

# Not Watching the Fight: Examining the Dynamics of School Turnaround

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## Abstract

This case describes how a newly appointed superintendent implemented systematic changes across the school district to increase academic performance and keep schools open and operational. The district superintendent and leadership team were forced by the state educational system to promote rapid and drastic organizational and academic changes to avoid district closure. These changes implied a new district performance policy, and it was promoted while navigating challenges related to local district politics, the internal culture of dysfunctionality and disarray, and the state educational system.

## Keywords

school turnaround, instructional leadership, academic performance

## Case Study

Superintendent Mary Washington stepped into her role as superintendent of Songbird Independent School District (ISD) 6 months ago. Following the implementation of the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) assessment program, the district failed to meet state achievement standards in reading, mathematics, science, and social studies for students from Grades 3 through 12 (see Appendix A). Now, the district is at risk of losing its accreditation and faces closure, an issue widely documented in the news media. Although Superintendent Washington cannot predict the district's future, she has made a commitment to Songbird ISD's schools and community. As she sees it, "You're not watching the fight, you're in the fight."

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## **Songbird History and Demographics**

In 1905, the city of Songbird had a school district consisting of only 22 students, and by 2002, the school district had enrolled 6,000 students. Songbird ISD has traditionally enjoyed a strong reputation for its academic and organized sports. Sadly, over the past 10 years, Songbird ISD's academic and financial effectiveness have diminished. Local media have described the school district as an ineffective organization to educate children and manage taxpayers' money, and as incapable of retaining students and staff. One of the biggest criticisms Songbird ISD has recently faced relates to its dysfunctional leadership leading to budget deficits and poor academic performance.

Currently, Songbird's population is approximately 13,000, with 4,000 households and 3,000 families residing within the city limits. The racial demographics of the city are 70% African American, 20% Hispanic, and 10% Caucasian. The median income for a household in the city is US\$40,000, and the per capita income for the city is US\$20,000. About 32% of the families live below the federal poverty line, including 31% of those below age 18 and 20% of those aged 65 or above. The cost of living at Songbird is approximately 20% below national average.

## **A District Facing Dramatic Changes**

Songbird ISD is a small, urban school district with approximately 2,300 students, mostly African American and living in poverty, serving a tight-knit, but increasingly divided, suburban community. Currently, the district employs 271 staff members, including 137 teachers and 36 administrators. In its past, Songbird ISD was a well-performing district, earning a district rating of "Recognized" in 2000 based on state standardized testing results. In the last decade, however, graduates have been leaving the area. From 2000 to 2011, White students decreased from 20.2% to 7.8%, whereas African American and Hispanic students have increased from 65.5% and 13.6% to 72.0% and 18.4%, respectively. The socioeconomic profile has also changed; in 2000, 49.0% of students were identified as economically disadvantaged, whereas in 2011, the percentage increased to 72.7%, marking a significant change in the community. In regard to district and school administrators, from 2000 to 2011, White and Hispanic administrators decreased from 67% to 20%, whereas African American administrators increased from 33% to 80%. A similar trend occurred with teachers and instructional aides (White and Hispanic instructors have decreased from 55% to 25% and African American instructors have increased from 45% to 75%).

Given the shift in student demographics, many teachers and administrators have found themselves ill-equipped for the change in terms of professional development and adequate training to meet their students' needs. At the campus level, administrators provided safe and reliable learning environments. Facilities, although old, are clean and well maintained, and students are well behaved. A sense of pride is evident when speaking to the principals, and they are quick to share their staff members' beliefs in Songbird. However, the administrators are frustrated by consistently declining achievement rates and annual attrition of students. Each year, Songbird ISD loses

approximately 100 students to neighboring districts with open enrollment; given the district's reliance on state funding, each loss directly affects staffing.

## **New Performance Policy**

The newly appointed superintendent understands that to further the necessary academic changes in the district, it is essential to increase staff capacity and establish a sense of urgency. To accomplish that task, the superintendent and leadership team have developed a new evaluation instrument that ties student performance to contract renewals. In other words, a teacher or a campus principal from any grade level could be fired at the end of the school year if his or her students do not show significant academic growth from local and state standardized assessments. The new evaluation system is aligned to state guidelines, and it was introduced to the school board as a new district policy. The new policy was approved by the board with just the necessary votes during an argumentative and divided session.

Even when the superintendent succeeded in establishing a sense of urgency among her staff within a new accountability system for key personnel, the implementation of such policy could signify a tremendous challenge. The new policy could produce the desired effects by increasing the academic performance of most of the students in the district. On the contrary, the new initiative could end up affecting staff morale, shutting employees down mentally, and finally negatively affecting student performance.

