



SREB

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



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Regional
Education
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Executive Summary

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

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

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

To borrow the title from a new study on SIG implementation by the University of Washington's Center for Reinventing Education, too many systems and low-performing high schools are “tinkering toward transformation.”¹ Many decision-makers appear to have only the cloudiest idea about creating and sustaining a transformed school. One district SIG director, in fact, asked the Center's researchers if they could provide *him* with information on how to successfully turn around a failing school. “He went on to explain that he was at a loss as to how to do this.”

This report tells how.

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

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

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

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

This report describes, in detail, how we can identify, prepare, place and support individuals who fully deserve the title of “Turnaround Principal.”

We pinpoint, through a policy lens, the elements that must be addressed to achieve an ambitious but reachable goal: Ensuring a steady stream of highly effective turnaround principals. And we underscore the critical role of state policymakers and education department leaders in making this happen. We agree with the Massachusetts education reform group MassInsight: *“Most school districts ... do not have the resources themselves to develop...a specialized subset of principals with expertise in turnaround — so it must be a responsibility of the state, working with outside partners.”*²

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

Improving these schools will require substantive and ongoing commitments and investments. From an economic perspective (as a recent McKinsey report points out),³ the loss of potential represented by dropouts and poorly prepared high school graduates is equivalent to *a permanent national recession*. That’s justification enough for the commitment *and* the investment.

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

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

- 1. Create state or regional programs to select and train experienced principals to serve as turnaround specialists.** Except in the very largest and best staffed school districts, the resources to create these specialized training programs are best located and coordinated at the state level.
- 2. Provide incentives for experienced principals to accept the turnaround challenge.** Include leadership incentives that reward improved performance and encourage longevity. If we can significantly reduce principal turnover, teachers, parents and community leaders are much more likely to commit to supporting the vision and change leadership of a new principal.
- 3. Develop and continuously improve principal selection tools that can predict success in turnaround settings.** Turning a high school around requires a special set of character traits, skills and beliefs that go beyond those required of principals in high-performing high schools. Many skills can be developed, but the necessary core beliefs, character traits and entrepreneurial spirit must be present at the start and evidenced through previous performance.
- 4. Increase per-student funding for principal preparation.** Acknowledge the greater costs associated with the intensive internships necessary for turnaround leaders. Field-based experiences are critical and time intensive.
- 5. Support ongoing, individualized professional development specifically for turnaround leaders.** Turnaround leaders face unique challenges and significant demands on their time. Highly supportive districts provide individualized mentoring and coaching and opportunities to learn with other turnaround principals within their state and across the nation.

6. **Create “enterprise zone” rules for turnaround high schools, providing expanded authority over personnel decisions, schedules, and improvement strategies.** A turnaround principal needs to be able to create the team that can implement his or her vision for the school and then to implement the strategies needed to achieve that vision. In particular, incentive policies are needed to encourage great teachers to remain in or join the faculty of low-performing schools. Turnaround principals should have as much discretion as possible in terms of all staff members who serve the school and come into contact with students. Turnaround principals also need flexibility in extending the school day; creating common staff planning time; providing tutoring opportunities for students; and implementing strategies necessary for turning schools around. Allow turnaround principals to adopt such policies even if they are not in place in other schools in the district. Turnaround principals should also have opportunities to present district leaders with well-conceived budget requests that support school improvement.
7. **Support the development and deployment of high-quality formative assessment lessons.** Formative assessment lessons that check for understanding can improve teaching by quickly identifying students’ gaps in knowledge, understanding and writing skills. Well-developed formative assessment lessons are essential in turnaround settings. They should be timely and strategically integrated into instruction throughout the school year. Waiting until the end of the year to see if students have been learning and teachers have been effective is too late.
8. **Provide principals with regular data “snapshots” about the culture and climate of their schools.** Perceptual data that are regularly collected, analyzed and reported can give principals information and insight they need to build relationships in the school and community. The success of a school turnaround is dependent on the strength of these relationships.
9. **End seniority-based layoff policies that disproportionately impact schools in need of turnaround.** In schools where instruction is already weak, there can be *no* excuse for releasing effective teachers or requiring principals to take weak teachers who have been subject to forced reductions at other schools. Schools in need of turnaround should be exempted from staffing decisions based solely on seniority.
10. **Provide incentives to encourage veteran teachers and promising novice teachers to work in turnaround high schools.** A school can only be as good as its teachers. Principals play a necessary role in inspiring, coaching, attracting, retaining and supporting teachers; but it is the teachers who carry the responsibility for quality day-to-day instruction. Low-performing schools need to systematically improve their human capital. That includes recruiting first-rate teachers and providing quality professional learning opportunities that enable all teachers to reach their maximum potential.
11. **Change the toxic “scoreboard” mentality that currently surrounds high stakes testing results.** Data help identify problem schools and define their specific challenges. But much of current discussion based on narrow measures of student achievement is causing more harm than good. School accountability must include positive steps to build the broad support needed to make lasting improvements in how students are engaged in challenging assignments and supported to complete them. Districts and states need to shift away from punitive policies and recognize their own responsibility to do everything necessary to change the conditions in their persistently failing high schools.

12. **Create pathways for success in high schools — particularly turnaround schools.** Principals cannot be expected to turn low-performing schools around if they do not know how to create access to authentic instruction that will engage students and motivate them to succeed. Principals must know how to engage the faculty in creating pathway programs of study that link academic and career/technical learning, require students to use academic skills to complete authentic projects and problems related to their interests, and connect students' learning to their goals beyond high school. When principals are able to help students find a reason for learning by providing pathways of success through high school and connecting learning to students' interests, they will be better able to turn low-performing schools around.

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

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

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

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



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Contents

Part I: What are the problems facing turnaround high school principals?.....3

Part II: How are high schools different from elementary or middle grades schools, and how does that impact leadership?.....6

Part III: How do principals improve teaching and learning, particularly in low-performing high schools?7

Part IV: What skills, traits, beliefs and experiences should turnaround principals have?.....14

Part V: What training do future turnaround principals need to enable them to succeed under difficult circumstances?19

Part VI: What support do turnaround principals need?23

Part VII: What district and state policies are needed to dramatically improve leadership in turnaround high schools?.....28

In Conclusion30

Acknowledgements

Introduction

“The emerging research on high-performing, high-poverty schools and promising turnaround schools confirms the central importance of very strong leadership as probably the most critical factor in their relative success.”

— *The Turnaround Challenge*⁴

Recent studies make one reality clear: While multiple factors can cause a low-performing high school to be in a turnaround situation, every high school that makes dramatic academic improvement has strong, effective school leadership. Turning a school around is no work for novices. It takes a skilled, visionary and proactive principal to pull apart the strands of demoralization, low expectations, poor teaching and unengaged students and rebuild a coherent, learning-centered school. This report examines how to find and prepare these principals.

The need is urgent. “We have not found a single case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership,” Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom and Anderson reported in a 2010 comprehensive review of school leadership.⁵ Another extensive review of the turnaround literature in the last decade concluded that “the right leader is not just one factor but a **critical lynchpin** in successful turnarounds.”⁶ [emphasis added]

For his 2010 report on turnaround results in 10 states, author Stuit found the problem of turning schools around to be so seemingly insurmountable that he was led to ask: *Are bad schools immortal?*⁷

Going even further, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has framed the moral dimensions of the problem as this generation’s civil rights movement.⁸ Currently, the **abysmal educational opportunities presented to the students served by schools that fail to meet academic targets year after year — the overwhelming majority of whom are underprivileged or minority students — rob them and their communities of the chance for a better future.** Recent evidence indicates that the national high school graduation rate is only 72 percent, and there are many urban and rural high schools in the nation and in the South where fewer than half of the students graduate.⁹

Compounding the problem, many of the lowest-performing high schools are at a severe disadvantage because their feeder schools are also weak. Students arrive in high school with major learning deficits, and they and their parents are discouraged and mistrustful. As difficult as the academic problems in these schools are, the pervasive social problems of poverty — discouragement, distrust and low expectations — are often even bigger barriers to success.

Turning around these high schools is the last chance our schools and our states have to arm students with the skills, knowledge and habits they will need to succeed in higher education, advanced training and the work force. Recognizing the economic impact, one principal interviewed for this report noted that “the stakes are very high ... we can’t afford to let any student fall by the wayside or slip through the cracks, and that is why we try so hard.”¹⁰

This report can help education leaders understand how to find and prepare the school leaders who can turn around the lowest 5 percent of high schools. It is based on the Southern Regional Education Board’s (SREB’s) extensive review of literature pertaining to school leadership and high school turnarounds and on a round of interviews with successful high school principals. SREB also convened a meeting of experts in Atlanta that included a successful high school turnaround principal, a successful urban superintendent, a school board member from a large urban district, district leaders with experience in school leadership issues, university faculty members, directors of school leadership academies, and leaders in SREB’s *High Schools That Work (HSTW)* school improvement network. Participants came from Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Rhode Island, Texas and Tennessee, and they contributed extensive firsthand knowledge relating to this work.

The group identified several key recommendations:

- Break the cycle of treating the lowest-performing schools as dumping grounds for dysfunctional school leaders and teachers.
- Assign the most experienced, best prepared and most successful principals to turn around the most challenged schools, instead of first-time principals or principals without a track record of success.
- Look for courage as a key trait when selecting a turnaround leader.
- Do not expect a turnaround leader to be perfect, and do not expect a person who avoids offending anyone to be able to turn a school around.
- Use a set of screening tools to ensure that future leaders have the beliefs necessary to lead school improvement and do not have flaws in their character that will cause them to fail under the spotlight and pressure of school leadership.
- Give turnaround principals authority to make key decisions, especially over personnel, school organization and schedule, and understand that they will have to take risks.
- Support turnaround principals wholeheartedly, with both the resources and the moral backing of district and state organizations.

As these recommendations suggest, America is still — a decade after the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)* — alarmingly comfortable with high schools that are islands of dysfunction, despite the stigma attached to them. The business-as-usual school leadership strategies pursued by states and districts up to this point offer little chance that chronically low-performing high schools will improve.

If leaders are going to turn these schools around, they will have to be far more strategic and determined in ensuring that the schools have leadership that makes improvement possible.

Simply put, excellent principals are necessary to attract and retain excellent teachers, and excellent teachers are necessary to foster excellent students. Districts need excellent principals in the most troubled high schools so that they can develop and support good teachers to create the positive energy and innovation needed for continuous school improvement.

