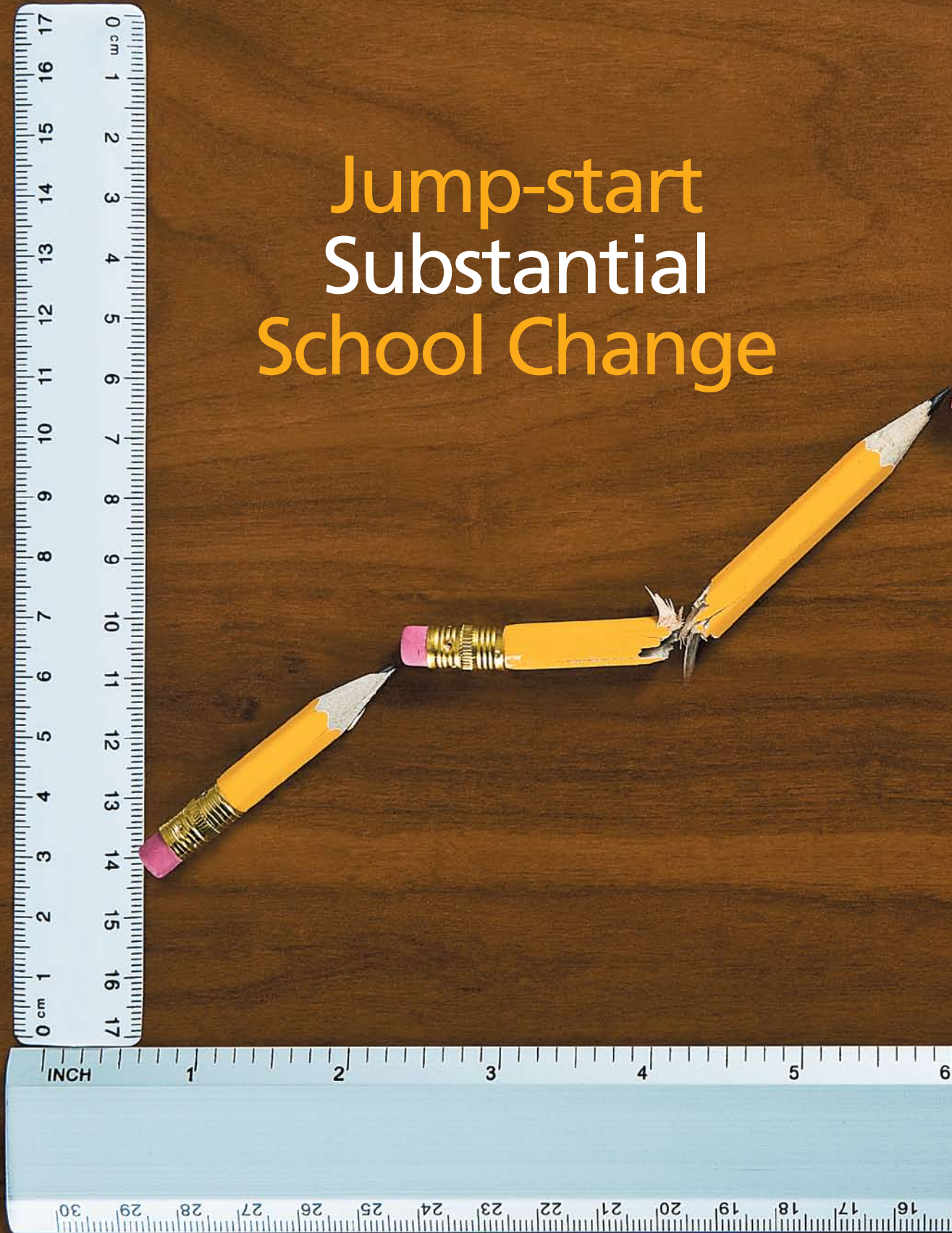


Jump-start Substantial School Change

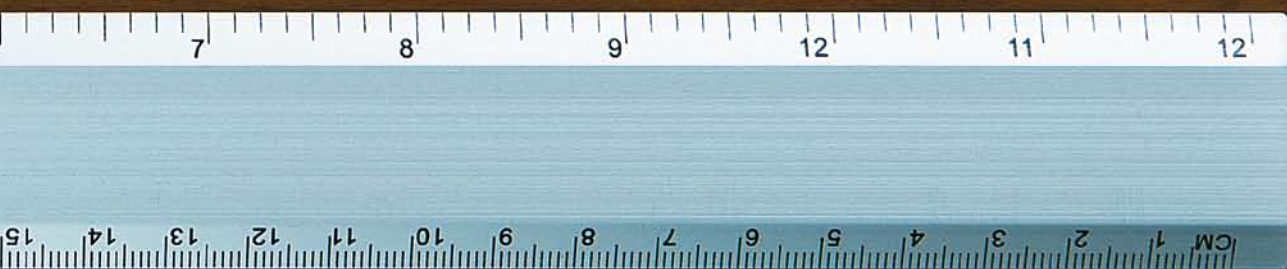




Nancy Protheroe

Use the lessons learned about school turnarounds to support school improvement.