## **Main Stakeholders**

The situation with Songbird ISD involves several key stakeholders who have a significant impact on the entire dynamic of the district.

### ***Mary Washington, Songbird ISD's Superintendent***

Six months into the role, Superintendent Washington has adjusted quickly to the demands of Songbird ISD. As a Texas native, Washington has worked in the southeast region for the past 15 years. She first worked in Seaside ISD as a special education teacher, then as a campus administrator, a human resources director, and, finally, as an assistant superintendent. Washington then applied and was hired as the superintendent of Songbird ISD.

During her years as a classroom teacher, Washington typically taught approximately 15 students with disabilities in a predominantly self-contained classroom setting. Witnessing the limits this placed on students, she became an advocate for inclusive instructional practices. As an administrator, Washington quickly developed a reputation for improving programs through her focus on relationships and goal setting. During her years as a human resources director, Washington developed a strong knowledge of contracts and legal issues. Her combined experiences have prepared her well to serve as superintendent of Songbird ISD.

In her current role, Washington has drawn upon her prior experiences to address the needs of the district in terms of student performance. Above all, she values the teachers

for their commitment to the district and its students. Washington has also prioritized positive relationships with the community, reaching out to other leaders to communicate an honest and optimistic vision for the district. Currently, the community has welcomed her as an agent of change; however, Washington is keenly aware that their support is closely linked to her ability to produce results. What makes her experience unique and compelling is the combination of several external and internal factors spinning around her persona: the pressure and permanent scrutiny of a district facing potential closure based on its academic performance, the internal political dynamic where the main stakeholders have their own agenda, and Mrs. Washington's role as a leader with unique perspectives considering that she was born and raised in the local area.

### *Songbird ISD Administrative Team*

To support the necessary changes throughout the district, Washington relies upon the campus administrators of Songbird's six schools to provide safe schools and well-maintained facilities. Recently, a climate survey was implemented district-wide. In their responses, the administrators reported a high level of autonomy and identified campus strengths such as adaptation, problem solving, and optimal power (see Appendix B). Although the district is not meeting state achievement standards, administrators are hesitant to address necessary changes and reluctant to implement disciplinary action with ineffective teachers. Washington does not share this view, approaching the issue instead from a business perspective. With her administrators, she has encouraged the removal of any teachers they would not want educating their own children. As with the community, the administrators appear to welcome the change in leadership, although some are cautious. Removing ineffective personnel in such a dysfunctional environment has been almost an impossible task based on the fact that mediocrity is protected by relationships. In other words, if an employee is somehow connected to or a good friend with a board member, that person is almost impossible to fire. The administrative team is cautiously optimistic that the newly implemented district performance policy would solve this problem in an unbiased way.

### *Songbird ISD Teachers*

In line with the administrators, the teachers are intrigued and yet uncertain about Washington. The teachers are committed to their students and the community and are wanting to improve student achievement. On the *Climate Survey*, the teachers' responses contrasted with administrators' (see Appendix C). Specifically, the teachers reported lower levels of adaptation, optimal power, and problem solving. However, similar to the administrators, the teachers identified communication, goal focus, and innovativeness as strengths. Innovativeness may be attributed to Washington's first initiative, a master teacher training series centered on learning groups including administrators, master teachers, struggling teachers, and new teachers to the district. Given the emphasis on collaboration and team problem solving within the trainings, the strengths of goal setting and communication may also be attributed to the

innovation. In the end, most of the teachers understand that they need to increase their capacity in order for the students to meet the state's academic standards. However, they are naturally concerned about the newly implemented district performance policy where in the end they could be fired if their students do not show significant academic growth. Some of the veteran teachers consider this policy outrageous and have threatened the district leadership with lawsuits if they end up being fired.

## **A Superintendent in Action**

To improve student achievement, besides promoting the new district performance policy, Superintendent Washington and her leadership team have worked diligently to increase the connection with parents and the educational community. The rationale behind involving parents was to allow them to get involved with their children's education, increase parents' capacity to help students at home as active educational partners, and to discourage parents from looking for other educational alternatives within surrounding school districts. This is congruent with Mintrop and Trujillo (2005) when explaining that lack of clarity within performance goals and well-structured capacity building strategies can create ineffective, low-performing school programs, with undesirable political consequences. The team has developed community partnerships and has increased the number of volunteers on each of the campuses. As partnerships and volunteers increased, the district introduced after-school and summer programs with an emphasis on science and mathematics. Students who participated in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) courses have demonstrated greater ability in logical thinking and deductive reasoning as well as increased college readiness (James & Diezmann, 2013). Similarly, students currently in the high school were invited to provide after-school tutoring and/or mentoring to students in the elementary and middle schools. Within time, the program extended to district alumni and brought high school graduates back into the community.