To help education leaders plan next steps, this report examines seven questions:

- Part I: What are the problems facing turnaround high school principals?
- Part II: How are high schools different from elementary or middle grades schools, and how does that impact leadership?
- Part III: How do principals improve teaching and learning, particularly in low-performing high schools?
- Part IV: What skills, traits, beliefs and experiences should turnaround principals have?
- Part V: What training do future principals need to enable them to succeed under difficult circumstances?
- Part VI: What support do turnaround principals need?
- Part VII: What district and state policies are needed to dramatically improve leadership in turnaround high schools?

Part I: What are the problems facing turnaround high school principals?

Early in the process of thinking through what is needed to find and prepare turnaround principals for chronically failing high schools, SREB polled some of its most successful *HSTW* school improvement consultants to find out what they saw in their most troubled schools. Their responses were remarkably consistent, outlining the characteristics of what might be described as **the syndrome of high school failure**:

- Teachers offer unengaging instruction. Class consists largely of lectures and worksheets, with little evidence of intellectually engaging student discussions and relevant, challenging assignments.
 - The school is in chaos. Students are not in class, classes do not start on time and major classroom management issues are endemic.
 - Teachers are miserable and operate in a dysfunctional culture.
 - Teachers are “sole practitioners” and lack an organizational structure in which teams of teachers work together to plan instruction, share best practices and conduct peer review of each other’s work.
 - Teachers do not relate well to students; thus, many students are not connected to a favorite teacher or subject.
 - Principals in these schools provide weak leadership. Their instructional leadership is limited to a test-prep focus, with an emphasis on drill and rote memorization of rules, procedures and facts.
- They are figureheads, invisible or operating with a strictly “gotcha” style. Some of these principals are stuck in survival mode, afraid to challenge teachers and thinking that their only chance is to have the teachers “on their side.”
- Unions are highly defensive and quick to file grievances.
 - Adults are more concerned about saving their jobs than student learning.
 - A culture of fear, a lack of trust and a lack of hope pervade.
 - Everyone has low expectations of everyone else — students, teachers and parents alike.
 - There is little parental involvement.

In his book *So Much Reform, So Little Change*, Charles Payne painted a similar word-picture of failing schools in America, especially as they are found in urban areas:

“They tend to be places governed by an overarching sense of futility and pessimism; where colleagues may distrust their supervisors and perhaps one another; where there can be a certain harshness in the way children and parents are dealt with; where many children seem to be disengaged much of the time, but not necessarily more-so than the teachers; . . . where instruction is uncoordinated and uninspiring; where there are too few resources, and those few are often badly used; where the curriculum is narrow, boring, and frequently changing; where teachers have profound skepticism about ‘programs’; where there is a general feeling of instability — personnel come and go, students come and go, programs come and go — all of it presided over by a dysfunctional bureaucracy.”¹¹

Changing that culture becomes the first critical task of a turnaround leader.

What Creates a Culture of Failure

It is impossible to overstate the extent to which the business of turning a high school around is about creating a culture of trust and hope. A study of trust in schools found that in bottom-quartile schools, 60 percent of teachers have minimal or no trust in colleagues, and 51 percent have minimal or no trust in their principal.¹² Trust is almost certainly lower in the bottom 5 percent of schools than in the bottom quartile.

What Creates a Culture of Weak Instruction and Leadership

A South Carolina school superintendent said, “The thing that breaks down a dysfunctional school is that we keep adding dysfunctional people to that school. And we just further bury what’s already underground — we’re just throwing dirt on top of it.”¹³ Another participant reported that it is common practice that in some large urban districts teachers and administrators who have been removed from schools for low performance are then assigned to the lowest-performing schools in the system.¹⁴ A third participant in the meeting, an associate superintendent of an urban district, reported a much higher proportion of “brand new teachers with no experience in these dysfunctional schools — the good teachers don’t want to go there. So you have all these inexperienced teachers in there with no [instructional] repertoire, and the culture is so bad that they end up leaving the profession altogether.”¹⁵

The anecdotal evidence is supported by a study of teacher distribution patterns in North Carolina in 2004 that shows teachers in high-poverty schools had less experience, attended fewer competitive undergraduate institutions, were more likely to hold a non-regular license and were less likely to be National Board Certified than those in lower-poverty schools.¹⁶ (See Table 1.) A recent McKinsey report echoed the importance of quality school leadership in attracting and retaining the best teachers. “Current teachers who were top-third graduates . . . valued excellent school leadership slightly more than a doubling of maximum compensation, and two and a half times as many of them would teach in a high needs school with a good working environment than would do so for double the salary.”¹⁷

Table 1
Teacher Distribution by Poverty Level of Schools, North Carolina, 2004

Teacher Credential	Quartile of Highest-Poverty Schools	Quartile of Lowest-Poverty Schools
Teachers with less than three years of experience	17.3%	14.6%
Teachers who graduated from a less-competitive undergraduate institution	27.4	14.2
Teachers holding a non-regular license	20.5	13.3
Teachers who were National Board Certified	4.1	9.9

Adapted from: Clotfelter, Charles, Helen F. Ladd, Jacob Vigdor and Justin Wheeler. *High-Poverty Schools and the Distribution of Teachers and Principals*. CALDER working paper, 2007.

The habit of adding dysfunctional educators to dysfunctional schools is the dirty secret (and a poorly kept secret, at that) of school improvement in this country. Allocations of teachers and administrators consistently reinforce already existing patterns of success and failure. **The poor result is that schools continuously demand that the least capable educators raise the lowest-performing students to proficiency** in reading and mathematics and prepare them for higher education and careers.

Unfortunately, some parties benefit from the tolerance of persistently failing schools. Weak teachers can be placed where parents are politically impotent, teachers and students can slack off, parents can blame the teachers and the school, district leaders can point to the myriad of issues at the school and wash their hands of it. Consultants can swarm around the school, offering advice. Politicians and pundits from across the political spectrum can point to the school as evidence for their points of view. Meanwhile, the school stumbles along failing to educate most of its children. Turnaround schools deserve **an immediate break from this mindset**.

What Creates a Culture of Chaos and Low Expectations

In Payne's words, "Failed institutions make the simplest things difficult."¹⁸ Chaos often afflicts the lowest-performing high schools. Extremely basic tasks principals should be able to accomplish, like hiring teachers to teach all classes, often fall apart. Absences and tardies are not recorded, students do not know what courses they need to take to graduate, parents do not receive communications, teachers do not have permanently assigned classrooms or textbooks until weeks into the school year, records are misplaced, equipment goes missing, and students continue to wander the halls aimlessly after the school day is supposed to have begun.

Such chaos is only augmented by the low expectations that are so pervasive in chronically low-performing high schools:

". . . when everyone has low expectations of everyone else, it may be okay if one doesn't do hall duty, or lets the paperwork slide, or doesn't assign anything that will be difficult to grade. If trying isn't going to make a difference, we can just relax a little. The low standards that work to the detriment of the collectivity over time can get mighty comfortable for the individual in the short term."¹⁹

Without recognizing and understanding the extent and the nature of the problems, states, districts and schools cannot hope to find and prepare the principals who can make a difference in these schools.

Yet there is hope. SREB's meetings and reviews found that K-12 leaders and educators and leaders collectively *do know* what is needed to get the right principals for these schools. The knowledge is there. **What is needed now is the will** to find and produce the school leaders who can eliminate the scourge of "dropout factories" that blight the lives of 6,400 dropouts every day.²⁰

Part II: How are high schools different from elementary or middle grades schools, and how does that impact leadership?

“No matter how extensive the teaching background of a school leader, could anyone have the content knowledge and relevant experience to coach one beginning teacher in how to engage students in British poetry of World War I and another on how to differentiate instruction in general chemistry? Even if school leaders have the requisite expertise, imagine them finding the time to observe 250 teachers or provide extensive hands-on mentoring on curriculum and instruction.”

— *New Thinking About Instructional Leadership*²¹

High schools are **larger** and **more complex** than elementary and middle grades schools, making leadership challenges more complicated and extensive. A recent study of the effects of school leadership on student learning found, “Instructional leadership in secondary schools must differ from instructional leadership in elementary schools, simply because high school principals cannot be experts in all subject areas. Many of the strategies that seem to work well in elementary schools do not necessarily work as well in high schools.”²²

The size of high schools also makes it more difficult for principals to directly observe and coach classroom teachers on an individual basis. Direct observation, coaching and mentoring of teachers is still essential at the high school level, but with more teachers and more specialized subjects, high school principals necessarily “work at a distinct disadvantage compared with elementary school principals.”²³

What Key Elements are Needed

Team building, establishment and support of **routines**, creation of **support systems**, and **organizational strategies** play a greater role in the work of high school principals, and this distinction is often lost on principal preparation programs and district offices. Because of these differences, it is crucial that high school principals develop “a strong leadership team to provide the necessary scale and scope of instructional leadership responsibilities.”²⁴

High school principals have other unique challenges. Students are older, bolder, ready to challenge authority, demanding to be more involved and engaged in their own education. Principals and teachers must find ways to tap into students’ interests and aspirations and give them a reason to be excited about learning. If students do not see instruction as relevant to them and their own futures, they will become bored and disengaged. To counteract that natural tendency, high school **students must develop connections to the school**, to peer groups within the school (perhaps organized around an extracurricular activity), to a favorite teacher and a favorite subject. Principals must create a mindset of success for every student and that graduation is expected.

During Louis et al.’s extensive interviews with school leaders, “Secondary school principals repeatedly said that there was not enough time in the day to complete all their responsibilities, and they told us directly that instructional leadership ‘gets placed on the back burner.’ ” And the researchers found that while department chairs appear to be well-situated to extend the reach of secondary principals as instructional leaders, this rarely works in practice. In many schools, **department chairs “provide little to no instructional leadership.”**²⁵ Too often department chairs are selected based on seniority rather than instructional expertise; seldom are department chairs expected, required and supported to serve as instructional leaders.

The result is that, compared with elementary schools or even middle grades schools, high schools suffer from leadership deficits as measured by virtually any indicator. **High school teachers are less likely to trust their principals** and less likely to say that parents are involved in decisions. Teachers report weaker professional communities in secondary schools.

Finally, Louis et al. found **that high schools were twice as likely to be in the bottom** quintile of all schools in their study **for both instructional climate and instructional actions.**²⁶

This does not imply that high school principals in general have fewer skills than their elementary counterparts, but that their challenges are different and in many ways more complex. Without a **focused search** for the most qualified candidate, high school principals, on average, are more likely to come up short.

