining and replicating successful turnarounds within a district. System alignment examples include providing financial reports at the school level, facilitating the transfer of school staff who cannot help complete the turnaround, and ensuring effective use of federal funds that flow through the district to the school (T. Fairchild, personal communication, November 4, 2005; B. Sayeski, personal communication, November 4, 2005). To the extent that a district provides support and services, a slow pace—for example in providing student progress data reports—when changes must happen quickly may hinder a turnaround (T. Fairchild, personal communication, November 4, 2005; B. Sayeski, personal communication, November 4, 2005; G. Williams, personal communication, October 26, 2005;).

Support may come in the form of supplemental funding that allows the school to draw successful educators with higher salaries (Center for Education Policy and Leadership, 2003; T. Fairchild, personal communication, November 4, 2005; B. Sayeski, personal communication, November 4, 2005). While increased funding is always requested and sometimes may be necessary, it is not necessarily required to support a successful turnaround. Commentators on San Francisco's unsuccessful later turnarounds pointed to inadequate funding as one cause of failure (Ressel, 1999). However, a far weightier bulk of documented, successful turnarounds across industries (including, notably, public turnarounds) suggests that existing resources can support necessary change if they are concentrated on the factors that are most in need of change and offer the biggest possible pay-offs (Boyne, 2004; Buchanan, 2003; T. Fairchild, personal communication, November 4, 2005; Kim & Mauborgne, 2003; B. Sayeski, personal communication, November 4, 2005; G. Williams, personal communication, October 26, 2005). One pair of researchers who have studied over 100 cross-industry turnarounds explained the lack of extra money in successful turnarounds this way: A key element of the turnaround success formula is the concentration of effort on a narrow but important problem. All of the turnaround leader's initial energy is spent on a process of speedy, urgent trial and error to determine what changes will work and get results in that specific problem area. Too much money, and too many resulting initiatives to spend the money, can hinder this process and dilute the turnaround leader's attention (Kim & Mauborgne, 2003).

Whatever support the district provides, experience suggests that it will need to be ongoing. A successful turnaround school may show dramatic improvements within the first year. But ongoing challenges often remain. A sustained turnaround that lasts beyond the leaders' initial efforts may take as many as five years, and the school may require support from the district during the entire period (G. Williams, personal communication, October 26, 2005). The experience with turnarounds in San Francisco indicated that support is critical after initial implementation, not just in the first phase (Ressel, 1999). Leaders of Virginia's turnaround specialist program echo this sentiment (T. Fairchild, personal communication, November 4, 2005; B. Sayeski, personal communication, November 4, 2005).

- **Freedom to Act.** Research and experience suggest that in chronically failing environments, the changes needed for success are often substantial (Roberto & Levesque, 2005). Research about successful reform efforts suggests that these schools have a higher chance of success when the district allows as much freedom as possible from regulations regarding scheduling, transportation, discipline, and curriculum (Berends, Bodilly, & Kirby, 2002). However, experienced school turnaround leaders and those working to grow their ranks report that freedom from district rules is not an essential precondition to turnaround success (T. Fairchild, personal communication, November 4, 2005; B. Sayeski, personal communication, November 4, 2005; G. Williams, personal communication, October 26, 2005). Often, successful turnaround leaders are able to achieve results within larger policy or organizational constraints (Paton & Mordaunt, 2004). When they cannot, these leaders achieve results by working around rules and seeking approval after their strategy has worked, rather than asking for permission beforehand (G. Williams, personal communication, October 26, 2005).

Districts that rely on a turnaround leader to make substantial changes despite traditional district regulations may raise the bar, however, for the type of leader they must attract. Without a leader who is willing to bend the rules and beg forgiveness later, external constraints can limit the chances of turning around student performance in a school (Paton & Mordaunt, 2004). Research in the public sector reveals that without an extraordinary leader, lack of freedom to act quickly and decisively can severely hinder an organization's ability to change (Paton & Mordaunt, 2004). Private-sector research indicates that requiring item-by-item permission by a unit for deviations from broader organization policies makes success less likely when the unit is attempting to succeed in an area of previous failure (Christensen, 1997). In schools, too, RAND researchers (Gill, Hamilton, Lockwood, Marsh, Zimmer, Hill, et al., 2005) found higher student achievement scores in schools in which the principal had authority to hire and fire his or her own teachers.

Providing schools extra support while simultaneously granting them greater freedom to deviate from district policies may be a difficult balance for central office staff to strike, especially without initial assurance that the new leader's reforms are going to work. Some districts have dealt with this challenge by asking new leaders to provide explanations and data to support the waivers they request (G. Williams, personal communication, October 26, 2005). The success of this strategy depends in large part on the capacity of the school's turnaround leader to achieve results without extra freedom, and his or her level of tolerance for item-by-item waivers (see Leadership below).

Environment

In addition to support and freedom provided at the district level, there are other “environmental” factors that influence the success or failure of a turnaround. The school and district engaged in the turnaround effort also will have to consider how best to engage the surrounding community in the turnaround effort and how much time to allow for results.

- **Community Engagement.** Research has shown that during the implementation phase of a turnaround, successful organizations frequently develop a turnaround campaign to ensure that restructuring takes place in an environment that is receptive to change (Garvin & Roberto, 2005; Hirschhorn, 2002; Kim & Mauborgne, 2003; Kotter, 1995; Roberto & Levesque, 2005). Low customer trust is a common element of failure leading to turnaround efforts across industries (Boyne, 2004; Brenneman, 1998; Hamel, 2000; Kim & Mauborgne, 2003). In schools, students, parents, and the broader community are all customers with a stake in school success.