Given the administrators' lack of innovations in the absence of long-term planning, a district-wide strategic plan was developed for the next 3 to 5 years (Allison & Kaye, 2005). The strategic plan provided all campuses with a common mission, identification of central academic issues, and action plans for each one of them. The document also provided a concrete representation of the process of change; this premise supported administrators in the implementation of innovations on their campuses (Fullan, 2001). Furthermore, the strategic planning allowed another opportunity for community involvement. By establishing and publishing a district plan, Superintendent Washington developed a purposeful sense of accountability for the district, while strengthening relationships with the surrounding community.

## **Conclusion**

As this case portrayed within its narrative and Appendices A, B, and C, Songbird ISD's key issues are low student achievement and potential district closure by the state educational institution. Student achievement declined as the number of economically disadvantaged students increased. Poor test performance might have been linked to a

lack of culturally responsive instruction. Tileston and Darling (2008) identified the Eurocentric curriculum as disenfranchising to a diverse population of learners. However, low achievement could also have been attributed to a lack of innovation and forecasting. In a study of successful and unsuccessful corporations, Collins and Hansen (2011) found companies that did not consider large-scale trends prior to selecting interventions often suffered significant losses. Prior to Superintendent Washington, Songbird ISD maintained traditional practices despite the changing demographics.

Within the demographic changes during the past several years, teachers and administrators from Songbird ISD faced rapidly diversifying student bodies in terms of culture and academic expectations. It seems Songbird ISD's educators were not able to adapt to the new realities of the district and fulfill the new academic demands from the students, the state educational institution, and the federal government. Jackson (2015) explains that limited knowledge and understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy is one of the biggest challenges that educators have to face when experiencing considerable changes within the student bodies.

Songbird ISD seems to be immersed in a school turnaround process. However, school leaders may not be aware of that reality. The newly implemented district performance policy may help to accelerate the school turnaround process while affecting staff morale. Peck and Reitzug (2013) elaborate on that concept by explaining that it is common among policymakers and school leaders to avoid thinking about school turnaround in terms of a systemic issue in need of critical changes.

Finally, increasing capacity seems to be one of the biggest challenges for Songbird ISD. Beyond sporadic and punctual professional developments, school leaders should focus on a comprehensive approach to increase general capacity among school stakeholders congruent with the district's strategic plan and needs assessment. Mayfield and Garrison-Wade (2015) elaborate on the benefits of research-based multicultural education professional development training. In that direction, it is recommended that Songbird ISD implement site-based training with continued support at the district level.

## Teaching Notes

The following teaching notes are designed to create connections between school district academic status, potential closure, and the consequences on school leadership and educational programs while meeting state guidelines and regulations.

## Discussion Questions

1. Explain the potential positive and negative consequences of the newly implemented district performance policy. What would you have done differently if you were the superintendent?
2. Collins and Hansen (2011) found companies that did not consider large-scale trends prior to selecting interventions often suffered significant losses. How is this case relevant to making long-term decisions and consequential methods to reorganize a school district when facing tremendous academic challenges?

3. Has the Superintendent correctly prioritized the issues that Songbird ISD is facing? Has the Superintendent effectively relied on her team to implement the necessary policies, to include the newly implemented district performance policy?
4. Which stakeholders should Superintendent Washington include when developing Songbird ISD Strategic Plan? Were there legal and practical implications related to that plan when considering that the district may be facing closure? Explain your answer.
5. How does your organization set clear goals? Are those goals aligned throughout the entire organization? Explain your answer.

## Appendix A

Accountability Rating: Improvement Required				
	Index 1 Student Achievement	Index 2 Student Progress	Index 3 Closing Performance Gaps	Index 4 Postsecondary Readiness
Target Score: 55	Target Score: 16	Target Score: 28	Target Score: 57	
Obtained Score: 54	Obtained Score: 33	Obtained Score: 29	Obtained Score: 56	
District Met State Academic Standard on:		V	V	
District Did Not Meet State Academic Standard on:	X			X

  

Performance Index Summary			
Index	Points Earned	Maximum Points	Index Score
1	1,873.0	3,479.0	54.0
2	658.0	2,000.0	33.0
3	863.0	3,000.0	29.0
4 STAAR Score	4.8		
Graduation Rate Score	19.3		
Graduation Plan Score	22.0		
Postsecondary Indicator Score	10.1		56.0

State Education Institution 2015 Accountability Summary: Songbird ISD.

Note. ISD = Independent School District; STAAR = State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness.

## Appendix B

Climate Survey Results: Songbird ISD—2016.