Part III: How do principals improve teaching and learning, particularly in low-performing high schools?

“To learn how leadership contributes to student learning, we must ask how leadership affects instruction.”

— *Learning from Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning*²⁷

Most education experts today agree that, as Leithwood et al. claimed in 2004, school leadership is second only to classroom teaching among school effects on student learning. What is less clear, but is steadily becoming better understood, is *how* principals affect student learning. **Twelve practices**, identified in the research literature and confirmed by SREB’s continuing work, **help turnaround principals succeed and improve student learning:**²⁸

1. Set consistent, clear, high expectations for student achievement.
2. Hold adults accountable for meeting goals and for using research-based practices.
3. Act boldly to alter what and how students are taught, rather than tinkering around the periphery of school problems.
4. Seek early wins that build faculty and student morale.
5. Support adults in building skills necessary to meet goals, and create opportunities for teachers to improve.
6. Provide strong organizational management to improve student learning through teacher hiring, retention and assignments, and the protection of instructional time.
7. Spend the majority of time on planning and engaging key faculty leaders in taking ownership of problems, adopting and implementing proven practices, taking the chaos out of the equation, and replacing it with hope and a purposeful path forward.
8. Improve the motivation and working conditions of teachers through the creation of professional learning communities.
9. Frequently observe classroom instruction, on average conducting 20 to 60 informal and often spontaneous classroom observations every week.
10. Provide teachers with immediate feedback, based on where they are at the moment, and expect teachers at all levels of ability to improve.
11. Constantly work on improving relationships throughout the school — administrator to teacher, teacher to teacher, student to teacher and student to student — and with the community.
12. Provide a strong focus on embedding literacy standards and strategies into all courses to advance both literacy skills and subject matter achievement.

This list of principal practices is ambitious, yet clear enough to guide the actions of turnaround principals and help set their priorities. Yet **tensions exist** in these guidelines.

The most important is the tension between “instructional leadership” — as it is sometimes narrowly interpreted to mean the principal’s one-on-one interactions with classroom teachers — and the need to provide strong organizational leadership with teams of teachers on a continuing basis (which emerging research has identified as a most promising practice to make gains in student learning).

A second major tension is between the need to hold adults accountable and the need to build relationships. Successfully rising to meet both of these needs has long been recognized as part of the art of school leadership.

A third and final tension involves the need to reduce chaos and uncertainty while also making major changes in the school. These contradictions are unavoidable in the work of turning schools around; but if they are recognized, skilled school leaders can balance the competing demands inherent in this work.

Set High Expectations

Low-graduation schools often operate under a set of expectations that are so low that they do not prepare students for any kind of a viable future, even if students do graduate. In the *HSTW* network of 1,200 schools, an SREB study of high-graduation and low-graduation schools with students of similar socioeconomic backgrounds identified large differences in course-taking patterns (unpublished study). Eighty percent of the students in the high-graduation schools complete a college-ready core of four years of college-preparatory English and mathematics, while at low-graduation schools, only 50 percent of students took the college-ready core. In the high-graduation schools, 86 percent of students took at least four career/technical (CT) courses, with 50 percent taking at least six CT courses. Twelve percent of students in the high-graduation schools took at least one Advanced Placement (AP) course in either math or science, and 22 percent took at least one AP in a humanities class. High-graduation schools were more likely to have a dual enrollment program with a local college or university. Percentages of students participating in dual enrollment programs, CT courses and AP courses all were lower in low-graduation schools. **The point is: High-graduation schools expect more of their students, and students rise to the higher expectations.**

One of the principals interviewed said that when he took over his school, he found a student culture in which it was okay to not care about grades. It was even cool to get F’s. He turned that around by **celebrating academic achievement**, having the honor roll read at football games (“You stood up for a touchdown, you can stand up for the honor roll”) and personally making a big deal out of students making academic gains. Now, “The report card day is funny because I’m walking down the hall, and you’d think it was paparazzi or something, because there’s a bunch of kids running at me with a bunch of little pieces of paper to show me stuff. I come up with a comment for each and every one of them. If I don’t, I’m hypocritical and I’m probably going to lose that child later if I don’t say something right to them.”²⁹

Another principal said that he has class **meetings with every student** in the school at the beginning of the year and again in the middle of the year to go over expectations. He sets the expectation that all students “try their very best and that everyone is college-ready” when they leave high school; and in order to make sure students get there, he tells them what the expectations are. “I’m very obvious with them. It’s like being a parent with your kids. ... You spell out the rules because they don’t know them. ... It’s not out of oppression. It’s out of love, and they know that.”³⁰

Hold Adults Accountable

In a turnaround setting, it is unequivocally the principal's duty to set and **clearly communicate high expectations** for adults in the school, and to hold them accountable for meeting those expectations. New Leaders for New Schools, a nonprofit organization that provides an alternative training route to school leadership in 11 major urban centers across the country, has found that:

“While principals in turnaround schools build strong staff relationships and gather key early input on instructional and school culture strategies, they are also quite directive about the need for the school to move quickly . . . in setting consistent expectations, supporting adults in building the necessary skills to meet expectations, and holding them accountable for doing so.”³¹

A member of our focus team said that teachers and other adults in the school need to understand that they are paid to be there; the students are not. “So the decisions need to be made around what's best for the children that we serve and have been entrusted to us.”

One of the principals interviewed became the principal of a high school in disarray a few years ago. When he first walked through his building during instructional time, he saw:

“... teachers on the Internet, teachers reading the paper, teachers on their cell phones, and just a lot of non-teaching. They said to me, ‘We've done fine without a principal for a year and a half.’ [I told them], ‘No you haven't.’ A lot of the change was to say, ‘Here are the expectations: You can't have a kid sleeping in your class. You can't be on the Internet while your kids are there.’ ... It's not just about rigor for students, but rigor for us as well. We have to work hard. We have to keep track of kids. You can't just throw kids away.”³²

He pushed, and some of the teachers pushed back, trying to sabotage his changes. But he persisted and began to move the school in a better direction.

Be Willing to Make Big Changes

If a high school is graduating less than half of its entering freshmen, one or two minor changes will not get the school to a 75 percent graduation rate — never mind the 90 percent or better rate that every high school should pursue. Effective turnaround principals need to **make big changes and then monitor them** to drop what does not work and reinforce what does. Bold and thoughtful big actions to change what and how students are taught may be necessary when cautious and more bureaucratic solutions have been tried and have not worked.

The education writer Laura Pappano captured this aspect of turnarounds as follows:

“School turnaround is about **rapid and dramatic improvement**, not just in test scores but also in culture, attitude, and student aspirations. It is marked not by orderly implementations but by altering a lot at once and being willing, if something doesn't work, to step in midstream and change it, and change it again. For those in the midst of school turnaround, much of the decision making happens in the moment — and carries tremendous personal risks as well as rewards.”³³ [emphasis added]

Schools participating in the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) have made remarkable gains in some challenging circumstances, although a large part of the KIPP model has been to lengthen the school day by about one-third.³⁴ Educators like Geoffrey Canada have achieved success with an **entrepreneurial** approach that has included providing before- and after-school community programs.³⁵ Turnaround leaders have to be able to go beyond making incremental changes to their schools, because incremental changes will not be enough.

Provide Early Wins

Most persistently low-performing high schools need a jolt of success to boost poor morale. As stated repeatedly in Mike Schmoker's book on achieving unprecedented improvements in teaching and learning, leaders need to "Win small, win early, win often."³⁶ For example, Worthing Senior High School in Houston, Texas, implemented a redo policy to improve student learning. Teacher teams used professional development Wednesdays to develop the policy, and a rotating "embedded enrichment period" was inserted in the daily schedule so that every eighth day, each class had extended time to help struggling students. The teachers collected and shared a list of 50 innovative ways to use that extended time. Administrators then prepared a list of all students getting F's in any of their classes, along with interventions that were and were not working, and shared this information with all teachers. At the end of the semester, students' grades included 850 fewer F's than had been given out the previous semester. This early win dramatically improved teacher morale and created buy-in for other changes.

Improve the Abilities of Teachers

Providing differentiated opportunities for teachers to improve what they teach, how they teach, and how they connect technology and learning to student interests and goals is a practice that the highest-performing principals address. Good teachers know that students need differentiated learning opportunities; and likewise, good leaders know that they cannot expect improvement from one-size-fits-all solutions to professional learning for teachers.³⁷ As Payne observed, "**The essential problem in our schools isn't children learning; it is adult learning.**"³⁸ Adults will have to get better at teaching and engaging students in intellectually demanding assignments in which they have an interest in order for students to become motivated and learn to improve.

Provide Strong Organizational Management

In a 2010 *Phi Delta Kappan* article, Horng and Loeb reported that in their research in three school districts, principals who rated highly on organizational management skills were more likely to achieve growth in student achievement. Parents and teachers in their schools also were more likely to report satisfaction with the school's instructional climate. Furthermore, they found that **time spent on day-to-day instructional activities was "marginally or not at all related to improvements** in student performance."³⁹

These findings make sense in the context of the major literature on school improvement. They acknowledge that this turns the conventional wisdom about instructional leadership on its head; but especially in the chaotic conditions found in persistently failing schools, the ability to establish normalcy may be an essential skill of instructional leadership.⁴⁰ **Organizational climate is especially important at the secondary level**, where it appears to play a critical role in influencing teachers and teaching practices.⁴¹ The record of successful turnarounds in the public sector, including schools, suggests that they require careful planning and a focus on quality control and operational details if good plans are to be implemented with success.⁴²

This does not mean that turnaround principals should retreat from classrooms into their offices. But it does redefine common conceptions of instructional leadership to acknowledge the continuing importance of organizational management, and the importance of hiring, retention, scheduling and other organizational tasks.⁴³ One of the principals interviewed saw the organizational role of hiring and placement of teachers as his greatest lever for improving teaching and learning. “I have to **hire good people**. I think being able to recognize the potential of teachers, either new teachers or teachers that have been in the business — I don’t think that could happen overnight.”⁴⁴ [emphasis added]

In *Results Now*, Mike Schmoker recounts the difficulties that Rick DuFour encountered as a high school principal trying to do it all, attempting to improve instruction through his personal interactions with one teacher at a time.⁴⁵ DuFour ran himself ragged before realizing that there were better solutions, that **instruction had to be improved collectively** and as a community, and that he would have to play a role in organizing that work. Improving instruction one teacher at a time may work in an elementary school, but most high schools are big enough to defeat that approach. Principals have to be able to **organize schools around themes that combine strong academics with career pathways that connect to students’ interests and goals**. High schools have to be organized so that students can easily understand how their studies are going to prepare them for life after graduation.⁴⁶

One of the key management tools of effective principals is to **create professional learning communities and charge them with taking ownership** of a problem, looking at the root cause of the problem, formulating solutions for addressing the problem and identifying the support they need to implement those solutions. Over the past two decades, the principals of *HSTW* schools who most effectively **set up focused teams of teachers** to take ownership of and work on problems — be it higher expectations, embedded professional development, creating a guidance and advisement system, raising the quality of classroom instruction — had greater student achievement.