The term “turnaround schools” has become an increasingly important phrase in the education lexicon in recent years. Although it is sometimes used generically when talking about schools that have rapidly and significantly increased student achievement, it often is applied more narrowly to schools in which districts used a strategy of replacing principals and teachers to jump-start school improvement efforts. This second definition has even made its way into federal policy, with the U.S. Department of Education specifying a turnaround model as one of four options for low-performing schools.





In an effort to identify characteristics of schools that have engaged in successful turnaround efforts, researchers have studied schools falling within both of these two categories. For the general category, the schools studied typically had not been assigned new principals, yet they demonstrated significantly greater improvement than comparable schools in their districts or states. In contrast, not all the schools assigned turnaround principals were able to improve student achievement substantially—although some of them did. Obviously, students in any of the much-improved schools benefited. The success of these schools, and the research done to study their characteristics, provides a valuable resource for education in general and specifically for principals. Although not a road-map that identifies specific programs, the research provides solid guidance for other schools—and principals—working on improvement.

Looking Outside Education

When researchers recently focused

“Leaders of successful turnarounds concentrated on achieving a few tangible wins in the first year.”

on turnaround schools, they found that little work had been done on the topic. To help build a knowledge base about turnaround strategies, they turned to literature outside education. Rhim, Kowal, Hassel, and Hassel (2007) define turnaround “as a documented, quick, dramatic, and sustained change in the performance of an organization.” They go on to clarify that “Turnaround literature differs from the vast body of literature about organizational change in general, which focuses on continuous, incremental improvement over longer time periods.”

The researchers also focused specifically on leaders—and what leaders would be expected to do. Their description will likely resonate with principals: “[W]hat to fix in a turnaround is not always clear at first, just as the exact steps for making a new venture successful often are not clear. Turnaround leaders must decide what results matter most and focus on a few actions to change those essential results.”

While this sounds fairly straightforward, principals leading change must make these major decisions and gather support for changes from staff while still engaging in other daily responsibilities.

However, another aspect of the review of the literature on turnarounds outside education provides helpful how-to information. Specifically, it focuses on the actions of leaders who have successfully engaged in turnarounds. Rhim and her colleagues found that leaders of successful turnarounds concentrated on achieving a few tangible wins in the first year, and

that “a striking element of the research on turnarounds is that successful turnaround leaders use speedy, focused results as a major lever to change the organization’s culture.” In addition, “turnarounds necessitated significant ... changes that require a willingness to alter the basic organizational systems in place.” An example for schools might be a radical change in the way the school schedule is built.

Both these and other leader actions were viewed as part of a cycle that included four major categories—analysis and problem-solving; driving for results; measuring and reporting; and influencing inside and outside. Although this cycle might begin with analysis and problem-solving, the improvement process was not linear because, for example, school staff needed to engage in evaluation of the new efforts—most often on the fly—and then make modifications if some efforts were not working.

Turnaround Leaders’ Actions

For the researchers, study of rapidly improving schools was more than an academic effort since identifying strategies that seemed to support rapid improvement might be helpful for other schools. The questions they addressed were clear:

- What happened in those turnaround schools that might have increased the pace of improvement?
- What strategies were different than the way a school had operated previous to turnaround efforts?
- What role did principals play? Specifically, what actions did they take?

In addition, the researchers compared their findings with those from outside education and found that “the steps toward turnaround success are very consistent across sectors” (Public Impact, 2008). Thus, they used the

framework developed from research on turnarounds outside education to organize their findings and provide direction for turnaround leaders in schools. The following four sections outline Brinson, Kowal, and Hassel’s (2008) findings.

Initial Analysis and Problem-Solving

Collect and analyze data. Initially, turnaround leaders personally analyze data about the organization’s performance to identify high-priority problems that can be fixed quickly. Later, they establish organization routines that include ongoing data analysis (see Measuring, Reporting, and Improving section).

Make an action plan based on data. Turnaround leaders make an action plan so that everyone involved knows specifically what they need to do differently. This allows people to focus on changing what they do,

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rather than worrying about impending change.

Driving for Results

Concentrate on big, fast payoffs in the first year. Successful turnaround leaders first concentrate on a limited number of changes to achieve early, visible wins for the organization. They do this to achieve success in an important area, to motivate staff for further change, and to reduce resistance by those who oppose change.

