

DOINGWHATWORKS



Presentation

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Signaling the Need for Dramatic Change with Strong Leadership

September 2008

Topic: Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools

Practice: Improved Leadership

Highlights

- Strong leaders clearly communicate expectations and strategies to the staff through inspiration, encouragement, and connections between the school and the community.
- Strong leaders share responsibilities, take risks, and implement new practices.
- Strong leaders should continually monitor progress, provide feedback, and make adjustments to instruction to improve student achievement.
- Strong leaders need to be accessible to staff, parents, and the community.

Full Transcript

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Welcome to the overview on signaling the need for dramatic change with strong leadership.

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Mr. Rivera is the principal of Jefferson High School, one of the lowest-performing schools in the state. He knows the school is in desperate need of a turnaround but hasn't been able to make it happen.

He talks with the staff about the challenge they face. Everyone in the school, he says, will need to do things in dramatically different ways. His staff remains doubtful that change will happen. To overcome "business as usual," Mr. Rivera needs to do things in dramatically different ways as well.

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When addressing the topic of change, principals need to be highly directive. It is not enough to simply say that change needs to take place. Strong leadership involves knowing what needs to change and how the team is going to approach it. A strong leader clearly communicates expectations and strategies to his or her team.

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Principals leading turnarounds in low-performing schools have three important roles. First, they set direction for the staff and school by establishing points of focus and setting priorities for school- and classroom-level practices.

Second, principals provide inspiration and encouragement to staff, keeping them motivated throughout the challenging process of school improvement. While principals should communicate that change is not optional, it is important to work with staff to calm their fears and provide the tools and support needed to implement change.

Lastly, principals can strengthen connections between the school, the district office, students' families, and the local business community. These partnerships can help the school acquire additional resources to facilitate the turnaround process. In addition, when parents and community members are involved in discussions about what is happening at the school, they are more likely to become supportive of the approach taken by the principal.

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In planning for change, principals should collect and study data on student achievement, discipline, class size, staffing, and use of instructional time. Principals can gather valuable information through classroom observations and talking to students and teachers. These data can help ensure that the planned changes are addressing the actual needs of the school.

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Each principal has unique challenges to overcome. New principals may need to quickly become familiar with a variety of school data, such as student achievement, attendance, and discipline history. They also need to establish relationships with staff. Continuing principals, on the other hand, may need to alter deeply entrenched leadership practices. They may have to become more visible in the classrooms or more knowledgeable about the instructional strategies each teacher is using in the classroom. These types of new practices clearly signal to the staff that change is not only required, but already happening.

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We've seen some of what a strong leader does, but what characteristics does a strong leader need? Research on successful turnarounds suggests that a strong principal is: a clear communicator, a role model, a team builder, and an innovator.

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A strong leader clearly communicates the purpose of and direction for each school change, includes teachers in the decision-making process, and spells out the ways that staff input will be used to further school improvement.

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Strong leaders are knowledgeable and capable. They model good teaching practices and coach teachers. In one school, a principal taught an algebra course for struggling students, incorporating new practices into the instruction. Once teachers saw that their principal had a solid grasp of their daily challenges, they were much more enthusiastic about trying the new practices in their own classrooms.

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A strong leader shares responsibilities, identifying and working with the other staff to lead school reform. Given the opportunity, strong teachers can become instructional leaders that guide others and advocate for change. Teamwork is essential for improving instructional quality and for establishing a shared set of beliefs that support the turnaround process.

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Strong leaders are willing to take risks and implement new practices. In one turnaround school, the principal had teachers tell their students not to raise their hands in response to a question. Instead, teachers would randomly call on students for answers. It took some time for both teachers and students to get used to this approach, but eventually it became clear that student attentiveness had improved.

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Principals should monitor progress and provide feedback throughout the school year. This allows staff to make adjustments to instructional practices. Continual monitoring and redirecting can help keep instruction—and the rest of the reform—on a productive track.

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The principal should create opportunities for teachers to voice their ideas or concerns about a variety of issues, including discipline and instruction. In addition, principals should invite teachers and coaches to discuss how they measure student progress on an ongoing basis and brainstorm together about ways to improve on current practices.

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Similarly, to promote a sense of shared responsibility, principals can encourage teachers to propose instructional innovations in the school. This lets teachers know the principal is aware that they are often the ones who best understand the needs of their students. In one successful turnaround school, teachers made some of the curricular decisions. For example, they helped in selecting textbooks and redesigning the teaming and block scheduling systems.

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Inviting parents and community leaders to school performances or to volunteer in classrooms helps connect them to the school. Businesses may be able to provide materials for students, such as books, scratch paper, pencils, or even copy services.

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Principals should work to create a warm environment and a sense of community in which all students feel safe, welcomed, and supported. Courtesy, respect, and caring should be modeled by all school staff and students.

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By walking the halls, talking with students, and observing classrooms, principals can gain firsthand knowledge about the needs of individual teachers and students. During classroom walkthroughs, a principal could observe whether the students know how to approach a task, break it into parts, and self-monitor their progress. He could also observe whether a task matched their level of knowledge and skills.

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Finally, whether it is academics, student behavior, facilities, or any other aspect of the school, a strong leader is an accessible leader who attends to every detail, large or small. An open-door policy that encourages teachers to stop by any time and discuss school-related issues is also essential for maintaining good communications.

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In conclusion, strong leadership is essential for a successful school turnaround.

The school turnaround leader is a role model and a good listener—someone who knows how to set direction, consult with staff, recruit the support of the community, and guide the process through modeling, coaching, and attention to detail.

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Mr. Rivera took a hard look at his own practices and began communicating his expectations more clearly, encouraging greater leadership among his staff, and spending more time in the hallways and classrooms. He

became a leader who inspired all staff to pursue the challenge of school turnaround. Jefferson High School showed immediate increases in the percentage of students reaching proficiency in reading, writing, and math after only one year of turnaround efforts. Today, the school is rated among the best in the state.

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To learn more about strong leadership for school turnaround, please explore the additional resources on the [Doing What Works](#) website.