



Full Details and Transcript



The Turnaround Principal: Part 1

July 2014

Topic **TURNING AROUND CHRONICALLY LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS**

Highlights

- » Michael Cormack discusses actions he has taken as a turnaround principal and the connection between these actions and the underlying competencies of Driving for Results and Influencing for Results.
- » The principal needs to be visible and engage with students, staff, and parents to become an effective instructional leader who can influence staff and bring about results.
- » Staff work together to build a culture of achievement focused on a college-going vision and the importance of students following their dreams.
- » To build capacity for instructional change, teachers learn about best practices, the principal and exemplary teachers model instruction, and quality teaching moments are shared among staff.


About the Interviewee


Michael Cormack is the principal of Quitman County Elementary School, an open enrollment public school serving 515 prekindergarten through fourth grade students in the rural Mississippi Delta. His efforts as principal include improving the quality of literacy instruction, creating a shared vision for quality instruction, and expanding prekindergarten programs to close the academic achievement gap before it begins. In the past two years, he has led QCES out of federal


school improvement to a recent state rating of “Successful” by the Mississippi Department of Education. Working as a team and family, QCES teachers, students, and parents have dramatically raised student achievement. Mr. Cormack has taught fourth through sixth grades and served in several program director roles with Teach for America. He is a graduate of Boston College and holds masters degrees in education from Delta State University and in organizational leadership from Columbia University.


Full Transcript



 **00:06 Narrator:** This two-part video series is designed to help states and districts understand the underlying competencies that enable a principal to be successful in the role of turnaround leader.


 **00:17** Turnaround principals require a unique set of competencies to bring about dramatic change. Researchers at Public Impact have identified four clusters of underlying competencies that enable principals to take action and turn around low-performing schools. The first cluster is Driving for Results; the second is Influencing for Results; the third is Problem Solving; and the fourth is Showing Confidence to Lead.


 **00:45** In Part 1 of this series, we hear from a principal who has taken successful action to turn around a low-performing elementary school. The examples described in this video illustrate the link between the principal’s actions and the competencies that underlie these actions.


 **01:01 Michael Cormack:** My name is Michael Cormack and I’m principal at Quitman County Elementary School, a prekindergarten through fourth grade elementary school in the rural Mississippi Delta. I originally came to our school four years ago at the very beginning of a turnaround process. And when I assumed the role of principal, our school was rated at risk of failing, and there was a really dire situation in terms of academic achievement and staff morale. Working really


hard over the last four years, we've worked to improve academic achievement for our students. We were recently rated "Successful" by the state department of education, and are working really to improve both the academic and the social climate for students here in our area.

Driving for Results


 **01:42 Narrator:** A principal who drives for results does whatever it takes to succeed, sets ambitious goals, and embeds high expectations in the fabric of the school culture. Principal Cormack demonstrates this competency by challenging his school to achieve performance levels equivalent to schools in high-income communities in the state.

 **02:01 Cormack:** There were a number of cultural changes that we needed to make to support a culture of high academic achievement and standards. One of the things that we really emphasize is a college-going culture. We fully expect that many of our students will be first-generation college students.

 **02:15** Instead of a casual Friday we have a college Friday, where our teachers are allowed to wear jeans and their college polos or Ts. They also incorporate during the day certain anecdotes—obviously kid-friendly anecdotes about college and their college experience. But we want to plant the seeds because there is a real generational experiential gap that our students have, and so one of the ways that we can bridge that gap is making certain that that culture of achievement becomes the expectation rather than just a pipe dream.


 **02:46** Our kids really respond to a sense of competition. And so, one of the ways that we have really galvanized them around an effort to improve student achievement is around our state's system of QDI, or Quality of Distribution Index. It basically is a number attached to schools that then is attached to a label or a grade-level ranking. And we looked at the most economically privileged counties in Mississippi and selected a QDI rival, as it were. So just like we would in sports competition, we wanted to do the same thing for our students in

academics. We have a fantastic bulletin board that lays out what we call big goals for each grade level, and they lay out the expectations of what students should be able to do by the end of the year. We attach that to a special incentive where the kids can earn a red shirt. And for us, the red shirt is a very coveted commodity around the school. It's a shirt that they can wear—a red T-shirt that they earn for meeting an ambitious end-of-the-year goal before the end of the year. And then at our monthly assemblies, those are announced and students' names are announced. They can receive their red shirt and every Friday they can wear that with jeans instead of the regular uniform. What it does is, it invests our students with a sense of pride of “earnship” and the fact that they've had to work really hard on the academic realm in order to earn something really special.

 **04:20 Student 1:** To follow your dream means if you want... if you think about something that you really want to do, it's not too early to do it.

Cormack: I want you to think first about one dream that you have for the future. What was your dream?


Student 2: To be a farmer.

 **04:36 Cormack:** You want to be a farmer? Good. Tell me something about that dream. What are you doing right now that's helping you do it to be ready to be a farmer?


Student 2: Go with my granddad.


Cormack: Okay, so you...tell me...say something more about that in a complete sentence. You go with your granddaddy, and what do you all do?


Student 2: He tell me stuff about the tractors.


 **04:56 Cormack:** Good, good. And do you know...did you all know that in order to operate a tractor, you have to have at least an associate's degree to that, because they have global positioning software, they have GPS in the tractors, and they communicate with satellites to increase how much cotton and all of those things. So it's a pretty important job.


Influencing for Results


 **05:17 Narrator:** In a turnaround school, it is critical to gain commitment to a common vision and then develop the capacity for success. A principal who influences for results builds effective teams to get things done. Principal Cormack demonstrates this competency by setting the school's priority on student achievement, helping staffs build instructional capacity, and fostering staff participation in decision making.

 **05:43 Cormack:** We recognize a real need to set high academic goals for...not only for our students but for our teachers. One of the key challenges that we face was making certain that our teachers had a consistent view of what quality instruction looked like, what it sounds like, and so we worked together to build that vision. What it meant is that we, as an administrative team, got into classrooms and made certain that teachers were getting feedback about instruction, that they were informed about best practices. We've done a bunch of modeling. We get in front of a staff meeting and actually model a best practice or we look to exemplary teachers. One of our main missions was to create a climate where teachers felt comfortable opening their door, being observed by others, letting a video camera—a little flip Mino camera, even—into the classroom to spotlight moments of instruction, so that that could be shared; that's a...principally, one of the biggest shifts in mindset that has happened.

 **06:41 Sandra Willborn:** Anybody that walks into Quitman County Elementary School can tell you what we're working toward. I don't know if we really were of one accord before...of one accord before Mr. Cormack came. When you have everyone working toward one common goal we know we're working toward, then we can all work together to achieve it.

 **07:00 Ricardo Sacks:** Now when we get data, we really dig deep into the data, see where we can go to improve our kids' education.

 **07:06 Amber Nicole Mills:** Mr. Cormack gives each and every staff member the opportunity to provide feedback and to help make decisions for the school.

 **07:15 Cormack:** It would be quite easy for me to spend the bulk of my time right here at my desk and my office because there are a lot of mandates both at the district level and the state level that could keep me wedded, ball and chain, to this desk. But I just have set the priority based on student achievement and me being and serving as an instructional leader, and I can't do that from this desk.

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