

LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOL TURNAROUND

#2 IN THE *ED DIRECTION* SCHOOL TURNAROUND MODEL SERIES



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In this shifting economic landscape, the new reality is that most students will require post-secondary education in order to earn a living wage. To open the door to higher education, student achievement is more important than ever. Teachers are on the front lines of advancing student performance, but recent studies establish an empirical link between visionary school leadership and improved student achievement.

At Ed Direction, we appreciate the groundbreaking work of researchers who conducted multi-year projects and found that leadership is *second only* to classroom instruction as a factor of a school’s influence on student learning (e.g. Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson). Since student learning depends so heavily on visionary leadership, we believe it is vital to address the principal’s role in turning around severely underperforming schools. In this paper—the second installment in our School Turnaround Model Series—we outline three specific behaviors that school leaders can implement to make the impact that research has proven possible: 1) defining and communicating a vision, 2) ensuring high-impact teaching, and 3) creating and leading teams.

DEFINING AND COMMUNICATING A VISION

Napoleon is quoted as saying that “leaders are dealers in hope,” and vision is their currency. From our years of consulting with districts and schools, we at Ed Direction wholeheartedly agree. At times, working to turn around a school may feel only slightly less stressful than attempting to conquer continental Europe, but leaders who succeed are those with a defined vision. Such leaders have a clear sense for what they’re working toward, why it is so important, and how they’ll get there.

These three essential elements (what, why, and how) can pave the way for successful leadership in school turnaround. The first component—the “what”—encompasses the student learning outcomes that educators are trying to achieve at a particular school. This element of vision is pragmatic and concrete. Leaders should use data to draft straightforward academic goals regarding growth and proficiency.

In contrast, the “why” is more emotive: it encompasses the lofty reasons that motivate educators to do this work. Interestingly, the “why” may look remarkably similar across different educational ecosystems. Generally, turnaround leaders are focused on helping

children maximize their potential by preparing them to become college and career ready.

Finally, the “how” of visionary school turnaround leadership gets down to the brass tacks that bridge the “why” and the “what.” It includes transparency about tactics, timetables, and strategies for the school year. When implementing the “how,” successful leaders rely on organized and efficient teams.

Because school turnaround is a shared effort, leaders who clearly define their vision will enable educators to buy in to the specific instructional strategies they will be implementing. By organizing teams, clarifying responsibilities, and arranging the location and timing of meetings, leaders will help everyone—teachers, support staff, students, and parents—be informed and on board.

Creating a vision is necessary but not sufficient: successful turnaround leaders clearly and cogently communicate their vision initially, and then consistently follow through. Patrick Lencioni, noted author of multiple books on management, observed:

The only way for people to embrace a message is to hear it over a period of time, in a variety of different situations, and preferably from different people. That’s why great leaders see themselves as Chief Reminding Officers as much as anything else. Their two top priorities are to set the direction of the organization and then to ensure that people are reminded of it on a regular basis.

For school turnaround in particular, we cannot overstate the importance of constant communication of what, why, and how of the school’s turnaround vision.

ENSURING HIGH-IMPACT TEACHING

Research confirms what principals, parents, and students experience firsthand: quality teaching trumps any other factor in improving student performance. Studies demonstrate the value of investing in quality teaching rather than simply reducing class size—better teaching means greater student learning. In fact, in one highly-regarded analysis, researchers found that every \$500 spent on improving the quality of instruction happening in the classroom is about five times more effective for boosting student performance than are efforts to implement typical reductions in class size using that same \$500 (e.g. Greenwald, Hedges, and Laine).

Size of Increase in Student Achievement for Every \$500 Spent on:

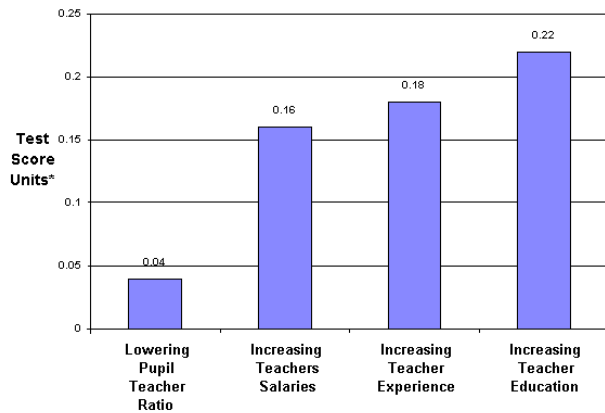


Figure 1: Source: <http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/negp/reports/highstds.htm>.

Similarly, other studies indicate that small groups, individual tutoring, and increased academic time only have significant bearing on student performance when the quality of instruction is also high (e.g. Allington & Cunningham; Berliner; Wasik & Slavin).

In her book “Student-Centered Leadership,” Vivian Robinson provides research-based guidance on the leadership practices associated with increased learning and well-being of students. She affirms that students perform better in schools wherein teachers report that leadership is heavily involved in activities that ensure the quality of teaching.

In short, a principal’s top priority should be ensuring that the school’s teaching is high caliber. Two tactics can dramatically improve the quality of teaching in a school: strategic hiring and classroom-observation-based professional development.

