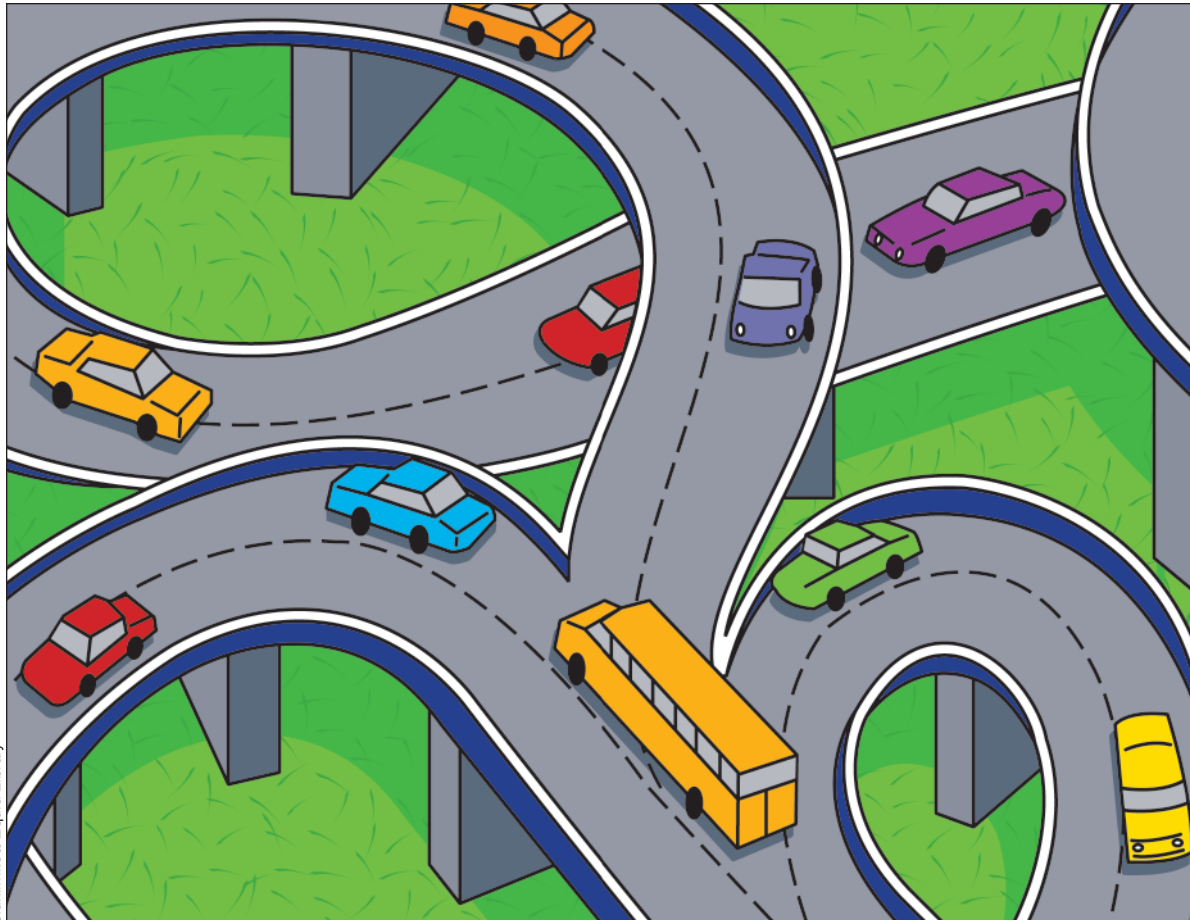


# Meeting the Challenge of School Turnaround



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## Lessons from the Intersection of Research and Practice

Seven recommendations for turning around low-performing schools may help leaders facing this challenge.

**By Michael Salmonowicz**

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“Turnaround” has become the new buzzword in education. From states and districts paying for principals to be trained as turnaround specialists to U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s call to turn around the country’s 5,000 lowest-performing schools, the concept of rapid, large-scale reform in individual schools — not just incremental school improvement — has taken hold.