Substantive change can create emotionally charged environments, with some community members feeling hopeful and energized about the school's future, and others resisting the change with fear and distrust. In successful turnarounds these feelings are made productive by creating a sense of ownership in the local community—making it clear why change is necessary and allowing staff and community members to see the real consequences of failure (Beer, Eisenstat, & Spector, 1990; Kim & Mauborgne, 2003;

Kotter, 1995; Roberto & Levesque, 2005). For example, though challenges at the U.S. Postal Service were largely external, the agency also faced powerful internal and community resistance to change. In retrospect, leaders believe this was mainly because key stakeholders did not perceive the seriousness of the problem (Reisner, 2002). In New York City, Bill Bratton dealt with this problem by putting key managers in the police department face to face with the daily problems that plagued the department, so that they could not deny the reality of failure. Police officers were asked to ride the subways that their constituents feared. This encouraged employees to see the customers' perspective and become part of the solution rather than deflecting criticism they felt was directed at them (Kim & Mauborgne, 2003).

These experiences echo turnaround efforts and other restructuring efforts in public schools, where teachers and parents have had a major impact on the design and implementation of restructuring strategies. During its restructuring effort, Chicago attempted to engage the community productively by initiating partnerships with grassroots organizations who helped parents understand why reform was necessary in their children's schools. The city also convened groups of community members at each school who guided changes that best responded to the needs of the community at each site (Chicago Public Schools, 2005). In contrast, in a district studied by Rice and Malen (2003), opportunities for collaboration on school redesign were missed due to more urgent problems of school operations. The resulting chaos reportedly made it difficult to establish and implement a collaborative vision in reconstituted schools. These experiences highlight the importance of having a turnaround leader who communicates a clear vision of the future, gets the right people on board for the turnaround process and concentrates on a narrow set of high-impact objectives early (see Leadership section below).

Parents may present a special challenge different from customers in other industries. Parents are not purely customers—they are also part of the long list of adults who affect student learning, because they control much of children's time outside of school. They also often have strong relationships with preexisting school leaders and staff. Some parents may have a stake in retaining school leaders and staff with whom they have relationships and may reject new leaders and staff, even when the school has failed (Hassel & Hassel, 2005). When a school has failed for several years, the parents whose children are still enrolled are, by definition, those who have not exited. Many of them may still feel hopeful that the use of “voice” can influence the current school leadership to improve (Hirschman, 1970).

Major restructuring efforts are politically challenging because the benefits of change often do not appear for several years, but the costs are immediate (Goldstein et al., 1998). The key lesson from prior turnaround efforts across industries is to engage teachers, parents, and the surrounding community in a way that encourages them to become part of the changes in the school, rather than critical observers who watch from the sidelines. The resulting support appears to provide the school with a better chance of success for turning its performance around.

- **Timetable.** The timing of a turnaround strategy is critical. Time is most relevant at two stages of the turnaround effort: planning and implementation. With regard to planning, the timeline for restructuring under federal law is largely dictated by the terms of NCLB. Under the law, a district must develop a restructuring plan during the year after a school fails to meet AYP for five consecutive years and must implement the plan in the following year. One study of states' implementation of the NCLB restructuring options found that few districts chose to replace school leaders and staff because schools were not identified for improvement until after the school year had begun (DiBiase, 2005). Even when scores are released earlier, schools may be tempted to focus on less drastic improvement efforts in the fifth year in hopes that restructuring will not be required. Research and experience suggests, however, that a year of planning is important. Schools

that make major staff and leadership changes over a summer often struggle with chaos and poor results in the following year (Malen et al., 2002). In San Francisco, where restructuring was undertaken by court order, two turnaround schools were not given the characteristic year to plan for their transition; ultimately, neither showed any gains in student achievement (Goldstein et al., 1998).

The timeline for implementation is equally important, if less defined. Most studies of business turnarounds conclude that the difference between successful and unsuccessful turnarounds lies more in the implementation of changes than their substance (Sudarsanam & Lai, 2001; Hoffman, 1989). Failure across industries is largely associated with well-planned change strategies that are only partially implemented (Roberto & Levesque, 2005). There is no definite time period to guarantee success: Some turnarounds in the public sector may take only a few months (Walshe et al., 2004). In Atlanta, for example, Mayor Franklin found that a 60-day window in which to balance the city's budget had the advantages of minimizing the opportunity for staff to doubt their commitment to change and forcing them to focus on critical turnaround targets (Buchanan, 2003). On the other hand, many corporate turnarounds take between three and five years (Appel, 2005; Gibson & Billings, 2003; Joyce, 2004).

Common to successful turnarounds, however, is implementation of intense reforms in the first few months (Sudarsanam & Lai, 2001). Fast, focused results are important in part to help establish credibility, create momentum for change, and break down resistance (Buchanan, 2003; Kotter, 1995; Paton & Mordaunt, 2004; Walshe et al., 2004). Unsuccessful turnarounds typically implement major reforms beyond the end of the first year, often in attempt to introduce changes that were implemented ineffectively the first time (Sudarsanam & Lai, 2001).

This research from other sectors resembles the experience of successful school turnarounds, in which drastic improvements are frequently evident at the end of the first year, particularly in elementary schools. In middle and high schools, improvement in the first year may be erratic, but overall increases in test scores are typically evident within the second year of successful turnaround efforts (G. Williams, personal communication, October 26, 2005). The turnaround program in Virginia expects significant student achievement improvements within one year, followed by continued improvement into Years 3–5 (T. Fairchild, personal communication, November 4, 2005; B. Sayeski, personal communication, November 4, 2005).

