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Developing a Climate for Change
Julie Kowal • June 2008

Topic: Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools
Practice: Committed Staff

Highlights

- Leaders of turnaround schools must be able to get buy-in from every staff member in the school for the radical changes that will be required.
- Principals should form quick bonds with the school and community's informal leaders early in the turnaround, and enlist the help of these allies.
- Successful turnaround schools undergo a transformation in the climate of the school—the way it feels in the classroom, the way it feels when teachers are talking in the hallway.

About the Interviewee

Julie Kowal earned her law degree with honors from the University of North Carolina. Her background in research and policy led her to work as a consultant with Public Impact, a national education policy and management consulting firm based in Chapel Hill. At Public Impact, Julie has focused largely on school improvement and human capital, including studies of private and charter school teacher compensation and cross-sector solutions for attracting teachers to hard-to-staff positions. Her work also includes cross-sector studies on the restructuring options under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and case studies of

schools that have undergone restructuring. Based on her research on turnarounds in education and across sectors, Julie recently conducted a review of the school turnaround initiative in Chicago Public Schools and is currently engaged in an evaluation of the School Turnaround Specialist Program at the University of Virginia.

Full Transcript

My name is Julie Kowal. I'm a research consultant with Public Impact.

We put a lot of pressure and responsibility on leaders of turnaround schools. They are probably the single most important element of a successful turnaround, but they can't—even the best leader can't do this alone. It's too big a job, and while the leader may be tempted to be a silver bullet for these turnaround schools, it's imperative, in fact, for them to get buy-in from every staff member in that school. After all, those staff members, many of them may have been in the school for decades. They know the community; they have ties to the community, perhaps. They have ties to their students. They have ties to the school building that a new principal or turnaround principal just coming in for the first time may not have. So it's critical to get buy-in from those staff members, also because even the best principal is not going to be in every classroom everyday. And if the changes that the turnaround leader is bringing in only happened in the main office or in the front hall of the school, then students aren't going to feel a difference and parents aren't going to feel the difference.

So changing the climate, what we see in turnaround settings across sectors is a transformation in the climate of the school, the way it feels in the classroom, the way it feels when teachers are talking in the hallway. And that sort of transformation can't just happen by putting new paint on the walls or giving the school a new name. It has to happen by changing the way people act in a moment-to-moment basis, which in many cases has to do with changing what they believe, that they believe they can succeed and that they can help their students succeed. And that sort of change has to happen from the top. It's got to be led by the turnaround leader. So, a huge part of the turnaround leader's job is influence, using superior interpersonal skills to get people on board with the types of radical changes that are going to be necessary in a turnaround situation. And what we see recur across successful turnarounds in all industries and in education, there's a couple of strategies, one is making strategic alliances. So, in any school—pretty much any school, whether it's high-performing, low-performing, any school—there are informal leaders, community members, parents, teachers who inspire respect from their peers and sort of set the tone for the school; they probably have for years. So, what we see as a principal forming a quick bond with those informal leaders very early in the turnaround, and then that helps, they built an ally to help them communicate the need for change, how urgent it is to build the case for the types of difficult changes they are going to be making in the school. So, finding those informal leaders is what we hear most often at the very start of the turnaround to help the principal get the message across to the other staff members.

Another strategy is gathering staff together in open-air meetings. So, infusing the school with a sense of transparent accountability that probably hasn't been there in the past. And so the principal may get together, get the staff together daily maybe or weekly and have them share their successes and their failures from that day or that week or that month publicly with their colleagues. So teachers are sharing their students' results on interim assessments, or they're telling their colleagues about a particularly effective lesson plan that they tried that day, or they are saying, "Hey, I tried this, and it really didn't work, and can you all problem-solve with me to help me reach my students, get this material across in a better way tomorrow?" It really creates a sense of common purpose that can get all the staff members on board, and it highlights success. It highlights, allows teachers to get some positive feedback when something they've done in the classroom is working, which probably hasn't happened for years. The other side of that is, in these meetings, the teachers who don't have success to share or who don't have an active problem-solving strategy for finding success, the light is shone on them too. So these meetings can put a sort of positive pressure on teachers who weren't necessarily on board with the changes in the first place to either problem-solve with their colleagues and use these meetings proactively to better reach students or move on to a place where they might be more comfortable.

What we see a lot in successful turnaround situations is leaders who start with sort of a campaign for change, and that's just a fancy word for communicating to the staff of the school why change is urgent and why it's going to happen now. Maybe it hasn't happened in the past. Maybe other strategies have been tried and failed, but the turnaround leader who can really come in and inspire staff by explaining why these changes will work, what the strategies are going to be, that campaign is one strategy to get staff on board who are uncomfortable seeing staffing changes that might happen in the turnaround school. So it's not, you know... If things have been a certain way for many years—teachers have been able to choose the classes that they teach in or groups have been able to work together in a social sort of setting—if that doesn't work for the students in a turnaround setting, then the turnaround leader really—it's imperative that the turnaround leader explain, "this is why you are going to see these changes. This is why you are going to see those informal groups change. This is why I am assigning you to second grade instead of fifth. Because it's all in the service of students, and there is an urgent need for dramatic improvement in student results, and these are the means that we have to use to get it there." So I think one of the best ways that the turnaround leader can help other staff members understand what they are seeing around them is by communicating the imperative for change; it's all about the students.