During the 2008-09 school year, I had the opportunity to work in one of the first turnaround high schools in Chicago Public Schools and to see what turnaround looks like “on the front lines.” My view of the process was enhanced because of the positions I held during the year. As an English and social studies teacher, I taught nine groups of stu-

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dents in six different courses, grappled with the challenges of raising student performance and managing classroom discipline, participated in department meetings and staff development sessions, and socialized with other teachers. As director of the school’s reading development team, I led professional development activities, observed teachers, administered two schoolwide reading assessments, attended leadership team meetings, and spoke regularly with the director of the district’s high school turnaround program. I had more contact with more individual students than any teacher in the building, as much contact with individual teachers as any administrator in the building, and a fair amount of access to the inner workings of the administration.

This experience was particularly exciting for me because from 2004 to 2008 I researched turnaround schools with colleagues from the University of Virginia’s Curry School of Education. Our research team reviewed the literature on low-performing schools and organizational turnaround, attended training sessions with and interviewed dozens of turnaround specialists from 18 districts in four states, visited numerous schools in the midst of turnaround initiatives, and surveyed turnaround specialists and their faculties.

From my year as a turnaround teacher and my experience as a researcher, I developed the following suggestions for those in schools and districts who are considering the possibility of school turnaround or who already are engaged in the process.

**1. Ensure that more than enough resources are available.**

After expending the political capital often necessary to launch a turnaround effort, the worst thing that can happen to school and district leaders is not having the resources to deliver promised reforms. Three questions should be asked before beginning a turnaround:

1. What resources will it take to turn around the school?
2. How long will these resources need to be sustained?
3. Are we willing and able to guarantee these resources?

An ideal model for achieving turnaround includes two stages. First, a school should be flooded with resources, everything from personnel to technology to discretionary funds. There should be no question that the school has everything it needs. Second, once a school has made considerable strides (after two to three years), some support should be withdrawn strategically — think of the game Jenga — to see what resources the school can do without while maintaining what has been achieved. It is possible, of course, that the second part of this model may not work. One of my colleagues in Chicago posed a question to me at the start of our turnaround process: “Can a school like ours” — with only 5% of students proficient in core subjects, in a neighborhood that had been economically depressed for decades, and where drug abuse, gang violence, and teen pregnancy were rampant — “ever succeed without all the extra resources from a school turnaround initiative?” This question stayed with me all year, and it is an important one for researchers to investigate.

Time is one resource that should be examined very closely. In schools marked for turnaround, students typically are far behind academically. Helping them make up ground can require more time than currently is allocated in a normal school day, especially in middle and high schools where students are older and further behind. Although many teachers commit time beyond contract hours to assist students, they often are stymied by before-school faculty meetings or students’ after-school extracurricular activities. Designing a longer school day is one way to guarantee additional instructional time; this also means creating a special contract that increases turnaround teachers’ salaries. For example, teachers at KIPP charter schools — one of the most successful charter school networks in the nation — work 10-hour days (students are in school for nine hours)

and are required to work half-days on some Saturdays and teach three weeks of summer school. But for this extra time they are paid 15% to 20% more than neighboring teachers in regular public schools. Half a century ago, John Carroll (1963) made the case that time is the primary factor affecting student learning; aside from money, it may be the most important resource to be managed in a turnaround school.

## **2. Ensure that the principal understands what “turnaround” means.**

School turnaround is quite different from the school improvement process with which most principals are familiar. When it comes to turning around a school, the principal is akin to a professional stunt driver who must whip a car around 180 degrees in traffic, achieving a drastic change in direction without causing an accident or flipping the car. Principals without specialized training in school turnaround should spend considerable time learning how their peers have gone about the process. Doing so can help a principal create her or his vision for the year and clearly communicate to teachers what challenges and changes to expect. A number of our research team’s recent publications (Duke, Tucker, Salmonowicz, and Levy 2008; Duke and Salmonowicz in press; Salmonowicz and Levy in press) provide specific details about the decisions made and actions taken by principals who were both successful and unsuccessful during the first year of turnaround.

A principal also should understand what turnaround means to her or his specific district so the ideas and goals of both parties are aligned. This alignment can result in more targeted use of resources and can prevent misunderstandings when hiring decisions and programmatic choices are made. The schools and districts studied by our research team used the Balanced Scorecard (Kaplan and Norton 1996) to set unambiguous goals and allow district leaders, principals, and faculty members to track progress throughout the year. My Chicago school used a similar tool.