Following the initial implementation of turnaround strategies, organizations across industries frequently enter a longer phase of recovery in which they incorporate changes into sustainable structures (Boyne, 2004; Roberto & Levesque, 2005; Teerlink & Ozley, 2000; Walshe et al., 2004). Particularly in schools, first-stage improvements are likely to be superficial unless they are followed by this longer-term strategy (T. Fairchild, personal communication, November 4, 2005; B. Sayeski, personal communication, November 4, 2005; G. Williams, personal communication, October 26, 2005). District pressure that creates a sense of urgency during initial implementation can be useful, but continued time pressure during the recovery phase may cut short the necessary time for lasting changes

(Paton & Mordaunt, 2004). Ultimately, the lesson for districts is to build in adequate planning time, encourage schools to implement changes quickly, and allow time for a long-term plan to solidify early results.

Leadership

The evidence is strong that a school's leader makes a big difference in student learning in all school settings. However, understanding of the characteristics that distinguish high-performing school leaders from the rest is very limited. In addition, no research yet describes how the characteristics of high-performing leaders differ in emerging school contexts such as start-up and turnaround schools. Research outside of education addresses some of these distinctions, and we draw on that here to provide some guidance about what districts should seek in turnaround school leaders.

A critical aspect of the district's governance role is selecting school leaders who will be effective in a turnaround situation. Research indicates that school leader differences explain about 25 percent of differences in student learning accounted for by school, on average (Waters et al., 2003; Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Meta-analysis of 51 cross-industry studies of high-complexity jobs found that people whose performance is one standard deviation above the mean achieve measurable results an average of 48 percent higher than average performers (Hunter, Schmidt, & Judiesch, 1990). In industry, where results have long been measured quantitatively, leaders who demonstrate certain behaviors achieve significantly better financial results (Collins, 2001; Goleman, 2001a; Goleman, 2001b). Research documenting turnarounds in public and private organizations indicates that the right leader is not just one factor but a critical lynchpin in successful turnarounds (Bossidy, 2001; Brenneman, 1998; Buchanan, 2003; Hamel, 2000; Hirschhorn, 2002; Joyce, 2004; Kanter, 2003; Kim & Mauborgne, 2003; Reisner, 2002; Teerlink & Ozley, 2000; Wetlaufer, 1999). The critical nature of the turnaround leader is echoed by those familiar with successful school turnarounds (T. Fairchild, personal communication, November 4, 2005; B. Sayeski, personal communication, November 4, 2005; G. Williams, personal communication, October 26, 2005). In short, the potential for leader impact is large in any setting, including schools, and most certainly in school turnaround efforts.

A large body of research and theoretical writing explores school leadership in general, and some of this may apply to aspects of turnaround school leadership. However, no school leader research yet provides a model of school leadership that is:

- Validated, or proven to accurately describe what distinguishes high performers from the rest, eliminating items that are appealing but inconsequential and including items that may not be intuitive from limited observations.
- Limited to characteristics that describe the person not the job.
- Detailed enough on those characteristics that districts may use it for accurate selection of high-performing leaders.

Two recent reviews summarize the state of school leader research. Leithwood et al. (2004) reviewed studies of school leadership and discussion of philosophical debates about matters such

as distributed leadership (e.g., Elmore, 2000) and change theory (e.g., Fullan, 2001b). The Leithwood team offers a hypothesized model of school leadership, which includes three broad categories: setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organization. However, the authors' final conclusion after reviewing existing research is: "There is much yet to be learned about who provides educational leadership" (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 17). Waters et al. (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of 30 years of leadership studies, both published and unpublished. They define 21 leader responsibilities, combining behavior characteristics and specific, prescribed leader actions, to implement effective-schools research (see next paragraph). Applying these 21 responsibilities mathematically to a hypothetical school at the 50th percentile in student achievement, they found a 10-percentile-point increase in student achievement for a one standard deviation across-the-board (all 21 characteristics) increase in leader capability. This percentile point increase translates roughly into a 20-percent increase in measured results for a one standard deviation increase in leader capability. They also hypothesize a model for defining when leadership will have a positive effect on student learning, including focus on effective school practices and adjustment of leadership to the magnitude of change. While helpful, this existing school leadership research explains neither the bulk of the performance difference between high-performing leaders and the rest, nor the characteristics districts should seek in candidates for school leadership positions.

One point on which many experts agree is that leaders in any school context must know the common findings about what works in high-performing schools, also called the effective-schools research (Elmore, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004; Waters et al., 2003). Thus, we include that content knowledge in the leader-selection list at the end of this section and in the Organizational Factors section.

To the extent that the existing school leader research is useful for understanding high-performing school leaders in general, it lacks any studies that describe the distinguishing characteristics of school leaders who are very successful in a *turnaround* situation specifically. The Leithwood team (2004) expresses hope that great school leaders can be flexible to achieve results in a variety of settings. However, experts who have studied thousands of managers, even when finding common leader characteristics, also have found differences in leaders who perform very well in differing settings (e.g., Boyatzis, 1982; Goleman, 2001b; Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Studies from other sectors comparing high and average performers have found that some leaders, with certain behavioral tendencies, consistently perform better in certain types of leadership roles (e.g., Spencer & Spencer, 1993; Collins, 2001).

Similarly, leading thinkers have hypothesized that unique leader actions are important for continuous change and improvement within all organizations (e.g., Collins, 2001; Fullan, 2001a; Kotter, 1996; Senge, 1990; Waters et al., 2003). Waters et al. (2003) refer to larger, nonturnaround changes within schools as second-order change. They hypothesize about the actions needed to implement such change. There are some similarities between these actions and those described repeatedly in cross-industry literature describing successful turnarounds, including clarifying a vision of the future, involving a leadership team, acknowledging failures openly, challenging the status quo, and acting as the driving force of change (Waters et al., 2003). However, the most commonly reported turnaround success actions—concentrating on a few changes with big, fast payoffs and acting without seeking permission for deviations from

current organization policy—are not part of the Waters et al. and other general change models. This is not surprising; turnaround literature across industries, focused on speedy, bad-to-great improvements, treats bad-to-great turnarounds as a phenomenon separate from less drastic and urgent change efforts. The no-holds-barred turnaround leader actions may not be effective or necessary in less dire, less urgent circumstances. Similarly, an incremental change focus requiring a leader to press too many culture levers at once may dilute the turnaround leader's effort produce speedy results in a focused area. This many explain why the central focus of successful turnaround leader actions differs from those described in more general change leader literature.