Improve Teachers’ Motivation and Working Conditions

While it has become fairly common knowledge that leadership impacts student outcomes, the specific mechanisms through which this occurs remain misunderstood. Louis et al.’s 2010 publication has begun to dispel the mystery of school leadership:

“Our results show that collective leadership is linked to student achievement indirectly, through its effects on teacher motivation and teachers’ workplace settings. As in several of our previous studies, we found significant but much weaker relationships between leadership and teacher capacity. . . . This qualification, however, does not diminish our finding that motivation and work settings — factors subject to leadership influence — have significant effects on student achievement.”⁴⁷

Other research points the way to how successful principals organize teachers into professional learning communities and then **monitor and facilitate** the work of the communities in their schools. They build the professional capacity of their staff by identifying and training facilitators for literacy and mathematics instruction in each of the grade levels and content areas of the school, and creating opportunities for them to work together across those grade levels so that core **literacy and math skills are taught across the curriculum**. Effective principals further support teachers by:⁴⁸

- assigning them to teach in fields for which they have preparation,
- providing common planning time,
- providing them with helpful feedback about their teaching,
- keeping them informed,
- making sure they have quality teaching materials, and
- ensuring that they have technology resources to support their teaching.

Observe Teachers Often and Provide Feedback

Principals rated highest in effectiveness by their teachers in the Louis et al. study made spontaneous and short visits to various classrooms 20 to 60 times per week. Smaller numbers of longer observations were not helpful, nor were pre-announced visits. The highest-rated principals focused only on **observing instruction**. Visits focusing on classroom management, safety, discipline or other topics were not associated with leadership that improved student learning. The highest-rated principals also were more likely to give teachers **immediate, specific feedback**.⁴⁹ This is consistent with best practices that have been outlined for conducting classroom walkthroughs, and it often included praising the observed teacher for something he or she did well, coupled with questions or suggestions for future improvement.⁵⁰

Improve Relationships Within the School and With the Community

Powerful community support for schools often is lying dormant because principals do not know how to tap into it. Taft Information Technology High School in Cincinnati, Ohio, was one of the worst schools in the state when Anthony G. Smith became its principal in 2001. Since 2001, its graduation rate has soared from an atrocious 25 percent to a solid 95 percent, proficiency on the state mathematics test rose from 33 percent to 96 percent, and proficiency in reading climbed from 68 percent to 96 percent. “It’s about relationships,” Smith said. “My covenant was with the community, not necessarily the board of education.”

Early in his tenure, Smith went door-to-door, selling his vision for improving the school. People bought into it. The CEO of Cincinnati Bell became a champion of the school, encouraging his employees to tutor students at the high school and providing incentives for students to maintain high GPAs.⁵¹

In Memphis, a long-time school leadership professor, Reginald Green, has inculcated a generation of school administrators with the mantra, “It’s about understanding yourself and understanding others.” At East Tennessee State University, the redesign of the school leadership program included the addition of courses with a focus on building and maintaining relationships. School leaders must be able to interpret assessment data, prepare a school budget and a master schedule, and understand school law; but if they cannot form relationships, nothing else that they know will help them.

Relationships within the school are at least as important as those with the external community. Louis et al. (2010) found that achievement scores in math are not associated with any particular principal behaviors, but they are associated with teachers’ trust in principals, suggesting that “relationships among adults may be important factors determining how well students perform.”⁵² Paul Browning, a successful principal in South Carolina, has said that everything that he and his teachers do is tied back to the three R’s — relationships, relevance and rigor — and it starts with relationships.⁵³

HSTW Assessment data have shown that students who have a greater connection to their school tend to do better across all subjects. (See Table 2.) For example, students who say they have a favorite teacher met the *HSTW* college- and career-readiness goals in reading, math and science at higher rates than those who do not have a favorite teacher. There are other links between a student’s connection to school and his or her success in learning: participating in extracurricular activities, being comfortable asking for help, and agreeing that teachers tailor their teaching and make it relevant to students are all relationship indicators that predict higher achievement.

Table 2
Links Between Students' Connection to School and Achievement on the *HSTW* Assessment¹

	Percentage of Students Responding	Percentage of Students the <i>HSTW</i> College- and Career-Readiness Goals ²		
		Reading	Math	Science
I have a favorite teacher.	57%	64%	62%	60%
Did not have a favorite teacher	43	45	44	42
If you needed extra help, would you feel comfortable asking teachers for it?				
Yes	88	58	55	54
No	12	46	44	44
My teachers take into consideration the way I learn best.				
Yes	43	61	57	56
No	57	53	51	49
My teachers help me understand the connection between what I am studying and why it is important for after high school.				
Yes	62	60	57	56
No	38	49	49	47
How often do you participate in school-sponsored extracurricular activities?				
Often	44	63	62	59
Sometimes	23	53	51	48
Seldom	17	52	49	48
Never	17	46	43	44

Source: 2010 *High Schools That Work* Assessment

- 1 The *HSTW* Assessment is based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and consists of achievement tests in reading, mathematics and science. The assessment also includes a transcript study of the students' course-taking patterns and a survey of the school and classroom experiences that demonstrate what and how students were taught, what was expected of them, and how much effort teachers exerted in teaching and students exerted in learning. The *HSTW* Assessment provides information that helps school leaders and teachers connect student performance with the courses they take and the quality of their school and classroom experiences.
- 2 The *HSTW* college- and career-readiness goals are set at the Basic level on the reading, mathematics and science tests. Students who meet the readiness goals are likely to be prepared for postsecondary studies without needing remediation or for entry-level employment.

Focus on Literacy Across the Curriculum

In his analysis of the “90/90/90” schools in Milwaukee — schools that are 90 percent economically disadvantaged, 90 percent minority, and achieve 90 percent proficiency rates — Reeves found that these schools all place a heavy emphasis on non-fiction writing.⁵⁴ Frequent non-fiction writing assignments — with chances to reflect on, revise and improve the style, logic and use of evidence — train the mind for critical thinking. **Students who are called upon to write intelligently about a wide variety of subjects are more engaged and gain greater mastery** than those who receive less demanding test-prep instruction and tend to do as well as or better than students who are simply drilled on content knowledge.⁵⁵

Principals do not have to know everything about reading and writing for learning; but they need to know enough to **send a message to all faculty** that in every course, from the shop class to the athletic department, students are going to have to read and write for learning. Language arts teachers cannot be expected to carry the entire load of improving literacy. In this information-based economy, anyone lacking literacy skills is at a terrible disadvantage. Yet literacy skills in the American high school continue to decline. The way students learn any discipline is to read it, analyze it and interpret it.

One way principals can organize and support this work is to identify in each discipline area — including math, science, social studies, and career/technical (CT) education — a successful teacher to serve as a **literacy leader**. That person then receives intensive training in embedding literacy throughout the curriculum, including specific strategies for teaching literacy in the content area. The principal ensures that there is common planning time throughout the year for those teachers to work on literacy strategies with the other teachers in their content area. Principals can then monitor the success of this initiative by asking their students if they agree with statements such as: “My teachers require writing assignments that make me defend my thinking with support and evidence from what I am reading.”

Part IV: What skills, traits, beliefs and experiences should turnaround principals have?

Recognizing that turnarounds represent special problems for leadership, SREB’s focus team of turnaround experts carefully considered and discussed the individual traits and skills most desired in a turnaround principal:

1. Courage
2. Intelligence and knowledge of curriculum and instruction
3. Emotional intelligence
4. Systems-thinking and ability to anticipate consequences of actions
5. A sense of hope, enthusiasm and confidence
6. Ethics
7. Communication and vision
8. Commitment and missionary zeal
9. Advocacy and empathy
10. Collaborator and relationship builder

Courage may at first appear to some a surprising selection, but courage rightly takes the first rank among the traits of a turnaround leader. Unpopular decisions come with the job, as do situations where a decision is required and there are no good options.

Effective turnaround principals need the courage to set high expectations, communicate openly with the faculty and the community in order to shape a vision for a school, assess faculty members who are not doing well, and dismiss faculty members if necessary. Honest conversations about performance can be difficult in rural settings where everyone knows everyone else, but teachers respond well to leaders with courage. Most teachers will follow if a principal has the courage to articulate a sound set of proven practices and engages them in the process of implementing them.

Courage to do what is right must be based on a deep body of knowledge of effective school practices; blind courage simply leads to doing the wrong things better. In many cases, turnaround leaders must have the courage to bend the rules (and the wisdom to know when they should). “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.”⁵⁶

Intelligence and mental agility are obvious prerequisites for success because effective turnaround principals must understand complex systems on multiple levels. They keep in mind the interconnectedness of a community of educators, students and parents working together toward common goals, and they make decisions quickly. A principal must be competent both operationally and pedagogically, with a keen mind trained to assess matters and render sound judgments. There are multiple aspects to a principal’s intelligence, just as there are multiple aspects to a principal’s job. Successful leaders exercise their minds constantly, and successful educators help others grow by exercising their own minds.⁵⁷

Successful turnaround principals also have the **emotional intelligence** to handle the ups and downs of the school year with composure and balance. Teachers and students need a leader who can remain calm under fire. Successful turnaround principals demonstrate confidence, perseverance and resilience. Teach for America has researched predictors of success among its teaching corps, and the two characteristics that seem to be most important are a track record of perseverance and high life satisfaction. A young person just out of college who has high life satisfaction will be better able to cope with the challenges of teaching in a difficult environment, and it stands to reason that the same may be true in looking for experienced educators who can succeed as turnaround principals. If they have high life satisfaction, they are more likely to have the social supports, the internal validation, and the reservoirs of positive feelings that can carry them through the tough times of turning a school around. A successful principal in Tennessee said, “You shouldn’t need a lot of strokes yourself. ... I don’t have to have somebody call me and tell me I’m doing a good job. You just can’t depend on that much.”⁵⁸

Following a line of research Albert Bandura began to explore in the 1970s, perceptions of self-efficacy are an element of emotional intelligence critical to success. Principals who have a strong perception of their own effectiveness will exhibit more persistence, doggedness and entrepreneurialism in finding ways to improve their schools. Principals with a low perception accomplish little, even under favorable conditions.⁵⁹

Systems-thinking and the ability to anticipate consequences involve the skill to trace the root causes of success or failure in an organization. This is the skill of understanding why an instructional program is working and being able to replicate it across a school and to infer how lessons of a success might be used in other areas of the curriculum. It is the ability to identify inefficiencies in a school’s operations or in its use of instructional time and to devise ways to address those inefficiencies.