## **3. Determine key priorities that you must get right the first time — and get them right.**

Teachers and students bear the brunt of the changes that occur during a turnaround; their buy-in to the process is therefore essential. Failure to get the important things right in the opening weeks of the school year can hurt teacher and student morale and diminish trust in the administration, damaging the school’s chances to improve. To ensure this does not happen, a turnaround principal must identify and accomplish those things that must be done right — 100%, the first time, no exceptions. These might

be simple “nuts and bolts” issues that directly impact students and teachers, like having faculty members’ teaching responsibilities and room keys ready, providing students with accurate class schedules, and having all books and supplies inventoried and ready for distribution. They might relate to tone-setting; for example, all principals trained through the University of Virginia’s School Turnaround Specialist Program practiced remarks for their first faculty meetings in front of peers. Or they might be large programs that hold much promise but also are more complex and prone to setbacks. These larger initiatives must be preceded by months of structured, disciplined planning and reflection: cost-benefit analyses; identification of assumptions, possible alternatives, and potential unintended consequences; and acknowledgement of new or disconfirming evidence and consideration of dissenting opinions. If school leaders are unsure about the chances for success af-

## **In schools that need to be turned around, many or most students are likely to have trouble reading.**

ter going through this process, it may be best to pilot the program on a small scale and collect evidence before fully implementing it.

Not everything can be perfect, however. As the year progresses, the administration and faculty should discuss how to strike a balance between the “fierce urgency of now” and the need to get things right when it comes to implementing reforms/programs. On one hand, waiting to be completely sure about something may be detrimental to students because “time is something. . . children don’t have” (Payne 2008: 174). On the other hand, being forced to abandon or overhaul a program midyear after preventable problems occur can upset the consistency that students so badly need in school. There is no prescription for how to balance these competing interests. Just remember that students and teachers in a low-performing school likely have been subjected to myriad failed reforms over the years. It is vital for them to see that this time will be different.

## **4. Show teachers that success in challenging schools is possible.**

At least some teachers in a low-performing school can be expected to resist changes that accompany a turnaround. This probably will stem from cynicism — cynicism that substantive changes can be made

and success achieved and that the work teachers do will be a determining factor in that success. In a recent survey of 320 teachers in turnaround schools (Duke, Konold, and Salmonowicz 2009), for example, teachers identified change at their schools as necessary primarily in areas that did not involve their own practice (for example, parent involvement, district support, math and reading curricula). And in response to an open-ended question at the end of the survey — What changes do you feel should be made

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to improve student achievement at your school? — one teacher wrote, “Get better students!”

I ran across similar sentiments while teaching in Chicago last year. When a department chair debriefed the faculty on her tour of high-poverty, high-achieving public high schools in another state, teachers greeted her remarks with disbelief. “They

**ARTICLE AT A GLANCE**

Having both conducted research on and worked in low-performing schools facing a large-scale reform to turn them around, Michael Salmonowicz offers seven recommendations for educators in schools that are facing such reforms:

1. Ensure that more than enough resources are available.
2. Ensure that the principal understands what “turnaround” means.
3. Determine key priorities that you must get right the first time — and get them right.
4. Show teachers that success in challenging schools is possible.
5. Make literacy the centerpiece of your turnaround plan.
6. Provide frequent, targeted, professional development.
7. Don’t scale up until you have a model that works.

were charter schools, right?” “Are you sure they weren’t elementary schools?” At a professional development session later in the year, an external consultant briefly spoke about under-resourced schools around the country that were meeting state standards. The first question from a teacher was whether they were magnet schools or neighborhood schools.