Districts considering turnarounds with new leaders (and possibly some new staff) as a restructuring strategy will be well served to understand what is known about leaders who perform very well specifically in the bad-to-great turnaround role. First, we address the issue of whether a new leader is necessary to achieve a successful turnaround under NCLB's restructuring option of replacing leaders and staff. Second, we address the distinguishing qualities—both actions and behavioral competencies—of leaders who are very successful in turnarounds. Third, we address ways that districts can choose such leaders for their schools.

Is a New Leader Necessary?

Approximately 70 percent of successful turnarounds in the business sector include changes in top management (Hoffman, 1989). (The extent to which top managers are replaced in successful turnarounds ranges from 33 percent to 100 percent in different studies.) Some turnarounds are thwarted when an existing leader is not convinced that the status quo is worse than attempting the unknown. In other cases, the leader believes that change is necessary, but is unable to modify his or her own behavior or embody a necessary new culture (Kotter, 1995).

In the business sector and in public schools, introducing a new leader to effect a turnaround can have benefits that are symbolic as well as substantive. A visible change in leadership may help communicate the school's dedication to change, allow the community to invest in a leader who shows new potential, and generate internal organizational pressure that helps make real change possible (Boyne, 2004; Walshe et al., 2004). New leaders are nothing new in education, but most new leaders of low-performing schools do not turn them around. In successful school turnarounds, symbolic changes in leadership are not enough. The turnaround leader—whether new or existing—must support change and have the capacity to lead it. Mere replacement of leaders in public schools may lead to less drastic change than in the business sector where leaders can implement deep and comprehensive changes, some of which are not feasible in the public sector. Extreme measures such as withdrawing entirely from an unsuccessful market are a constant possibility in the business sector, but not in public schools (Boyne, 2004).

Under NCLB guidelines, districts choosing this restructuring option must replace “staff (which may include the principal) who are relevant to the failure” (NCLB, 2002). Since research indicates that most often a new leader is necessary for a successful turnaround, most districts selecting this option will need to choose replacement leaders. Some districts might be tempted to promote an assistant principal or lead teacher from the failing school to the principal role, reasoning that such a new leader would already be familiar with the students, staff, and parents.

According to cross-industry research, successful businesses that replace top leaders are almost twice as likely to replace them with someone from outside the organization, rather than an insider (Hoffman, 1989). New leaders who are recruited from outside the school offer a fresh perspective on its strengths and weaknesses. A new leader may also introduce a refined concept of the school that provides a better direction for its growth. A strong new leader also may be better able to build his or her own staff teams, whether by replacing staff or transforming their approach (Hoffman, 1989).

In summary, a turnaround leader need not always be a new leader nor new to the school. However, a large majority of successful turnarounds are directed by leaders new to the organization, and the NCLB Act (2002) requires replacement of staff who are relevant to the failure; most often this will include the school's leader.

What Makes a Successful Turnaround Leader?

Successful turnaround leaders can be defined in two ways: by their specific actions and by the behavioral characteristics or competencies that lead them to act in certain ways.

Actions. Research indicates that successful turnaround leaders across industries, public and private, take common actions. Based on the collection of published bad-to-great turnaround case studies, we have compiled a list of leader actions that have appeared in multiple successful turnarounds. This is by no means exhaustive or precisely prescriptive; various turnarounds may call for other actions as well, and some may not require all of these actions. For the district selecting turnaround leaders, evidence that the prospective leader has taken some similar actions is confirmation that the leader's previous success was not an accident but the result of well-proven turnaround tactics that can be repeated. We have translated the findings (Bossidy, 2001; Breneman, 1998; Buchanan, 2003; T. Fairchild, personal communication, November 4, 2005; Hamel, 2000; Hirschhorn, 2002; Kanter, 2003; Kim & Mauborgne, 2003; Reisner, 2002; B. Sayeski, personal communication, November 4, 2005; Teerlink & Ozley, 2000; Wetlaufer, 1999; G. Williams, personal communication, October 26, 2005) from a broad array of organizations into school terms where necessary.

Major Actions

- Concentrates on a few changes with big, fast payoffs
- Implements practices proven to work with previously low-performing students *without* seeking permission for deviations from district policies

Supporting Steps

- Communicates a positive vision of future school results
- Collects and personally analyzes school and student performance data
- Makes an action plan based on data
- Helps staff personally see and feel the problems students face
- Gets key influencers within district and school to support major changes

- Measures and reports progress frequently and publicly
- Gathers staff team often and requires all involved in decision making to disclose and discuss their own results in open-air meetings
- Funnels more time and money into tactics that get results; halts unsuccessful tactics
- Requires all staff to change—not optional
- Silences change naysayers indirectly by showing speedy successes
- Acts in relentless pursuit of goals rather than touting progress as ultimate success

One striking element of this research is that successful turnaround leaders use speedy, focused results as a major lever to change the organization’s culture. This stands in contrast to research about incremental change leaders, who focus on a broader process of culture change to improve long-term results (Fullan, 2001a; Kotter, 1996; Senge, 1990; Waters et al., 2003).