Backwards-mapping against identified benchmarks and objectives is a crucial sub-skill of systems-thinking. An example of this is a high school that wanted to get all of its students ready for the option of postsecondary studies. The top determinant of whether its students were accepted into four-year colleges turned out to be whether they completed Algebra II. On further study, school leaders found that ninth-grade success in Algebra I almost always predicted later success in Algebra II. Those pieces of information helped them make decisions about master scheduling, teacher assignments and student supports in order to achieve their stated goal.⁶⁰

Another principal exhibited systems-thinking by having his departments develop common assessments for each of the core subjects and collect and analyze those assessment data, in conjunction with attendance data, in two-week and six-week cycles. Next, he asked teachers to make predictions about where students were going to be at the end of grading periods and to back those predictions up with evidence. Then he set up a system for all students who were not expected to meet standards to receive tutoring.⁶¹

A sense of hope, enthusiasm and confidence is necessary as an antidote to the sense of despair endemic in most persistently failing schools. Turnaround principals are able to inspire the best in the people around them. Members of our focus team talked about the need for turnaround principals to be “resilient optimists.” Browning, one of the principal interviewees who supported this study, stated: “First of all, you need to be a turbo-Pollyanna. You’ve got to be unflappable in your positive attitude. That is really important. It’s really important for the students and the teachers to see that, no matter what your status is, you’re positive about your direction and you’re positive about where we can go.”⁶² It can’t be a false optimism, either, because teachers and others will see through that.

Confidence also is important. A leader without confidence will be unable to inspire those in the school to put in the necessary effort. A turnaround principal needs confidence that each student can learn to higher levels and that the faculty can create learning experiences that will cause students to learn at higher levels.

Ethics and a strong moral foundation are critical in a school leader. In its revision of its state school leadership standards, Tennessee included a strand on ethics. Especially in today’s high-stakes accountability environment, pressures to demonstrate gains in student achievement have led to lapses in ethical behavior that have destroyed careers and plunged schools and districts into turmoil. Leaders must have a strong sense of ethics and be able to instill in their teachers a moral code.

Glenn Pethel, the director of the school leadership program in Broad Prize-winning Gwinnett County, Georgia, tells aspiring leaders in the district that principals must conduct themselves in an irreproachable manner at all times. They have to be able to accept that standard; and that means that wherever they are, whatever they are doing, their actions have to withstand public scrutiny. Otherwise, that action and its consequences will reflect on their school and their district, and it can affect their ability to do the job.

Communication skills, especially the ability to communicate a **vision**, are important for any principal, but the necessity for exceptionally skilled communication is especially important in the case of a turnaround. Jarvis Sanford, a New Leaders for New Schools principal who has led a successful turnaround, has observed that “If you can’t inspire people to want to work, it’s all for naught.”⁶³ Especially in a turnaround, there has to be a shared vision that is compelling enough to get a large group of people to change ingrained behaviors. Kouzes and Posner quote Marshall McLuhan on the importance of storytelling in the work of school leadership: “Those who think there’s a difference between education and entertainment don’t know the first thing about either one.”⁶⁴ Successful turnaround principals succeed in engaging their colleagues.

Principals need both facilitation and listening skills in their repertoire. They have to be able to ask good questions so that they can identify the root causes of problems. They have to be skilled in paraphrasing and summarizing conversations so that everyone takes away the same meaning from the conversation. This type of reflective and careful communication is especially important when interacting with frustrated parents or struggling teachers.

Communication is about the entire set of affective skills that principals bring into schools, their body language, and their ability to convey confidence. Ed Miley, a 30-year principal who now directs leadership development for his district of Providence, Rhode Island, said that his district is becoming more intuitive in its approach.

“We have them do a PowerPoint presentation about what they will do to turn their school around if they were to become principal. Now, some of the ideas they have are just not going to work. We’re not looking at the ideas as much as what they look like when they are standing in front of a group of people whom they are not that comfortable with. . . . And we’re looking to see if people will take them seriously, because the kids are going to make that judgment somehow or the other in the first half hour you’re in the building. . . . Whatever the criteria is, they make that judgment. And the faculty does it at the first faculty meeting.”⁶⁵

Commitment and missionary zeal are essential. A principal from South Carolina noted, “They’ve really got to have a passion to do a good job for the [students]. I don’t care what your salary is — it’s not enough.”⁶⁶ They have to have the energy and physical stamina to put in long hours, and they have to bring with them a communicable belief in equity. New Leaders for New Schools has said that a leading criterion in their selection of future leaders is that they have “an unwavering belief in the potential of every student to succeed academically.”⁶⁷

Advocacy and empathy are more keys to establishing the relationships upon which a school can be turned around. Kouzes and Posner drive this message home in their book *Encouraging the Heart*. They cite Daniel Goleman’s identification of empathy as “the fundamental skill of management,” and Gregory Boyer’s research that finds that “the best leaders put others at the center of the universe.”⁶⁸ Reeves and Fullan also talk about the need for school leaders to “love their employees.”⁶⁹ This does not mean that every teacher is rated “highly effective.”

A key skill of empathy is the ability to really listen to other people. Browning said that as a principal, “You’ve got to give people a chance to talk. That is the supreme way to learn about people and to learn what their priorities are. . . . You can’t learn anything while you’re talking.”⁷⁰ A leader does not always have to agree but does always have to listen. Furthermore, empathy involves more than just listening; it has to be the result of a genuine interest in understanding the other person.

A good principal has the capacity to hold teachers to high standards and **advocates** for teachers by giving them the conditions and support they need to succeed. They assist teachers by making sure that they have common planning time, high-quality professional development opportunities, and a safe and orderly environment in which to work. Principals support teachers in managing student conduct, establishing clear and consistent expectations for students. **Effective principals know how to “manage up”** — they effectively represent the interests of their schools to district leaders, advocating for the resources and the policies their schools need to best meet the needs of students.

Finally, a successful turnaround principal has to be a willing **collaborator**. As essential as the leader is, he or she will never turn the school around without the help of others. When Glenn Pethel was asked about the most common causes for new principals to fail, he responded without any hesitation that the top reason is that they are people who have always been at the top of their class, they have always been the best teachers in their building, they are brilliant, they know that they are brilliant, and they go into a school knowing all of the answers and not listening.⁷¹ Reeves has said that turning schools around requires “the imperfect work of imperfect groups of people.”⁷² It requires patience, understanding, diplomacy and more than a little humility. **Successful principals are not afraid to say that they rely heavily on teachers and other school staff who know more than they do about their particular areas.** Successful turnaround leaders are direct at times, setting non-negotiable standards and expectations, but they also view and engage their faculty as partners.

Selecting Turnaround Principals Who Have These Traits

Depending on the amount of time that a district has (how soon the district needs these turnaround principals), the importance it attaches to experience, and the level of confidence that it has in the ability of its current school leaders to take over low-performing schools, a district has **three basic options** for identifying and preparing turnaround principals. (See Table 3.)

- First, the district can hire a **proven principal** (who is successfully leading or has led another high school) and provide intensive training in taking over a troubled school.
- Second, the district can identify current **assistant principals** who have the required degrees, licenses and several years of successful experience at that level, and give them about a year of intensive training in taking over a turnaround school.

- The third option, requiring the greatest foresight, is to identify in advance any **promising future leaders** with the background and traits that make them suited to lead turnaround schools and enroll them in principal preparation programs.

Identifying and investing in young educators with exceptional promise has the greatest potential for developing strong and well-rounded future leaders. While this option can build up a reservoir of capable future leaders, it cannot meet immediate or short-term needs to improve school leadership. Districts should always invest in their long-term futures by identifying and growing future leaders, but for immediate needs, they have to engage in fast-track candidates as well.

	Current Status	Training That is Needed	Timeline
1. Already proven principal	Leading another, less-challenging high school	Intensive summer training and two years of continuing support	About two weeks of intense prep can get them ready for a turnaround
2. Promotable/Licensed candidate	Serving as an effective assistant principal	About 13 months of intense training, and a district commitment to two years of continuous support	At least a year away
3. Aspiring leader	Serving as an exemplary classroom teacher	Two years to obtain a license, at least three years as an assistant principal to gain experience, and then another year of intensive training specific to turnarounds	At least six years away

Experience as a successful school principal is an obvious asset to a challenged school. The consensus of the experts consulted was that it would be a mistake to attempt to turn a high school around with someone who has not been a successful principal somewhere else. A caution, however, is that previous experience in a higher-performing school will not necessarily be relevant to the turnaround school, and the skill sets that led to that success may not necessarily transfer. Kowal and Hassell warned:

“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. . . . **In contrast, successful start-up leaders thrive on immediate results.** . . . Even highly successful district principals may not have the right profile to be successful in turnaround schools, where the additional **entrepreneurial** profile is needed.” [emphasis added]⁷³

The nature of leadership in a turnaround high school is different than in a higher performing school, but most of the experts participating in this study felt the advantages to be gained from turning to an experienced leader for this difficult work outweighed the concerns that experienced principals would be miscast as turnaround leaders. A principal with decades of experience who is currently leading a turnaround school offered this opinion:

“Not to say that there are not people who can do it, [but] I’m not so sure you need to put new principals in low-performing schools that have been low-performing for a long period of time. You can burn them out very quickly. [Because of my track record] I can take risks that younger principals can’t take. I’ve been able to do that; I’ve been able to make decisions that a new principal thinks, ‘I better not do that.’ I [can] work from the point of [view that] I’d rather try something great and fail than try nothing and succeed. And a new principal has to have that same latitude. But under the current scrutiny, they want these schools turned around in two years, which is not going to happen in most cases. And these young principals are thinking about having to feed their families.”⁷⁴

On both sides of this argument there is a recognition that turnaround principals need to have an entrepreneurial spirit. The question is: Do young principals in their first assignment have the ability to act in an entrepreneurial fashion? Virginia has opted to go with experience in its search for turnaround principals. Its turnaround specialist preparation program, housed at the University of Virginia, is specifically aimed at providing experienced principals with the skills and approaches most likely to succeed in improving schools that have chronically under-performed. It identifies high-performing urban principals and provides them with training toward a specialist degree in turnaround leadership as they engage in the work of improving persistently low-performing schools. The state program includes an extensive incentive structure, including sizable bonuses for completing the turnaround specialist certification, leading a school to meet the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) criteria of *NCLB*, and reducing student failure rates in core subjects.⁷⁵

Part V: What training do future turnaround principals need to enable them to succeed under difficult circumstances?