The attitudes of practitioners and researchers clearly diverge on the subject of improving a school or school system. Talk to a university researcher and you generally find cautious optimism. Talk to a K-12 teacher and pessimism often abounds. So how should school leaders introduce potentially resistant faculty members to the idea of turning around their school? A good start would include providing substantial time (before the school year begins) for teachers to read and discuss the research findings that make academics hopeful. First, teachers should be presented with the work of Sanders and Horn (1998), which shows that teachers have a bigger impact on student academic progress than any other factor, including race, socioeconomic status, and class size. Many teachers are unaware of this and related research, and they deeply believe that their effectiveness is inhibited by factors they cannot control. Next on the reading list should be clear, indisputable evidence that schools *just like theirs* have turned around or made big steps toward doing so. Chapters from Karin Chenoweth’s *It’s Being Done* (2007) and *How It’s Being Done* (2009), or *Teachers’ Guide to School Turnarounds* (Duke, Tucker, Salmonowicz, Levy, and Saunders 2008) can help skeptical faculty members see that it is possible to achieve turnaround despite a school’s current low performance.

**5. Make literacy the centerpiece of your turnaround plan.**

When our research team investigated the dozens of problematic conditions present in 19 Virginia elementary and middle schools undergoing turnaround, only one was found in every school: low reading achievement (Duke, Tucker, Salmonowicz, and Levy 2007). I found a similar situation at my high school in Chicago, where 60% of students were reading on or below a 6th-grade level. Twenty-one percent were reading on or below a 4th-grade level; half of these students were in the 9th grade, presumably because most struggling readers in the upper grades had dropped out of school.

In schools that need to be turned around, many or most students are likely to have trouble reading. Therefore, those schools must address literacy in a comprehensive manner. Staffing, course scheduling, resource allocation, and professional development all should revolve around the literacy program. There is no one right way to approach literacy in a

low-performing school. However, the issue assuredly will not be resolved unless 1) school and district leaders assess and acknowledge the problem and provide necessary resources to address it, and 2) teachers understand that achievement in other subject areas will follow the trajectory of reading and are willing to be open-minded and flexible when it comes to the school's plan of action.

## 6. Provide frequent, targeted, professional development.

One of the strengths of Chicago's high school turnaround design was the importance placed on weekly professional development in addition to annual professional development days mandated by the district. Based on recent research, this may be necessary for teachers and students in any school to see some benefit. For example, Yoon and colleagues (2007) found that only professional development programs lasting 14 or more hours showed significant effects on student achievement; nearly all of the programs lasted between 30 and 100 hours.

However often teachers come together to learn, deepening skill in key areas — not broadly covering many areas — should be the focus. Just as educators fight against “mile wide and inch deep” textbooks and curricula for students, they should do the same when it comes to professional development. No more than two or three areas should be tackled during a single school year. One of these should be literacy, as discussed above, while the others may be anything from discipline to differentiation. Considering all the changes that can come with school turnaround — new staff members and administrators, a revised bell schedule, new curricula, different committee structures and teams, a revamped discipline model, etc. — teachers will be hard-pressed to find the time or energy to undertake too many new things in professional development. Pushing them to do so may lead to disappointing results (Salmonowicz and Levy in press).

## 7. Don't scale up until you have a model that works.

This recommendation is for school districts anxious to expand existing turnaround initiatives. Although it may be tempting to start this worthy work in as many schools as possible, as quickly as possible, future efforts at reform can be undercut if a proven program is not in place. Chicago serves as an example of this. Halfway through my school's first year under the district's turnaround initiative, another high school was being prepped to begin the turnaround process in fall 2009. Attention and resources were diverted before we knew whether the reforms at our school — the “pilot” school — had worked!

This likely will result in neither school showing significant progress in the near future, which may lead even the most idealistic teachers, along with students and community members, to become pessimistic about the possibility of turnaround at the high school level. A better option, in my opinion, would have been to pour energy and resources into one school and ensure it succeeded. It then could have been used as a district (and perhaps national) model for future turnaround initiatives. Just as it is wise for a school to successfully pilot a program in a classroom or two before implementing it across the building, a district should successfully turn around one school at a given level (elementary, middle, or high school) before attempting to do so on a large scale.

