October 2010 | Volume **68** | Number **2**
Interventions That Work Pages 78-81

Drastic School Turnaround Strategies Are Risky

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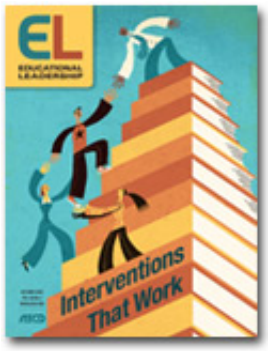

States and districts need to step up and have the political courage to close failing schools and let others try," proclaimed U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan (2009), announcing a $3.5 billion federal investment to turn around the 5,000 worst-performing schools in the country. But can this kind of intervention work?

What's the Idea?

School turnaround strategies aim to improve student achievement in chronically low-performing schools. Borrowing the "turnaround" lingo from the business world, education policymakers claim that only drastic action, from firing the principal to closing the school entirely, can get quick results and rescue failing schools.

What's the Reality?

Efforts to improve low-performing schools are not new. What's new is the call by policymakers to impose such draconian interventions on 5,000 of the lowest of the low performers. To get a piece of the billions authorized for the federal School Turnaround Grant program, states must ensure that districts use one of four strategies for each target school: fire the principal and at least one-half of the staff; reopen the school as a charter school; close the school and transfer students to better schools in the district; or fire the principal and overhaul teacher evaluation, schedules, and instruction (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

What's the Research?

Strategies to turn schools around are modeled after turnarounds in the corporate world, where it is easier to fire and rehire staff and leaders. Yet even in the business world, results are rarely positive. One review of the literature found that only about one-fourth of businesses that undertook turnaround initiatives were able to institute major changes in their structure and management, and even those businesses did not show increased economic performance (Hess & Gift, 2008).

Studies that have looked at attempts to replace entire school staffs—referred to as *reconstitution*—agree that merely replacing teachers does not lead to improved instruction. Case studies of three reconstituted schools in one large urban district found that replacing the staff had little effect on quality, school organization, or student performance (Malen, Croninger, Muncey, & Redmond-Jones, 2002). Even a U.S. Department of Education guide shares this conclusion: "The school turnaround case studies and the business turnaround research do not support the wholesale replacement of staff" (Herman et al., 2008, p. 28).

An exception occurred in San Francisco in the early 1980s. Under a court order to desegregate, teachers in four schools were transferred to other schools with an option to reapply to their original school under new leadership. Test scores improved in these four schools, but scores did not improve in later rounds of reconstitution because the conditions could not be replicated. Increased scores appeared to be the result of the combined effects of extra money, reduced class sizes, planning time, professional development, new materials, and parent choice and commitment, along with a national search for teachers (Ricke &

Malen, 2010).

If replacing the staff is not effective, what about closing low-performing schools entirely? Do students transferred from closed schools perform better in their new schools? Chicago researchers tracked students from closed schools and found that most ended up in academically weak schools and, except for the few students attending high-scoring schools, were no better off academically one year later (de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009). Because the strategy is likely to work only in districts that have other schools with higher academic achievement and space for more students, the results of this Chicago study are not surprising. Meeting these conditions is difficult in most urban districts, and impossible in rural districts.

The strategy of turning low-performing schools over to a charter organization or other outside agency has not fared well either. Taking over an existing school is much more difficult than building a new school from the ground up. Philadelphia's experience with outsourcing the management of 45 schools showed that even with additional expenditures, student achievement gains were no greater in those managed by outside organizations than in those remaining under district management (Gill, Zimmer, Christman, & Blanc, 2007). Even "turnaround specialists" are not successful across the board; Maryland gave up on using such organizations in 2007 because of poor results (Neuman-Sheldon, 2007).

In case studies of schools in six states required to restructure under No Child Left Behind, neither replacing school staff nor contracting with an outside agency showed promise. Instead, schools that improved used multiple coordinated strategies tailored to their particular circumstances and continually revised their practices (Scott, 2009).

The theme that no single strategy can succeed echoes throughout research on school reform. Invariably, improvements occur when multiple elements are in place, including strong school leadership, links to parents and the community, development of teachers' professional capacity, a safe and stimulating learning climate, and instructional guidance and materials (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Payne, 2008). Yet the lowest-performing schools are where these elements are the least likely to be present.

What's One to Do?

Walking through schools in which students wander the halls and teachers have given up teaching, it is not hard to understand the desire of policymakers to shut these schools down. Drastic actions are needed. Yet, the proposed turnaround strategies run counter to what research tells us about all the pieces needed to create and sustain improvement—particularly in the lowest-performing schools, where hope and trust are scarce.

A realistic approach would include key components identified by researchers: carefully determining the starting place with the most promise and building the skills and knowledge of those responsible for student learning. It would also, from the beginning, seriously engage teachers and the community in setting goals and putting them into practice. And it would acknowledge the importance of resources and patience. Replacing staff or redefining their roles may be necessary, but starting with a presumption that communicates contempt for the practitioners responsible for carrying out the work will undermine whatever follows.

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