“It is crystal clear to me that if you just want managers, then managers are no problem. But, if you want leaders, you’ve got to develop leaders — and the development never ends.”

—Paul Browning, Principal, Socastee High School, South Carolina

Each of the three approaches to hiring principals to take over a high school in need of turnaround has its own advantages, drawbacks and preparation pathways. Model pathways are outlined in detail on the following pages. Of course, training in specific districts can and should always be tailored to local conditions and contexts.

Pathway #1: Preparing Already Proven Principals to Lead Turnarounds

Because they are so experienced, these principals can be trained with an intensive, 10-day summer institute. It should focus on five themes: (1) *Learn effective practices* of turnaround principals, including discussing case studies of successful turnarounds and meeting with successful turnaround leaders who can serve as **mentors**. (2) *Develop a portrait* of the assigned school and its community. Each principal should gather hard data (such as performance metrics) and soft data (such as information on the personality of the school, the faculty and the community) and then begin strategic planning to establish the relationships that will lead to success. (3) *Explore strategies and techniques* for changing a school culture to one of high

The Turnaround Skills All Three Approaches Should Cover

Principals in turnaround high schools must be competent in a specific set of instructional leadership skills. These skills start with the basics of math and literacy instruction and extend to the skills necessary to engage students in relevant instruction, to improve the skills of teachers, and to improve the culture of the school. A turnaround principal must know:

1. How to work with faculty to teach students to the new levels required to meet college- and career-readiness standards for reading, writing, math and science
2. How to implement literacy standards and instruction in all courses across the curriculum
3. How to design pathway programs of study that join solid academic and CT courses, align with postsecondary studies and will prepare students to graduate with skills necessary to immediately succeed in college, advanced training or a career
4. How to personalize the learning environment and ensure that every student has a meaningful relationship with an adult in the school
5. How to create a strong guidance and advisement system that assists each student in creating a focus or program of study that will result in graduating from high school prepared for success in a field aligned to his or her goals and interests
6. How to assist teachers to plan and carry out classroom instruction that engages students intellectually, socially, emotionally and behaviorally in learning
7. How to create a culture where attending and graduating from high school and pursuing some form of future study is expected and celebrated
8. How to collect and analyze student survey and achievement data, conduct learning walks and classroom observations to assess the quality of teaching and learning, and use this information to have meaningful, reflective, respectful and ongoing conversations with teachers about their teaching practices
9. How to protect, extend and reinforce quality learning time — during the school day, week and year — and how to use discretionary resources to provide quality extended-time instruction that will enable student to meet higher standards

expectations for all students and adults: the components of school culture, how belief systems change, adult behaviors that create schools where every student is expected to succeed, how to improve teacher-student relationships, and the role of the school leader in introducing and accelerating change. (4) *Use data and root cause analysis* to identify and solve problems of student achievement. Effective leaders must know how to treat more than the symptoms of the problems they confront — they must get to the root of those problems and create long-term solutions. (5) *Recognize effective instructional practices* and replicate their successes. Classroom instruction is the core business of every school, and turnaround principals must be experts in this business.

At the beginning of this training, the participants should meet with the mentors (some turnaround programs call them “shepherds”) who will work with them throughout the next year. Morning sessions can be devoted to learning new material, while afternoon sessions are spent working either in small groups or one-on-one with their mentors on developing, component-by-component, a strategic plan for turning the school around. **All participants should leave the intensive summer training with a plan of action**, beginning with the upcoming teacher pre-service training, plus a timeline with goals and objectives for their first 45 days in the school, first 90 days and first year. Because the mentor has been involved in the training and the planning, he or she can help the principal stay focused and on course in the upcoming year.

Pathway #2: Preparing Current Assistant Principals to Lead Turnarounds

Currently successful assistant principals may need a year of intensive training to prepare to become turnaround principals. An excellent model for them is the Executive Leadership Program (ELP) that SREB created in partnership with Memphis City Schools (MCS) in Tennessee.

ELP is a yearlong boot camp for leaders with at least three years of experience who have been identified as being likely to be promoted. ELP is designed to ensure that prospective leaders are proficient in all areas of school leadership and able to hit the ground running as effective administrators. **ELP training is built around a series of SREB leadership courses taught by experienced trainers, many of whom are university faculty or former school administrators.** ELP participants are trained in SREB leadership courses such as: *Using Root Cause Analysis to Create a High-performance Learning Culture*, *Personalizing the Organization and Communicating for Improved Student Results*, and *Leading Schoolwide Literacy Initiatives*. Skilled SREB facilitators also lead school learning walks with the cohorts in a process akin to conducting medical rounds. For an example of a prototypical training schedule, see Exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1
Prototypical Intensive Training Schedule to Prepare School Leaders Over a Year's Time

Month	Course	Details
August	<i>Orientation</i>	Face-to-face training
August	<i>Mentoring School Leaders in Competency-Based Internship and Induction Experiences</i>	3 separate face-to-face sessions
September	<i>Using Data to Focus Improvement</i>	6 days face-to-face training over 3 sessions
October	<i>Using Root Cause Analysis to Create a High-Performance Learning Culture</i>	40 hours of online instruction plus one, 2-day face-to-face training visit
November	<i>Aligning Assignments for and Assessing Academic Rigor</i>	40 hours of online plus 2 days of face-to-face training
January	<i>Personalizing the Organization and Communicating for Improved Student Results</i>	40 hours of online plus 2 days of face-to-face training
February	<i>Coaching for School Improvement</i>	4 days of face-to-face training in 2 sessions
March	<i>Providing Focused and Sustained Professional Development</i>	4 days of face-to-face training in 2 sessions
April	<i>Leading Schoolwide Literacy Initiatives</i>	40 hours of online plus 2 days of face-to-face training
May	<i>Leadership Teams and Embracing Change for Student Success</i>	40 hours of online plus 2 days of face-to-face training

Trainings are held on Tuesday and Wednesday nights throughout the school year. MCS district leaders and current MCS school administrators provide information on day-to-day school leadership, particularly within the specific contexts of the MCS system. Participants become familiar with local policies, procedures and expectations. They learn how to access and manage resources within the MCS system so that they will have the tools necessary to improve a school. Each participant is assigned an experienced and successful principal in the system as a **mentor** who will guide him or her in applying learning from the courses in real-world, real-time settings.

For its capstone activity, the ELP cohort is divided into teams that review the data for a school in the district. These teams prepare an improvement plan for that school, tailoring strategies to the context of the school and incorporating learning from the program, with strong encouragement to offer innovative solutions. At the end of the program, participants formally present these plans to their peers and a jury of experts. This yearlong program is extremely demanding. It draws heavily on the benefits of the current and previous school-based experiences of participants. And its success is very promising.

As of fall 2011, 30 graduates of the ELP had been promoted to principal; half of them had been promoted to lead schools on the district's High Priority list. ELP graduates have been principals of 21 schools long enough to have school effectiveness data reported by the state of Tennessee. For 17 of those 21 schools (81 percent), school effectiveness for the 2010-2011 school year was trending positive in comparison with previous years.

Pathway #3: Growing Classroom Teachers Into Turnaround Principals

The third pathway is to identify and select exemplary classroom teachers with the character, passion and drive that mark them as possible turnaround leaders, and then include them in cohorts that receive university training in conjunction with a yearlong practicum providing rich, field-based experiences. This training must include an integral **mentoring** support program that begins during and is coordinated with their university training and then automatically continues past that training to support them as they enter leadership positions. SREB has implemented this pathway with the Florida Leadership Academy for Schools of Innovation and Improvement (FLASII), a five-year program funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

FLASII began with the identification of teachers in high-needs Florida districts who demonstrated instructional excellence, leadership and a passion for improving schools in high-poverty settings. Selected participants enrolled as a cohort in an accredited university school leadership program that emphasized the special competencies for leading school turnaround, with a portion of their tuition covered by the grant. Participants were matched with trained mentors and also attended weekend seminars on special topics. In addition, they served on the leadership team responsible for implementing their school's comprehensive school improvement plan, attended training on SREB leadership modules with the other members of that team, and assisted in implementing that training in their schools. Finally, all participants were located in schools served by *HSTW* school improvement coaches.

This combination of program structure, enhanced training and resources resulted in participants being exposed to research-based ideas for school improvement while having opportunities to work immediately on the implementation of new ideas and skills under the guidance of multiple, experienced advisors.

Education leaders can use any or all of these pathways for creating effective turnaround leaders. In addition — after a decade of work in improving school leadership — SREB has found that certain training experiences best prepare all principals to succeed under difficult circumstances.

- Integrating extended, hands-on internship and residency experiences with scholarly studies is critical.
- Aspiring leaders need opportunities to progress through the steps of closely observing and reflecting on the work of good school principals, participating in school improvement initiatives, and finally leading teams of adults in identifying a school's problems and implementing school improvement initiatives to achieve needed change.
- The value of an internship experience is heavily dependent on the active support of a highly qualified, on-site school principal; the mentor principal can make or break an internship experience.
- District involvement in the development of its own future leaders is essential and cannot be delegated to universities or anyone else.
- All aspiring leaders need a trained mentor to guide their professional growth, help them identify and overcome areas of weakness and fully understand the role of leadership in a school setting.
- University instruction and courses should focus on preparing principals as leaders of teachers and learning and should include the implementation of valid school and classroom practices.
- Training new leaders in well-organized cohorts creates a professional community to which they can turn for advice and sharing experiences.

Part VI: What support do turnaround principals need?