Competencies and Characteristics

Although researchers and consultants have begun to speculate about what makes a successful turnaround leader in the school context (Burbach, 2005; Duke, 2004; Joyce, 2004; School Turnaround, n.d.), no high-quality research has been conducted to clarify the competencies that distinguish successful school turnaround leaders from those who are moderately successful or unsuccessful.

In other sectors, there are no published studies that rigorously compare competencies of outstanding and average turnaround leaders, as there are for entrepreneurs and managers of already-successful units within larger organizations (the classic manager or principal role). However, there is a rich set of case studies documenting the actions that successful turnaround leaders take (as noted previously). Here, we briefly compare the actions of turnaround managers to those of successful managers in other contexts. Then, we pair rigorous, published studies about entrepreneurs and classic managers with the documented actions of turnaround leaders to construct an initial list of competencies that may distinguish successful from less successful turnaround leaders. Future research should be conducted to confirm and refine this model.

The Turnaround Leader Role. Prior review of case studies in noneducation public turnarounds indicates that these leaders resemble typical, successful public managers—but also something more. Joyce (2004) notes that multiple case studies revealed successful public turnaround leaders use strategic visions, communication, and employee empowerment just as other successful public managers do. This is very similar to the findings of Spencer and Spencer’s (1993) rigorous studies of middle managers, including principals (examined in detail in Competencies section). But Joyce (2004) also found that public turnaround managers use additional tactics: They focus on operational details; they are very determined and resilient and use this to get staff to take actions that may feel uncomfortable; and they spend more time on planning and control. These actions are very similar to key findings of Spencer and Spencer’s (1993) rigorous studies of successful start-up leaders across industries.

By definition, turnaround leaders are working within a preexisting organization. The school leader operating within a district must manage a web of relationships with the central-office hierarchy. The turnaround principal's manager in most cases will be a district leader responsible for a number of schools, and the turnaround principal in part will be dependent on various people in the central office who control school funding and services. In addition, school turnaround leaders cannot build new practices from scratch as start-up leaders can. Instead, they must get school staff members to stop one set of activities and behaviors that have failed to work and get them to start a new set that will work. This challenge is not unique in kind—successful managers in already well-performing concerns must influence people to change when customer needs change or new technologies become available for use (Beer & Nohria, 2000; Collins, 2001; Kanter, 1991; Kotter, 1995). Successful change within thriving organizations is hard enough and the subject of many studies. Emerging thought has helped leaders understand that leading an organization forward as the world changes, not just managing the details of compliance with current policies, is key to sustained success (Beer & Nohria, 2000; Christensen, 1997; Collins, 2001; Kotter, 1998).

Turnaround change is more extreme than improving already-successful organizations, and in many ways turnarounds resemble start-ups. Before a turnaround, the organization is failing; old practices are not working. New practices, rather than merely improved ones, must be started to ensure success. Success must come quickly: in a start-up, before the initial investment funds are consumed, and in a turnaround, before the organization loses patience with change. There simply is no room for prolonged investment of time or money in activities that do not work. But what to fix in a turnaround is not always clear at first, just as the exact steps for making a new business venture successful often are not clear. Turnaround leaders must decide what results matter most and focus on a few actions to change those essential results. Through a speedy process of trial and error in which unsuccessful tactics are dropped and new strategies tried, successful turnaround leaders figure out what actions will get rapid, large results and then they increase those activities (Bossidy, 2001; Brenneman, 1998; Buchanan, 2003; Hamel, 2000; Hirschhorn, 2002; Kanter, 2003; Kim & Mauborgne, 2003; Reisner, 2002; Teerlink & Ozley, 2000; Wetlaufer, 1999). This is very much the way highly successful start-up leaders operate, as well (Spencer & Spencer, 1993).

Thus, the work of turnaround leaders is a hybrid of the classic manager role (including that of traditional principal) and start-up leader role. Similar to classic managers, they must operate within an existing larger organization, where access to resources and “forgiveness” to try something new is determined by webs of relationships upwards, sideways, and down. But as with start-up leaders, they are expected to produce critical results—improved student achievement scores, improved profits, improved customer image, reduced crime rates, avoidance of or emergence from bankruptcy, and others—with lightning speed, *or else*. In a turnaround, failure to accomplish core objectives quickly is not acceptable, since the organization is in turnaround mode precisely because current organization performance is disastrous. Finally, the school turnaround leader is leading change—but far more drastic and seemingly improbable change than leaders in already-well-performing organizations. To the extent that turnaround change actions resemble incremental change actions *and* are different from those of start-up and classic managers, turnaround leaders may need additional capabilities.

The Competencies. Fortunately, high-quality cross-industry research has found strikingly similar characteristics among leaders in successful start-up organizations in numerous industries and cultures. Similarly, highly successful middle managers in differing industries are remarkably similar to each other. In carefully constructed comparison studies, these similarities distinguish highly successful performers—the top 10 percent as measured using commonly accepted outcome variables—from average performers. Leaders in the start-up and middle management contexts who achieve the best results exhibit these characteristics more frequently and at higher levels of skill than those leaders who achieve average results (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). These characteristics are termed competencies and are defined as measurable actions, or what people do, say, think, and feel. This is distinct from content or subject-matter knowledge (Boyatzis, 1982; Goleman, 2001b; Spencer & Spencer, 1993).