No. of participants: 36 (100% of Songbird ISD Administrators)

1. I am at \_\_\_\_\_ level of Goal Orientation. If you are not at the high or highest level, what can we (as a team) do to help you get there? (Goal Orientation Options: low, medium, high, highest)  
Results on Goal Orientation: 4% low; 6% medium; 90% high; 12% highest.
2. A. Do you feel that communication from Front Office is clear and free of distortions?  
 Yes \_\_\_\_  
 No \_\_\_\_, please provide specifics.  
 Do you feel that communication within your team is clear and free of distortions?  
 Yes \_\_\_\_  
 No \_\_\_\_, please provide specifics.  
Results on Communication Efficiency: A. 87% Yes; 13% No; B. 91% Yes; 9% No.

(continued)

## Appendix B. (continued)

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3. Do you feel that you have input in school-/district-wide decisions?  
 Yes \_\_\_\_  
 No \_\_\_\_, please provide specifics.  
Results on Power Utilization: 91% Yes; 9% No.
4. Do you believe your abilities have been utilized effectively by school leaders in general?  
 Yes \_\_\_\_  
 No \_\_\_\_, please provide specifics.  
Results on Resource Availability: 91% Yes; 9% No.
5. A. How unified is your campus?  
 B. How unified is your grade level/department team?  
Results on Sense of Identity: 16% Not unified; 14% Somehow unified; 45% Very unified; 25% Highly unified.
6. A. Please rate your morale from 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest. \_\_\_\_  
 B. If your morale is below 7, please provide specifics in order for us to improve.  
Results on General Morale: 9% Below 7; 91% Above 7.
7. A. Do you feel that your leaders allow you to be creative? Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_  
 B. If your answer is no, please provide specifics . . .  
Results on Creativity: 91% Yes; 9% No.
8. A. Do you feel that your leaders allow you to be independent? Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_  
 B. If your answer is no, please provide specifics . . .  
Results on Autonomy: 93% Yes; 7% No.
9. A. Do you feel your campus has a high level of adaptation? Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_  
 B. If your answer is no, please provide specifics . . .  
Results on Adaptation: 96% Yes; 4% No.
10. A. Do you think the problems get solved, stay solved, and the problem solving skills are sustained and/or reinforced? Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_  
 B. If your answer is no, please provide specifics . . .  
Results on Problem-Solving Skills: 93% Yes; 7% No.
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Note. ISD = Independent School District.

## Appendix C

Climate Survey Results: Songbird ISD—2016.

No. of participants: 137 (100% of Songbird ISD Teachers)

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11. I am at \_\_\_\_\_ level of Goal Orientation. If you are not at the high or highest level, what can we (as a team) do to help you get there? (Goal Orientation Options: low, medium, high, highest)  
Results on Goal Orientation: 4% low; 16% medium; 70% high; 10% highest.
12. A. Do you feel that communication from Front Office is clear and free of distortions?  
 Yes \_\_\_\_  
 No \_\_\_\_, please provide specifics.
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(continued)



**Appendix C. (continued)**

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- Do you feel that communication within your team is clear and free of distortions?  
 Yes \_\_\_\_  
 No \_\_\_\_, please provide specifics.  
Results on Communication Efficiency: A. 83% Yes; 17% No; B. 81% Yes; 19% No.
13. Do you feel that you have input in school-/district-wide decisions?  
 Yes \_\_\_\_  
 No \_\_\_\_, please provide specifics.  
Results on Power Utilization: 9% Yes; 91% No.
14. Do you believe your abilities have been utilized effectively by school leaders in general?  
 Yes \_\_\_\_  
 No \_\_\_\_, please provide specifics.  
Results on Resource Availability: 73% Yes; 27% No.
15. A. How unified is your campus?  
 B. How unified is your grade level/department team?  
Results on Sense of Identity: 26% Not unified; 24% Somehow unified; 26% Very unified; 24% Highly unified.
16. A. Please rate your morale from 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest. \_\_\_\_  
 B. If your morale is below 7, please provide specifics in order for us to improve.  
Results on General Morale: 9% Below 7; 91% Above 7.
17. A. Do you feel that your leaders allow you to be creative? Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_  
 B. If your answer is no, please provide specifics . . .  
Results on Creativity: 91% Yes; 9% No.
18. A. Do you feel that your leaders allow you to be independent? Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_  
 B. If your answer is no, please provide specifics . . .  
Results on Autonomy: 91% Yes; 9% No.
19. A. Do you feel your campus has a high level of adaptation? Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_  
 B. If your answer is no, please provide specifics . . .  
Results on Adaptation: 13% Yes; 87% No.
20. A. Do you think the problems get solved, stay solved, and the problem-solving skills are sustained and/or reinforced? Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_  
 B. If your answer is no, please provide specifics . . .  
Results on Problem-Solving Skills: 7% Yes; 93% No.
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Note. ISD = Independent School District.

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