Following training, a well-developed induction program is critical for new turnaround principals. They need the support of a trained mentor for at least one year. Spending at least one year as an assistant principal working for an experienced and skillful principal increases the odds of success in a challenged school.⁷⁶

Persistent failure in high schools is the result of multiple, mutually reinforcing problems — any one of which alone would be enough to undermine school success. Thus, fixing any one of the problems will not result in a turnaround.

Effective instructional leadership is a necessary condition for improving these schools, **but it is not sufficient.**

Good principals will still need substantial support if they are to succeed in improving the lowest-performing schools.

Depriving them of that support simply sets good people up for failure. Without support, good principals likely will be overwhelmed by resistant teachers, unengaged students, angry parents and capricious district leadership. Districts must give them a fair chance.

Principals need eight supportive conditions to turn schools around:⁷⁷

1. Authority over personnel, school organization and scheduling
2. Control over the necessary budget and resources
3. High-quality interim assessments for reading and math, plus a system for tracking and analyzing assessment and other data
4. Periodic teacher evaluations, using multiple data sources
5. Training on embedding the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) or other rigorous state standards in the school's curriculum
6. Encouragement to be instructional leaders who support teachers to engage and motivate students in learning
7. Effective professional development that is embedded in the school structure and focuses on preparing teachers to implement proven practices aligned to improved achievement and intellectual growth of students
8. A district with a long-term plan for supporting the principal to create a continuous school improvement culture

The eight conditions are ambitious, perhaps especially during a period of restricted budgets. But these conditions are necessary if turnarounds are going to work. Unfortunately, finding a new leader can often be an easier option than properly supporting leaders already in place. Louis et al. (2010) noted:

“District leaders faced with struggling schools were less rather than more likely to sponsor leadership-development initiatives or to provide strategic help to principals; they focused instead on recruiting a different sort of administrator. **In one of the large, low-performing urban districts in our sample, district administrators expressed the belief that principals were essentially born, not made. They talked more about the need to replace principals in low-performing schools than about prospects for developing their leadership skills.** Not surprisingly, in this setting, district leaders did not describe any local professional-development programs for principals.”⁷⁸ [emphasis added]

Support #1: Why authority is key

In its study of district support for principals, SREB found that 80 percent of leaders in highly supportive districts talked about the need for principals to have control over personnel decisions, whereas fewer than half of respondents in less supportive districts saw this as important. **Principals in turnaround schools need more power to get the teachers they need if they are going to succeed.** A district leader on the focus team for this report said that his district gave its priority

schools “first dibs” at teachers coming into the district,⁷⁹ but practices like this are still too uncommon. Five years ago, a team of researchers from MassInsight produced a report, *The Turnaround Challenge*, that said, in part:

“It would seem reasonable, for example, that students in the lowest-performing schools should be taught by the most able teachers. But under current incentive and compensation structures, it would be irrational to expect the most capable teachers and administrators to gravitate to the most dysfunctional schools. New incentives — differential pay, low-interest mortgages, loan-forgiveness, leadership roles — must be developed if we are to match the neediest students with the teachers and leaders most capable of helping them.”⁸⁰

Little has changed since then, and this is one of the core problems facing turnaround principals. While they almost certainly have some good teachers, they are likely to have fewer great teachers and many more entry-level or marginally effective teachers. In fact, a recent McKinsey and Company report documented that high-poverty schools had a significantly smaller percentage of teachers who graduated in the top third of their college classes.⁸¹ The good news in the McKinsey report is that school leadership really does matter — first-rate school leaders can attract more talented teachers to the most challenged schools.

However, as MassInsight’s *Turnaround Challenge* report pointed out, there must also be incentives to make teaching in turnaround high schools attractive on multiple levels, so that principals can build up teams with which they can successfully improve the school. Outside of education there is recognition that dramatic improvements in organizational capacity are likely to require equally dramatic improvements in human capital.⁸² Turnaround principals must have greater control over their staffs and must be able to attract high-caliber individuals — the extraordinary teachers who can get extraordinary results.

Support #2: Why budget control is key

Obviously, turnaround schools have greater problems and need greater resources. Montgomery County, Maryland, is a suburban district outside Washington, D.C., with pockets of poverty. Superintendent Jerry Weast identified “Red Zone” and “Green Zone” schools, and unapologetically insisted on providing greater resources to the Red Zone schools, which served more students who were racial or ethnic minorities, English-language learners and/or socioeconomically disadvantaged. The district recognized that students in Red Zone schools were going to need more support to get to graduation — and Montgomery County has achieved that goal in a way that few other districts in the nation have, with dramatic improvement among minority students’ graduation rates, AP test scores and SAT scores.⁸³ The extra support is, as one of the focus team members said, “A hard sell in some areas. You want a new principal to come in, whether experienced or not experienced, and build a world with nothing — and that’s very difficult to do.” MassInsight has estimated that a school turnaround requires an investment of approximately \$250,000 to \$1 million per year at least for three years.⁸⁴

Principals should also have control over the resources of external programs and consultants. Many turnarounds are “Christmas tree” schools, with too many ornamental programs weighing down their branches. **Many schools have a dozen or more poorly implemented programs, sometimes offering flatly contradictory advice and almost always tripping over each other.**

Principals should be able to tell the district or the state if math or literacy consultants assigned to the school are not helping. An informant for this study told of a situation in a needs-improvement school where a new principal met at the beginning of the year with three school improvement consultants from different organizations. All were fully paid for and assigned to the school, none was aware that the others would be there, and each offered a different plan for improvement that would take the complete support of the principal and his entire staff for the next year. At some point, principals have to be able to say “no.”⁸⁵

Support #3: Why interim assessments are key

Turnaround schools are starting from behind in a race against time. Their students are behind and need to catch up, making every day and week of instruction critical to success. The availability of high-quality interim assessments allows teachers and school leaders to monitor the progress of students and add appropriate supports when they are falling behind. An example of a district that made adjustments part of its improvement strategy is Aldine, Texas, winner of the 2009 Broad Prize. The district “instituted more frequent assessments that provide quick feedback to teachers and allow them to adjust instruction, and designed an online . . . database that lets teachers access model lessons.”⁸⁶

Highly effective systems also make it a point that school leaders are able to use the data they receive. A three-ring binder of raw data from the previous year won’t necessarily help; supportive districts provide meaningful and timely data to principals and teachers, combined with analysis and interpretation that can inform appropriate actions.⁸⁷

Quality math assessments should be aligned to the new Common Core State Standards or other rigorous state standards, and they should have a balance of assessing procedural skills as well as reasoning and understanding. Current instruction and assessments typically emphasize learning by rote instead of solving multi-dimensional, real-world problems that require critical thinking and an understanding of math concepts. Reading and writing assessments should likewise be aligned with rigorous standards, and should emphasize mastery of reading and understanding content across multiple subjects and effective writing for a variety of purposes and audiences.

Support #4: Why teacher evaluations are key

In general, the teaching profession has remained remarkably averse to the evaluation of practice. Just as students need to know how they are doing, teachers benefit from feedback focused on continuous improvement of their performance. Administrators need the support of a system that effectively communicates the need for evaluation and provides them with training in conducting effective evaluations. Formal summative evaluations are beneficial, but frequent formative evaluations are even more important to continuously improving instructional practices.

Teacher evaluation systems should be multifaceted, incorporating (1) student achievement data, (2) expert classroom observations, (3) assessments of teachers’ pedagogical knowledge, and (4) student perceptions to form a comprehensive understanding of a teacher’s strengths and challenges.

Beyond understanding and expecting that school leaders need to conduct frequent classroom visits each week, districts can support principals and assistant principals by providing effective training on conducting teacher evaluations and walkthroughs: knowing what to look for, how to recognize good teaching, how to provide feedback, and how to get past minor details to see the big picture for their school. Supportive districts ensure that all school leaders become experts in evaluating and providing feedback to their teachers.

Support #5: Why training on standards is key

By early 2012, most states and the District of Columbia had adopted the CCSS. The new standards will require that turnaround school principals change how students are taught, what they are taught, and the depth of understanding expected. For example, achieving the literacy standards requires teachers to use tools and strategies in all courses that engage students in comprehending complex texts and putting their understanding into a well-written paper. Addressing the new math standards will require teachers to teach fewer topics, but to have students master them at a much greater depth of understanding.

Principals cannot be experts in every subject taught in their school, nor should they be; but principals will be responsible for ensuring that their schools **adjust what and how they teach to meet the new standards**. This will require specific training and support that will enable them to lead their faculty in changing their curriculum. In terms of literacy, principals need to **identify a lead literacy person for each content area** who can work with the team of teachers to incorporate literacy standards and strategies into subject areas in ways that advance both subject matter and literacy achievement. Math instruction will require a paradigm shift from just teaching math procedure to a balance that includes procedural fluency, understanding and reasoning, and principals need to **identify math teachers who understand and can lead that change**. In a turnaround setting, they are likely to have fewer veteran teachers who can take the lead in the content areas, a lower level of instructional expertise in their building, more crises and distractions, and more time pressure to achieve results. Adoption of the CCSS marks a major change for all schools — but turnaround schools will need even greater support and guidance.

Support #6: Why support as instructional leaders is key

Recent research shows that district and state support of principals can be felt in the classroom. Louis et al. (2010) found that 36 percent of the variance in principal leadership can be traced back to district predictors such as a strong focus on instruction — **districts that focus on instruction end up having principals who focus on instruction**. Furthermore, they found that principals who had positive perceptions of state policy received higher ratings from their teachers on their instructional leadership behavior. “In other words, state policy is felt at the school level,” according to Louis et al.⁸⁸ Principals do not work in isolation, and district leaders and state policy-makers must keep in mind how their actions will help or hinder principals as they provide instructional leadership in a school.

Districts have to show principals that they care. One way they do that is by being engaged and interested in the instructional work of the school. SREB’s studies of district support for principals have found, based on interviews with both principals and district staff, that **staff in more supportive districts spent more time in schools**, meeting with teachers, students and administrators, and that they had a **greater focus on instruction in conducting those visits**. Supportive districts are also more protective and respectful of principals’ time. A principal interviewed for this study said, “E-mails ought to be against the law! I’ll get an e-mail from central office to tell me about something that I’m supposed to have done before the day’s out,” disrupting the principal’s work in leading and improving instruction. Supportive districts find ways to take things off the plate of their principals, rather than putting more things on.