Applying Spencer and Spencer's (1993) research about common characteristics of highly successful start-up leaders to schools, Hassel and Hassel (2005) advise that turnaround leaders may need to exhibit the following competencies:

- **Driving for Results.** Start-up leaders set high goals, take initiative, and are relentlessly persistent. They are able to make decisions even when unpopular or different from approaches taken by others (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). In a school context, behaviors using this competency might include setting a very high bar for the number of students who should make grade level and planning ahead to make it happen. When results fall short, these school leaders would not give up on the original high goals and would likely to raise the goals once met.
- **Solving Problems.** Leaders in successful start-ups gather and use data, think through problems, and follow up with targeted action. They use a hands-on approach to problem solving to ensure that everyone can follow the plan (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). In a school context, behaviors using this competency might include researching what has worked in similar schools, closely monitoring and announcing progress, making decisions based on student progress data, and constantly evaluating their approach toward meeting the school's goals.
- **Showing Confidence.** Successful start-up leaders exhibit confidence that the organization's goals can be reached. Instead of treating challenges as excuses for failure, they use them as a starting point for problem solving to meet common goals (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). In a school context, behaviors using this competency might include continually stating that problems will be solved successfully and not excusing any student from learning based on a student's family, ethnicity, or background.
- **Influencing Others.** Goals are reached in successful start-ups in large part due to the leaders' use of relationships. These leaders focus less on developing staff skills over time (though this is eventually necessary) and more on using influence to foster immediate action toward the organization's short-term needs (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). In a school context, behaviors exhibiting this competency might include using strong interpersonal skills to motivate teachers, parents, and students around the new school's mission and personally addressing staff, students, or parents who need to alter school-related conduct. Although these leaders have extraordinarily strong interpersonal skills, they will sacrifice a long-term relationship if it is necessary to achieve immediate learning results.

Again, applying Spencer and Spencer's (1993) research to schools, Hassel and Hassel report that turnaround leaders also may need to exhibit the following competencies of successful classic middle managers:

- **Influencing Others.** This is the strongest single competency among high-performing, classic managers, including principals. They are very attuned to establishing credibility throughout the organization and to working through others. They carefully calculate the effect of words and actions on peers, those whom they manage, and those who manage them. We include here the related competencies of developing others' capabilities and interpersonal understanding (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Developing others may be needed only if a turnaround leader is responsible for sustaining a turnaround past initial implementation.
- **Driving for Results.** This includes taking initiative, setting goals, and improving the effectiveness of the organization. Unlike the start-up manager, the ongoing manager's drive for results is colored by the desire to influence others. In practical terms, while the start-up leader might jump in and take over an activity just to get the job done right, the classic manager would not feel successful unless he or she influenced subordinates to achieve the results themselves (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). The combined drive to succeed and subsuming of individual achievement to results achieved through others has been echoed by *Good to Great* author Jim Collins (2001) in what he calls a paradoxical blend of humility and professional will.
- **Teamwork and Cooperation.** This involves soliciting others' input and involving them in matters that affect them. This competency is not part of the start-up leader profile (Spencer & Spencer, 1993).
- **Analytical Thinking.** This is broadly used and includes thinking logically about influence strategies, the short and long-term consequences of various situations, likely obstacles, and the steps needed to achieve a goal. In contrast, the start-up leader focuses similar problem solving exclusively on accomplishing immediate results (Spencer & Spencer, 1993).

The distinction between successful start-up leaders and classic managers lies as much in the balance as the content. Start-up leaders are driven foremost by a craving for speedy results, critical when the mere existence of the enterprise depends on it. Classic managers are driven foremost by a desire for credibility and influence within the broader organization, including the building of competence among school staff. Turnaround leaders in a district may need to balance both.

Researchers who have compared very-high-performing traditional principals to high-performing middle managers across industries found overall strong similarities. But researchers also found that the best principals display more conceptual thinking, team leadership, and organizational commitment than average performers (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). These differences also may exist for high-performing school turnaround leaders compared to those in other industries. Thus, we add three more competencies from Spencer and Spencer's studies to the model:

- **Conceptual Thinking:** The ability to identify patterns and connections between situations and to identify key issues in complex situations. In the school context, a leader displaying this competency might identify how to connect learning standards and

activities across grade levels and subjects, or understand and articulate for staff how the curriculum and classroom activities should connect to the school mission.

- **Team leadership:** The ability and willingness to assume the role as leader of a team or group. At basic levels, this includes keeping the team informed; explaining decisions; treating all team members fairly; promoting team effectiveness by removing incapable members and assigning interesting, developmental tasks to all; and ensuring adequate resources for the team's work. At highest levels, it includes ensuring that the work of the team gets done and communicating a compelling vision that, in fact, motivates the team to perform.
- **Organizational Commitment:** The ability and willingness to align one's own behavior with the needs and goals of the organization. This includes working toward the organization's goals even when in conflict with one's own preferences, making personal sacrifices to achieve the goals, standing by controversial decisions that benefit the organization, and asking others to make personal sacrifices to meet organization goals.

Researchers who conducted these studies have hypothesized about the competencies of highly successful change leaders, and they suggest that communicating a compelling vision is an additional influence competency needed. This is consistent with general change leader research (e.g., Kotter, 1996; Waters et al., 2003). Because communicating a compelling vision also is a well-proven action of successful turnaround leaders, we add it to the model.

- **Communicating a Compelling Vision.** This is the highest level of team leadership, noted above, applied to a high-change situation. It involves communicating a compelling vision of the organization's future goals and plan so that staff find adapting in response both appealing and feasible. Communications are motivating and lead staff to commit their energy to the change (Spencer & Spencer, 1993).

This hybrid model is supported by additional research indicating that successful turnaround businesses replace their top leaders with ones who are growth-oriented and entrepreneurial. These managers typically also have experience in the organization's industry, are self-confident, task-oriented, and are able to inspire confidence in others (Hoffman, 1989).