Implement practices even if it requires deviation. Turnaround leaders make changes that deviate from organization norms or rules—not just for change’s sake, but to achieve early wins. In a failing organization, existing norms and rules often contribute to failure. Targeted deviations to achieve early wins teach the organization that new practices can lead to success.

Require all staff to change. When a turnaround leader implements an

“School leaders trying turnarounds must stay focused on accomplishing the most critical, consistent success actions.”

action plan, change is mandatory, not optional.

Make necessary staff replacements. Successful turnaround leaders typically do not replace all or most staff. But they often replace some senior staff, particularly those who manage others. After the organization begins to show turnaround success, staff unwilling or unable to make changes that their colleagues have made leave or are removed by the leader.

Focus on successful tactics; halt others. Successful turnaround leaders are quick to discard tactics that do not work and spend more resources and time on tactics that work. This pruning and growing process focuses limited time and money where they will have the most impact on critical results.

However, such an approach stands in sharp contrast to one often seen in less successful schools, an approach researchers at the Consortium for Chicago School Research characterize as “Christmas tree” innovations (Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001). Although such innovations may be viewed initially as addressing a problem, not all have the anticipated positive impact. Schools that do not carefully monitor and prune initiatives that don’t produce the desired result pull resources away from more promising possibilities. In addition, a Christmas tree full of initiatives often contributes to a lack of coherence in a school’s instructional program.

Do not tout progress as ultimate success. Turnaround leaders are not satisfied with partial success. They report progress, but keep the organization focused on high goals. When a goal is met, they are likely to raise the bar.

Influencing Inside and Outside the Organization

Communicate a positive vision. Turnaround leaders motivate others inside and outside the organization to contribute their discretionary effort by communicating a clear picture of success and its benefits.

Help staff personally feel problems. Turnaround leaders use various tactics to help staff empathize with—or “put themselves in the shoes of”—those they serve. This helps staff feel the problems that the status quo is causing and feel motivated to change.

Gain support of key influencers. Turnaround leaders work hard to gain the support of trusted influencers among staff and community. They work through these people to influence those who might oppose change.

Silence critics with speedy success. Early, visible wins are used not just for success in their own right, but to make it harder for others to oppose further change. This reduces leader time spent addressing politics and increases time spent managing for results.

Measuring, Reporting, and Improving

Measure and report progress frequently. Turnaround leaders set up systems to measure and report interim results often. This enables the rapid discard of failed tactics and increase of successful tactics essential for fast results.

Require all decision-makers to share data and solve problems. Sharing of results in open-air meetings allows turnaround leaders to hold staff who make key decisions accountable for results, creating discomfort for those who do not make needed changes and providing kudos to those who are achieving success. This shifts the focus of the organization’s meetings from power plays, blaming, and excuses to problem-solving.

Critical Turnaround Actions

In addition to describing their findings on school turnarounds, researchers from Public Impact emphasized the need for a “fast cycle of actions” and



have specific suggestions for educators working to achieve rapid and significant school improvement.

School leaders trying turnarounds must stay focused on accomplishing the most critical, consistent success actions.

WEB RESOURCES

School Turnarounds: A Review of the Cross-Sector Evidence on Dramatic Organizational Improvement is available on the Web site of the Center on Innovation and Improvement.
www.centerii.org/survey/downloads/Turnarounds-Color.pdf

Using the research base on school turnarounds, Public Impact has developed the Competencies for Turnaround Success Series focused on principal and teacher competencies that support turnaround efforts.
www.publicimpact.com

In *The District Leadership Challenge: Empowering Principals to Improve Teaching and Learning*, the Southern Regional Education Board identifies strategies districts can use to more effectively support school improvement.
www.sreb.org/publications/2009/09V11_District_Leadership_Challenge_color.pdf


A practice guide developed by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences, *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools*, includes recommendations, plus a one-page checklist summarizing these, for schools engaged in improvement efforts.
http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/Turnaround_pg_04181.pdf



In nearly all cases, leaders of successful turnarounds took the following steps.

- Identify and focus on a few early wins with big payoffs, and use that early success to gain momentum—while these wins are limited in scope, they are high-priority, not peripheral, elements of organization performance;
- Break organization norms or rules to deploy new tactics needed for early wins—failed rules and routines are discarded when they inhibit success; and
- Act quickly in a fast cycle of trying new tactics, measuring results, discarding failed tactics, and doing more of what works—time is the enemy when the status quo is failure (Public Impact, 2008).

Implications for Principals

Most principals have read about and heard presentations about characteristics of effective schools. However, that research base was missing a critical piece. What is needed in many schools across the country is guidance for how to jump-start substantial change. This evolving knowledge base on turnarounds—building from research both inside and outside education—provides clear direction for strategies school leaders and their schools can implement in their improvement efforts. 

Nancy Protheroe is director of special research projects at the Educational Research Service. Her e-mail address is nprotheroe@ers.org.

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