



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Recommendations of the Turnaround Practice Guide

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Topic: Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools

Highlights

- Turning around a school requires a strong leader who is not afraid of making unpopular changes.
- Set goals for improvement, and use data to track progress.
- Start with “quick wins” in the areas of instructional time, facilities, and discipline.
- Maintain a core of committed staff who know the school and the students and are committed to reforms.

About the Interviewee

Dr. Rebecca Herman is a managing research analyst at the American Institutes for Research. She specializes in evaluating the evidence for school reform, including turnaround strategies. She chaired a panel to produce the Institute for Education Science’s practice guide on turning around chronically low performing schools.

As the project director for the first phase of the What Works Clearinghouse, from 2002 to 2007, she was responsible for the U.S. Department of Education’s

flagship project to set standards for educational research and use those standards to identify effective educational programs, practices, and approaches. Dr. Herman developed a guide for school practitioners on how to recognize and use evidence of effects, issued by the U.S. Department of Education in response to the call for “scientifically based research.” Further, she was an invited speaker at the Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education’s panel on scientifically based research. She also was an invited member of the BEST national blue ribbon panel on best practices in pre-K through 12th grade. Dr. Herman was project director of the *Educators’ Guide to Schoolwide Reform*, which provided a critical look at the research and implementation of the most prominent and promising comprehensive school reform efforts in this country. The Guide developed standards for the quality of research on comprehensive school reform. She provided congressional testimony and many invited presentations on this and related work.

Dr. Herman received an M.A. and Ph.D. in sociology from Johns Hopkins University.

Full Transcript

Hi, I’m Becki Herman. I’m a Managing Research Analyst at the American Institutes for Research and the panel chair for the Practice Guide to Turnaround Chronically Low-Performing Schools.

The turnaround practice guide is designed to help underperforming schools by providing some practices that the principals and staff can immediately put into action to change the way the school operates and to promote quick changes in the functioning of the school and the learning of the students. The first practice recommended by the guide is strong leadership, and there are two aspects of that that I want to focus on. First, that the leader needs to be strong, this needs to be a person who is not afraid to take on challenges, not afraid to make changes that may be quite unpopular, or perhaps to push back on school or district policy.

The second aspect of strong leadership is that the leader needs to signal that there will be a change in the way the school operates, that this will not be business as usual. And this can happen in one of several ways. Bringing in a new principal is often a signal for change, and it helps if that new principal is somebody who has already had experience turning around a low-performing school or somebody who, if it’s a continuing principal, who has received some training in learning how to turn around a low-performing school. You can also signal change from business as usual by making a public announcement—to the community, in working with the district, even in the popular press, in the local newspaper—to indicate that the school is not going to be functioning as it had previously.

The second practice in the practice guide is to maintain a laser-like focus on instruction. One aspect of that is that the principal should be an instructional leader. The principal should be deeply involved in instruction of the school: visiting classrooms on a regular basis, modeling instruction for the teachers, working with them on their lesson plans. That’s an important part of helping the school, all of the staff, refocus on

the instruction which is the piece of the change that is most likely to have a dramatic impact on student achievement.

Another element of maintaining focus on instruction is to set a clear and narrow set of goals for improvement—goals that can be achieved in a reasonable period of time and that are quite clearly related to instruction and related to the achievement that’s a focus for that school—and to use data to measure progress towards that goal. The principal and the teachers can work together to use data to understand how the school is performing and to refocus their efforts on instruction. The principal and the teachers can look at data at the school level to determine whether the school as a whole is improving in the areas that are a priority. They can also look at the data at the class level to determine whether a teacher needs to reteach a certain topic or perhaps he or she might need some professional development to better be able to teach that particular topic or skill. The teachers can work together looking at data on an individual student to determine whether a student has really grasped a certain key skills and concepts and to plan on how to reteach to that student if necessary.

A turnaround school also can maintain that focus on instruction by taking a look at the curriculum. Many of the successful turnaround schools examined their curricula and aligned them to state standards and assessments, and in the process discovered that they may not have been teaching some of the topics and some of the skills that are required by the state standards. So, it’s important for the school to take a look at what they are teaching by aligning the curriculum. The process itself helps the teachers better understand what they need to teach and how.

The principal should focus on quick wins that can be accomplished, and that means the principal might want to not choose as wins something that requires a consensus across the school, something that requires district approval, something that requires lot of extra funding that’s not already set aside. What the successful turnaround schools tend to select as quick wins are quick wins in the area of instructional time, in the area of facilities, or discipline and behavior. So for example, a principal might choose a quick win that involves instructional time. The principal might set aside time for teachers to collaborate and to plan together, or the principal might ensure that there is uninterrupted instructional time. And it can be something as simple as changing the bell schedule and the policy on announcements so that there are no announcements from the central office in the middle of instructional time. Another family of quick wins are changes to the facilities. So, for example, the school could be repainted, or some moderate landscaping to the front of the school could occur. Some successful schools even clean the school, which was something that was a dramatic change for them. The principal can post student work and change it frequently so that it doesn’t appear stale. Changes in the appearance of the school can make it a warmer environment. A third family of quick wins are changes in discipline and behavior. In this area, it’s easy to make small changes that have dramatic impact. The principal might set a policy that external doors are closed or are guarded during times when students tend to be truant so to really just keep the students in the school. So those are three families of quick wins: changes in the use of instructional time, changes in the facilities, changes in discipline and behavior. But the important thing is not that one selects one specific win in those areas. The important thing

is to match the needs of the school with the quick win that is the priority for that school.

The first step to building committed staff is to assess the strengths and the weaknesses of each member of the staff. This is to identify those who are both qualified and committed to the direction that this school will now be moving in. Having identified the staff that are going to be the strengths of the schools in the new direction, the principal can redeploy or cancel out staff who do not fit in with that vision. According to No Child Left Behind, there is an option of replacing all school staff, but most of the research recommends not pursuing that option. The research recommends maintaining a core of committed staff, staff who both know the school and the students, and are committed and able to carry out the reforms in the new direction.

Successful turnaround schools generally use one or more of these practices, often in collaboration. So, for example, a principal can signal change, which is the first recommendation, but it's not enough just to signal change. The principal needs to follow immediately with some quick wins, which will indicate that it's possible to achieve the changes. Or as another example, there may be some changes in the leadership, and there may be some quick wins early in the turnaround process. These need to contribute to this emphasis on improvement. It's not enough for there to be a change in leadership and for there to be quick wins and for them not to build towards instructional improvement which will ultimately affect what the students learn and how.