Support in a highly supportive district also is differentiated. Just as a one-size-fits-all approach to instruction does not work in the classroom, one-size-fits-all solutions do not adequately support schools and principals. Louis et al. (2010) observed, “To realize their potential as instructional leaders, principals working in middle schools and high schools need particular modes of support. They face a distinct challenge, shaped by the large, complex settings in which they work, and the level of support extended to them should be commensurate with their distinct needs.”⁸⁹ **First-year principals, especially, are likely to need individualized professional development and support**. As they begin to adapt to the job, they will uncover gaps in their knowledge and skills that are both specific and urgent.⁹⁰

Support #7: Why professional development in the school structure is key

Changing low performance to high achievement requires improvement in the quality of leadership and instruction across an entire school. Professional learning, structured around teachers and leaders working together in teams to solve problems to boost school improvement, must become a pervasive and organic part of the culture. Based on their experiences with the University of Virginia's Turnaround Specialist Program, Fairchild and Tierney (2011) reported:

“Principals and teachers need to access instructional supports and engage in quality professional development that strengthens and builds capacity for the turnaround. ‘Developing the executive’ — including the turnaround principal, district administrators, and a school leadership team — will attend to the essential human capital component of the turnaround, which is not only critical for turnaround to occur but also for the change to be sustained over time.”⁹¹

Persistent low performance in schools is almost invariably a symptom of severe human capital deficits. In Washington, D.C., 42 percent of teachers are in their first or second year of teaching — and the district has a 43 percent graduation rate. In neighboring Montgomery County, Maryland, only 12 percent of teachers are in their first or second year, and the district graduation rate is 85.7 percent.⁹² These facts are not unrelated. Most of the time, low-performing **schools fail because teachers lack the skills and the conditions of support** necessary to succeed.

Support #8: Why a long-term district plan for supporting the principal is key

Although elementary schools may see improvement evident in test scores at the end of one year, it is more likely that even in the most successful middle grades and high school cases, test scores will not evidence improvement until the second year.⁹³ Fullan (1999) cautioned that it takes about three years to change an elementary school, six years to change a high school, and eight years to change a district.⁹⁴ Recognizing that changing the culture of a high school takes time, districts and states should create frameworks for understanding and measuring progress in the early years of turnaround situations.

Districts need to make a long-term commitment to providing mentoring and coaching in support of sustainable turnarounds. Since principals cannot do the work alone, turnarounds often will take longer than the tenure of a single good principal, so the **support should build the capacity of a complete team**. Based on experiences in Virginia and Louisiana, researchers have observed that “Turnaround without succession planning risks long-term failure.” This corroborates what others have found in Ontario, the United Kingdom and the United States.⁹⁵ For a period of several years beyond an improvement in their performance metrics, turnarounds are fragile and need corresponding support. Like a very sick medical patient, a turnaround school must prevent a relapse by **continuing to follow a treatment plan**, even after the immediate symptoms have disappeared.

Part VII: What district and state policies are needed to dramatically improve leadership in turnaround high schools?

As a recent McKinsey report pointed out, the loss of potential represented by high school dropouts and graduates who are not prepared for college or careers is equivalent to a permanent national recession.⁹⁶ Improving the high schools that are the last hope for students falling through the cracks will require superior school leadership. That leadership is within reach — if states, districts, communities and schools have the desire and the political will to prepare and empower it. Pursuing the following 12 policies can result in the necessary improvements for high school leadership.

- 1. Create state or regional programs to select and train experienced principals to serve as turnaround specialists.**
In *The Turnaround Challenge*, MassInsight concluded that “Most school districts, except for perhaps the largest 100 or so, do not have the resources themselves to develop . . . a specialized subset of principals with expertise in turnaround — so it must be a responsibility of the state, working with outside partners.”⁹⁷ The resources to create the specialized training programs to prepare and support turnaround principals are best located and coordinated at the state level.
- 2. Provide incentives for experienced principals to accept the challenge of turnaround leadership, including incentives for improved performance and longevity in turnaround schools.** Principal turnover in chronically low-performing schools is typically extremely high, and the rotating-door of leaders makes teachers hesitant to commit to supporting the vision and direction of a new principal. Teachers and parents alike become skeptical that any principal is going to stay for any length of time. Incentives should encourage longevity. If the intention is that the turnaround principal moves on to another school, it becomes critical to **begin early work on a succession plan** that can result in continuity and a smooth transition.⁹⁸
- 3. Develop and continuously improve principal selection tools that can predict success in turnaround settings.**
Turning a high school around requires a special set of character traits, skills and beliefs that go beyond those required of principals in high-performing high schools. Sometimes, these may be difficult to discern through interviews. Improved selection tools can help districts screen for candidates suitable for leadership in turnaround settings.
- 4. Increase per-student funding for preparing principals to reflect the greater costs associated with the intensive internships necessary for those programs.** Field-based experiences are critical to the relevance and success of training programs and are demanding of faculty time that is not typically covered by tuition associated with classes. Principal preparation programs historically have generated revenue for universities, and school systems have borne the cost of this in ill-prepared school leaders. States including Alabama and Tennessee have raised the selectivity, rigor and relevance of training for school leaders, and others can follow their lead in this area.
- 5. Support ongoing, individualized professional development specifically for turnaround leaders.** Highly supportive districts provide individualized mentoring and coaching, as well as opportunities to gather with other turnaround principals within their state and from across the nation. Mandating that they spend their time in one-size-fits-all trainings can be unproductive.
- 6. Create “enterprise zone” rules for turnaround high schools, providing expanded authority over personnel decisions, schedules, and improvement strategies.** Turnaround principals need to be able to create the team that can implement their vision for the school and then to implement the strategies needed to achieve that vision. They need the authority to make staffing decisions and the ability to attract the right teachers for the job of turning a school around. In particular, incentive policies are needed to encourage great teachers to remain in or join the faculty of low-performing schools. Turnaround principals also need flexibility in adopting policies that may not be available in higher-performing schools in the same district — such as policies to extend learning time, to provide tutoring opportunities for students and to implement grading strategies that require students to complete work and to be retaught until they meet grade-level standards.

7. **Support the development and deployment of high-quality formative assessment exams and lessons.**⁹⁹ Formative assessment exams and lessons can improve teaching by enabling teachers to spot students' misconceptions, gaps in knowledge and errors of fact and take action immediately. Districts and states that support formal low-stakes, high-quality formative exams and assignments help improve teaching and student learning. Waiting until the end of the year to see if students have been learning is too late.
8. **Collect, analyze and report to principals perceptual data on the culture and climate of their schools, giving better information with which to understand the work of building relationships in the school and community.** Quality surveys of culture and climate can be even more important than test scores in helping principals understand what has to change about the school, what has to change about their leadership, and what students, parents and teachers want most. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), for example, has developed a 360° engagement survey that collects input from teachers, parents, students and supervisors for principals going through the NBPTS Accomplished Principals certification process. Principals going through this process have seen this as invaluable feedback for identifying and improving upon weaknesses in their professional practice. Other tools also are available.
9. **End seniority-based layoff policies that disproportionately impact schools in need of turnaround.** In schools where instruction is already weak, there can be no excuse for releasing effective teachers or forcing principals to take weak teachers who have been subject to force reductions at other schools. Schools in need of turnaround should be exempted from staffing decisions based solely on seniority.¹⁰⁰
10. **Provide incentives to encourage veteran teachers and promising novice teachers to work in turnaround high schools.** A school can only be as good as its teachers. Principals play a necessary role in inspiring, coaching, attracting, retaining and supporting teachers; but it is the teachers who carry the load of day-to-day instruction. Low-performing schools need to systematically improve the human capital of their teaching faculty, and that includes recruiting first-rate teachers as well as providing quality professional learning opportunities that enable all teachers to reach their maximum potential.
11. **Change the toxic “scoreboard” mentality that currently surrounds testing results.** Data have helped identify problem schools and define their specific challenges, but the current measures and discussion around measures of student achievement are, in many cases, causing more harm than good. The current accountability environment is focused too much on punitive measures and not enough on the broad support needed to make lasting improvements. Districts and states need to take ownership of persistently failing high schools within their borders and recognize their responsibility to do everything necessary to change the conditions in those schools. **The discussion has to be more about what “we” can do and less about what “those people” are doing wrong.**

As long as policies permit dysfunctional schools to serve as dumping grounds for the least effective educators, progress will continue to be elusive. Under current conditions, the stigma associated with turnaround schools tends to outweigh additional resources that are allocated to those schools — resources that, in any case, rarely compensate for the difference in teacher salaries at top high schools and those at the bottom.¹⁰¹

12. **Create pathways for success in high schools — particularly turnaround schools.** Principals cannot be expected to turn low-performing schools around if they do not know how to create access to authentic instruction that will engage students and motivate them to succeed. Principals need support from the state and the district to engage teachers in creating pathway programs of study that link academic and career/technical learning, require students to use academic skills to complete authentic projects and problems related to their interests, and connect students' learning to their goals beyond high school. When principals are able to help students find a reason for learning by providing pathways of success through high school and connecting learning to students' interests, they will be better able to turn low-performing schools around.

In Conclusion

Being a school principal is one of the most challenging jobs in America. Leading a high school increases the complexity of the job — and leading a chronically low-performing high school only further augments the challenge. Turning around persistent academic failure demands a high degree of professional skill, paired with strong character, entrepreneurial spirit, passion and courage.

The practices, strategies and challenges outlined in this report demonstrate that it is no work for novices. Turning a school around is best approached by identifying, developing and supporting a professional educator who is already an experienced principal with a track record of success.

These leaders are not born so much as they are developed over a period of years. They need to develop a mastery of curriculum and instruction and be able to successfully share their mastery with other teachers so that the people around them become better teachers. They need to practice the habits and skills of effective leadership. Finally, they need to gain the specific skills and knowledge they will need as school leaders in a turnaround context.

One of the hallmarks of any mature profession is the recognition of specialties. Just as the medical profession recognizes specialties for cardiology and oncology, turnaround principals should be trained — and recognized — as specialists with a unique set of competencies. The turnaround challenge calls for nothing less.

The success of high school turnaround leaders requires strong support from teachers, other school staff, the district and state. No matter how outstanding these principals are, they cannot do it alone. Furthermore, no principal will stay in one school forever, so teams, practices, systems and succession plans need to be in place to sustain success.

America is too wealthy, talented and gifted to accept as inevitable the current state of our lowest-performing high schools. Improving those schools will require thousands of school leaders we do not currently have — but we can find and develop these leaders. Collectively, states, districts and communities need to commit to do what is necessary to put a great principal in every school in the country.

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