Visionary leaders support excellent teaching at their schools is by hiring the best teachers available. We have seen that hiring is particularly important for schools that are in turnaround status. To avoid hiring “leftover” teachers in the district, here are some strategies that a turnaround leaders can employ:

- Hire early; waiting until summer break or even the end of spring is too late.
- Proactively identify and recruit the highest-quality teachers. This cannot happen behind a desk or through a phone; it necessitates “boots-on-the-ground” recruiting.

- For each potential hire, watch a live teaching demonstration with a classroom full of students.
- Identify clearly which specific evidence-based strategies and classroom practices the teacher uses.
- Obtain evidence that the teacher has a track record of helping students achieve above-average outcomes. Because many students progress throughout the school year just through normal cognitive development, mediocre teachers might point to student growth in May or June that is merely the expected one-year average. Turnaround leaders should choose teachers who provide evidence of consistently moving student achievement beyond this average.

While investing energy in the recruiting process is absolutely necessary to ensuring quality instruction throughout the school, it is just a first step. Successful turnaround leaders then consistently improve their teachers and teacher teams with solid professional development via supportive classroom observation.

Looking at a sports analogy, over the past several years, superstar players have made headlines by joining together to make “super teams.” While each individual player is immensely talented, these teams may require months or even seasons of intensive acculturation and coaching before the players are working together and competing at championship level. This principle holds true for teachers: even if they exceed hiring metrics, teachers and teacher teams benefit from consistent coaching and development to improve performance over time.

While most professional development offers theories and principles for great teaching, the most effective PD we have seen occurs right inside the classroom. Practice is required to develop any skill; developing teaching capabilities requires classroom application with coaching. Successful turnaround leaders nurture teachers’ capabilities by observing them in their classrooms and providing feedback about how they are implementing key principles and strategies. Different from evaluation-oriented observations, these PD observations are grounded in supportive coaching, and they cultivate rapport between teachers and leaders.

To lead a successful school turnaround, principals absolutely must invest up to one-third of every day in coaching their players—observing teachers and

providing feedback. Teachers need prompt written and verbal feedback from the principal after each classroom observation in order to sustain trust and growth. Effective turnaround leaders provide feedback at least once a month—and ideally every week—for every teacher. This feedback allows the principal to praise progress and skill, and also to initiate difficult conversations.

CREATING AND LEADING TEAMS

Skillfully creating, leading, and maintaining teams is critical to the success of any turnaround effort—teams are the leader’s hands and eyes in actually accomplishing the vision. However, anyone who has ever worked in a team knows that there are unique challenges associated with group efforts.

To support team efforts, leaders should be aware of potential problems and should provide preventative and ongoing support. At Ed Direction, we have identified the three most frequent problems with teams in turnaround schools, and we’ve developed specific strategies that leaders can use to overcome them. The top concerns consistently include:

1. *Confusion about responsibilities* – Sometimes we see overlap and replication where multiple teams are tasked with similar responsibilities. Huge gaps may form as one team assumes other teams are doing things that they aren’t actually doing.
2. *Miscommunication* – Often, “in groups” and “out groups” unintentionally develop: some team members feel included and informed, but others do not. Out groups feel lack of ownership, which decreases their motivation and sense of camaraderie.
3. *Inefficient use of time* – Typically, teams struggle to use their time well—they often get lost in minutia and fail to focus on the most important things. This disorganization often stems from a lack of clarity about team responsibility and priorities.

Visionary turnaround leaders can prevent and overcome these pitfalls by employing the following time-tested solutions:

1. *Efficient organization* – Clarify which team owns which responsibilities. This will ensure that all necessary responsibilities are being owned by at least one team.

2. *Clear communication* – In order to avoid overlap and redundancy, let teams and staff schoolwide know what other teams are working on. Reiterate the importance of each team’s efforts to reduce stratification between groups.
3. *Effective time management* – Create meeting agenda objectives to ensure that the most important topics receive the attention they deserve. At the end of every meeting, each member should leave with action items so there is shared responsibility and real clarity about who’s going to do what and by when. Then, follow up on these assignments at the next meeting, and let the outcomes guide future meetings and assignments.

To implement these strategies, the most successful turnaround leaders will run what we call a central “school transformation team.” Like assistant coaches on a sports team, this central team is responsible for monitoring instructional quality and verifying that PLCs (Professional Learning Communities (or CTTs [Collaborative Teacher Teams], as we refer to them) are functioning well. By collaborating closely with the transformation team, principals ensure that every student is achieving mastery in their grade level or subject area, or is receiving needed intervention. In managing teams that function well throughout the school, leaders transform their vision into reality teacher by teacher and student by student.

Similar to the classroom observation PD for teachers described above, principals should also observe and dialogue with teams by regularly attending team meetings to ensure efficient organization, clear communication, and effective time management. Visionary leaders actually get out and observe, provide coaching and feedback, and steer errant teams back on course.

CONCLUSION

Warren Bennis, a widely-respected scholar and pioneer in the field of leadership studies, observed: “Leadership is the capacity to translate vision into reality.” In order to clarify vision and generate enthusiasm, principals have to be so much more than effective motivational speakers. It takes significant effort to hire the best teachers, organize functioning teams, and regularly observe teachers and provide feedback.

But this effort delivers significant return on investment—it ensures high-impact teaching and boosts collaboration throughout the school. As achievement levels rise and students gain the opportunity for higher education and greater lifelong earning power, leaders reap the rewards of transforming vision into reality.

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