Initial and Sustaining Phases of Turnarounds. The competencies described above spring from cross-industry leader research, but they also overlap with characteristics cited anecdotally by those who work with school turnaround leaders. These experts also perceive differences between the actions that a turnaround leader must make in the initial phase (Years 1–2) of a turnaround and the years immediately following when changes are sustained and solidified (T. Fairchild, personal communication, November 4, 2005; B. Sayeski, personal communication, November 4, 2005; G. Williams, personal communication, October 26, 2005). We hypothesize that the most successful turnaround leaders in the initial phase, when speedy results are crucial, more closely resemble start-up leaders. Similarly, we hypothesize that the most successful leaders during the sustaining phase, when all staff must permanently adopt widespread behavior changes, somewhat more resemble classic managers and may need to use more of the incremental change tactics described in the literature on broader organizational change. But the initial phase requires working within a complex hierarchy, and the sustaining phase requires continued drive for results in a very challenging environment. Thus, both roles are likely to require some mix of the

classic entrepreneur and manager competencies, and both likely require continued communication of the vision.

In sum, district leaders should look first and foremost to the well-documented turnaround leader actions and hybrid turnaround leader competencies for guidance, knowing that the leadership needs of even a highly successful turnaround school may mature over time. In the future, significantly better research is needed to understand precisely what competencies distinguish high-performing school turnaround leaders in both initial and sustaining turnaround phases.

Selecting the Right Leader

A track record is generally the best indicator of a leader's future success. Often, however, a district will be forced to choose among candidates who have not lead whole-school turnaround efforts. Instead, they may have led smaller change efforts within schools, perhaps not from positions of formal leadership.

Some districts may be tempted to utilize principals who have maintained success or made incremental improvements in existing schools. Successful leaders in organizations that are already high performing tend to focus on delegation of core responsibilities, incremental staff development, long-term relationships, and a wide array of other culture change levers (Collins, 2001; Fullan, 2001a; Kotter, 1996; Senge, 1990; Spencer & Spencer, 1993; Waters et al., 2003). In contrast, successful start-up leaders thrive on immediate results (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Even highly successful district principals may not have the right profile to be successful in turnaround schools, where the additional entrepreneurial profile is needed (Hassel & Hassel, 2005).

When leaders who have a full-scale, school-turnaround track record are not available, the district should look for potential leaders who can demonstrate:

- A track record of leading significant, speedy change where many barriers to success existed; changes may be more focused than whole-school change but should have involved influencing other people and introducing new practices inconsistent with current “policy”; changes should have been significant (not just incremental improvements to an existing activity).
- A track record of using some or most of the actions common to successful turnarounds (described in brief above).
- Both start-up and managerial success competencies (described in brief above), including the very highest level of team leadership needed to implement change, also called communicating a compelling vision.
- A solid understanding of research about effective schools (described in Organizational Factors section) and the ability to describe how it applies to children who have not been successful learners previously.

Organizational Factors

Even with a strong leader, an ideal environment, and adequate district support, there are factors within the school that can determine the success of a turnaround effort. These internal organizational factors include staff replacement and training and changes in the school's internal structure or culture. Turnaround leaders across sectors take other common actions within their organizations to effect turnarounds (addressed in the Leadership section). After a school has effected a turnaround, the organizational design is similar to that of other schools that achieve high levels of learning with previously low-performing students. A brief review of these design elements follows.

- **Staff Replacement.** Teachers are often viewed as the most promising points of intervention in turnaround schools because they “mediate all relationships within instruction” (Finnegan & O’Day, 2003, p. 23). Accordingly, several school turnaround efforts to date have been based on wholesale replacement of staff (Finnegan & O’Day, 2003). In other industries, many successful turnarounds are based in part on replacement of large numbers of staff, but several are not. The strategy depends more on the capacity of the current staff to adapt to new responsibilities and goals than on the inherent benefits of a clean slate (Hoffman, 1989). Research about school turnarounds echoes this finding, suggesting that staff replacement is not strictly necessary but may be essential in schools where the staff is a clear cause of failure (Goldstein et al., 1998). The NCLB Act (2002) requires replacement only of staff who are deemed to be relevant to the school’s failure.

Whether or not to replace school staff is a particularly important consideration for district and school leaders. Studies have shown that school turnaround efforts are often undertaken in communities “characterized by chronic teacher shortages and pervasive educational challenges and through plans which rely largely on the rhetorical appeal of ‘a new opportunity’” (Malen et al., 2002, p. 120) that does not result in a more capable and committed staff. In these communities, wholesale staff replacement may weaken rather than strengthen a school. Research suggests that replacement teachers typically have less experience and fewer teaching credentials than the previous employees, and that the change itself can damage the professional community at the school (Rice & Malen, 2004). Leaders involved in San Francisco’s turnaround strategies concluded that even when the new teachers are strong, schools that replace their entire staffs may suffer simply because all of the teachers are new (Goldstein et al., 1998).

Cross-industry research shows that successful turnarounds often combine new employees with old to introduce new energy and enthusiasm without losing skill and experience (Gadiesh et al., 2003; Hirschhorn, 2002; Kim & Mauborgne, 2003; Paton & Mordaunt, 2004; Roberto & Levesque, 2005; Walshe et al., 2004).

In schools, as well, successful turnaround efforts have occurred when the school is free to selectively rid itself of weak staff members and has an adequate supply to replenish itself with teachers who are committed to the school’s new focus (Malen et al., 2002; T. Fairchild, personal communication, November 4, 2005; B. Sayeski, personal communication, November 4, 2005). Those who have worked with successful school

turnarounds report that removal of ineffective staff can happen during the turnaround process itself rather than at the beginning and may be limited to a small number of staff who are unable to make the needed changes under an effective turnaround leader (T. Fairchild, personal communication, November 4, 2005; B. Sayeski, personal communication, November 4, 2005; G. Williams, personal communication, October 26, 2005). In Chicago, district leaders learned by experience that in some cases, districts may not need to replace entire school staffs to initiate a turnaround, but they could selectively remove ineffective teachers instead (Olson, 1999). Morale issues that may be present in large-scale layoffs or staff replacements may not be an issue when only a few staff members are replaced, and they are those who have failed to make changes that other staff members have made.