One disappointment from my experience in Chicago was that there was no third-party documentation of our turnaround effort. There exist dozens, perhaps hundreds, of examples of elemen-

### Need examples of successful turnarounds?

**Charles A. Dana Center, University of Texas at Austin. *Hope for Urban Education: A Study of Nine High-Performing, High-Poverty, Urban Elementary Schools*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Planning and Evaluation Service, 1999. [www.ed.gov/PDFDocs/urbaned.pdf](http://www.ed.gov/PDFDocs/urbaned.pdf).**

**Charles A. Dana Center, University of Texas at Austin. *Opening Doors: Promising Lessons from Five Texas High Schools*. Austin, Texas: Charles A. Dana Center, 2001. [www.utdanacenter.org/research/openingdoors.php](http://www.utdanacenter.org/research/openingdoors.php).**

**Duke, Daniel, Pamela Tucker, Melva Belcher, Deloris Crews, J. Harrison-Coleman, Jennifer Higgins, et al. *Lift-Off: Launching the School Turnaround Process in 10 Virginia Schools*. Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia, Partnership for Leaders in Education, 2005. [www.darden.virginia.edu/uploadedFiles/Centers\\_of\\_Excellence/PLE/VSTPS-Final.pdf](http://www.darden.virginia.edu/uploadedFiles/Centers_of_Excellence/PLE/VSTPS-Final.pdf).**

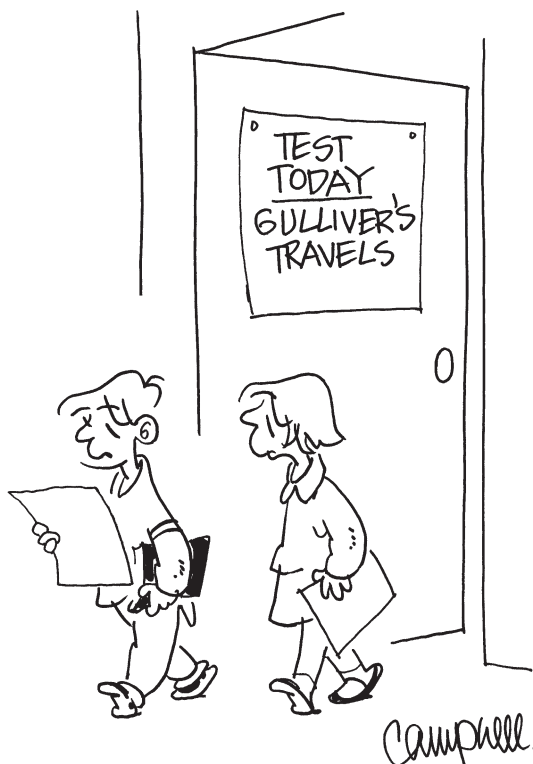
**Picucci, Ali, Amanda Brownson, Rahel Kahlet, and Andrew Sobel. *Driven to Succeed: High-Performing, High-Poverty, Turnaround Middle Schools. Vol. II: Case Studies*. Austin, Texas: Charles A. Dana Center, University of Texas at Austin, 2002.**

The University of Virginia turnaround research resulted in a number of publications aimed at academics, principals, and teachers. Find a complete list at <http://sites.google.com/site/turnaroundpublications>.

The University of Virginia research team was led by Daniel Duke. Besides the author, other team members included Professor Pamela Tucker and graduate students Jennifer Higgins, Lesley Lanphear, Melissa Levy, and Stephen Saunders.

tary and middle schools that have been successfully turned around, but we have few studies or stories of this kind when it comes to high schools (see the sidebar on page 23 for a list of turnaround case studies). This is due mainly to the fact that more turnaround initiatives have been attempted in elementary and middle schools and to the difficulty in attaining this type of success at the high school level. Because little documentation exists, it is hard to know what works and what doesn't when it comes to high school turnaround. For example, can we simply transfer best practices from a turnaround elementary or middle school, or must an entirely new model be created?

In addition to the seven recommendations offered above, I strongly encourage universities to partner with local school districts so more insight into the hard work of high school turnaround can be gained. Resulting studies can be invaluable to practitioners, since school-based personnel typically have neither the time nor objectivity to undertake such research. Findings also can inform training provided by principal preparation programs and policies governing school reform efforts. Forging these types of partnerships is one way to bring together the skills, knowledge, and passion of practitioners and researchers in support of deserving students. **K**



"Turns out the Yaboos didn't invent the search engine."

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