Since successful school turnarounds do not require wholesale replacement of staff, districts with unions may find this restructuring option feasible. However, two matters may inhibit successful turnarounds in unionized districts. First, as documented in the Leadership section, successful turnaround leaders often implement new practices to get speedy results even when the practices violate preexisting organization policies. This may not be feasible if the practices violate collective bargaining agreement terms that a district does not have power to waive. Second, the staff replacement issue, even when the number of staff is small, may be the largest barrier to successful turnarounds in unionized districts. Districts with collective bargaining agreements that prohibit replacement of staff may need to arrange in advance for waivers or exemptions that would allow principals to replace some portion of staff in turnaround schools when needed.

- **Improved Culture.** Research and experience in the business sector reveal that one of the most important interventions during a turnaround is a change in an organization's culture (Hoffman, 1989). Employee habits and values are heavily influenced by management and develop over time; changing these attitudes to support an organization's new goals appears critical to success (Gadiesh et al., 2003). Aside from staff replacement, the primary methods of changing culture are additional training and improved communication (Hoffman, 1989).

In schools, whether the turnaround involves retention of the entire teaching staff, wholesale replacement, or measures in between, a new leader's first task is often to work with staff and administrators to develop a shared vision and common goals. Professional development eventually is necessary to help veteran teachers break old habits and learn new approaches; new, less experienced teachers require intense training as well (Doherty & Abernathy, 1998). Successful interventions have focused on developing teachers' skills by providing training in pedagogical strategies, such as how better to group students and organize their lessons (Finnegan & O'Day, 2003). Others focus on building teachers' sense of professional community. Turnaround schools in San Francisco, for example, grouped teachers into cohesive work groups in which they could collaborate around a common vision (Goldstein et al., 1998). New principals in Houston encouraged teachers within grade levels to coordinate lessons and homework assignments (Olson, 1999).

- **School Design.** Studies of high-performing schools, including those with previously low-performing students, show common school design elements. Multiple teams of researchers over several decades have studied the elements of schools that have achieved extraordinary learning results compared to other schools with similar children. The research covers schools with differing student populations (Cuban, 1984; Hassel & Hassel, 2005; Huberman & Miles, 1984; Marzano, 2003; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993; Wang et al., 1993), as well as research about high-poverty, high-performing schools (Carter, 1999; Carter, 2000; Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2004). This research suggests a set of effective characteristics that a school design should incorporate in some way. Based on the effective-schools literature, common distinguishing characteristics of the best schools include:
 - A clear mission that guides daily decisions at the school.
 - High, unyielding expectations that all students can and will learn at grade level and beyond.
 - Frequent monitoring of students' progress and responsive approaches for those students who are falling behind.
 - Staying up to date on instructional research about what works.
 - Allotting quality periods of uninterrupted instructional time on core subjects.
 - A safe and orderly environment that encourages students to focus on learning.
 - Establishing a strong connection between home and school so that parents can and will support their children's learning.
 - Using leadership approaches that maximize the effectiveness of instruction.

Several of these were highlighted as critical by former school turnaround leaders and those who work with them: communicating a clear mission, high expectations, monitoring performance using data, and leadership. Targeting existing resources on these was described as essential (T. Fairchild, personal communication, November 4, 2005; B. Sayeski, personal communication, November 4, 2005; G. Williams, personal conversation, October 26, 2005).

What Further Research Is Needed to Understand Turnarounds?

This paper reviews what we know about school turnarounds, but it also reveals gaps in our knowledge. Restructuring with new leaders and staff has been tried more frequently than the other drastic restructuring options under NCLB (DiBiase, 2005); however, as more schools enter into the restructuring phase under the law, we offer three suggestions to guide further research.

First, future studies should more rigorously analyze the competencies of the most successful turnaround leaders. This should include assessment of the differences between initial turnaround leaders, who typically thrive on the entrepreneurial challenge of a new turnaround effort, and transitional or sustaining change leaders, whose skills lie in solidifying a turnaround's initial improvements. Cross-industry research suggests that these separate phases of a turnaround effort may require leaders with different skills, but districts currently have little information to draw upon to guide the selection of these distinct leaders.

Second, future turnaround efforts will benefit greatly from more information about how to recognize the strengths and limitations of the school's current staff and select and train the right replacements where needed.

Third, it would be helpful to have documentation of successful school turnaround processes and analyses of common elements across schools. This gap need not slow implementation, however. Although turnarounds are a relatively well-researched organizational strategy in other sectors, school stories might offer easily grasped examples of well-proven action steps in school turnarounds. With this, the field of school turnarounds would be ripe for "how-to" documentation to help districts and individual schools ready to try this strategy.

Conclusion

Decades of research about turnarounds in the business, nonprofit, and public sectors show that successful turnarounds can dramatically improve results. Districts that choose to restructure low-performing schools by replacing school leaders and staff will likely be aware of the potential benefits the strategy offers when well implemented. But not all turnaround efforts succeed. We hope to inform future efforts by highlighting the possible pitfalls as well, so that districts may avoid them and selectively choose which schools are ripe for turnarounds. Experience suggests that when a district is able to find a true turnaround leader and support that leader's efforts to focus on significant, critical changes that produce speedy improvements in student learning, turnarounds can succeed. Further experience should increase understanding of how to sustain successful turnarounds.

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