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FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Supporting and Developing Turnaround Leaders

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Topic: Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools

Practice: Improved Leadership

Highlights

- To have credibility, principals trying to turn around underachieving schools at which they have been working for several years must take responsibility for the school's existing problems. Newly hired principals trying to turn around schools must quickly learn about existing relationships and politics.
- District support is important for turnaround efforts; districts must give schools the freedom to build the team they need and to allocate time in ways that get results. Districts must support principals who are meeting resistance to the changes they are trying to implement.
- One of the most important things the district can do in a turnaround is to monitor progress.
- Leadership for turnaround requires special skills; a supply of leaders with these skills must be established for the U.S. to draw from in turning around failing schools. Potential leaders may be found in schools and in district administrations, and also outside of education.

About the Interviewee

Bryan C. Hassel is Co-Director of Public Impact. He consults nationally with leading public agencies, nonprofit and organizations, and foundations working for dramatic improvements in K-12 education. He is a recognized expert on charter schools, school turnarounds, education entrepreneurship and human capital in education. On the topic of school turnarounds, he co-authored Public Impact's *School Turnarounds: Cross-Sector Evidence on Dramatic Organizational Improvement*. He consults widely with school districts, states, and other organizations engaged in school turnarounds.

In addition to numerous other articles, monographs, and how-to guides for practitioners, he is the co-author of *Picky Parent Guide: Choose Your Child's School with Confidence* and author of *The Charter School Challenge: Avoiding the Pitfalls, Fulfilling the Promise*, published by the Brookings Institution Press in 1999. Dr. Hassel received his doctorate in public policy from Harvard University and his masters in politics from Oxford University, which he attended as a Rhodes Scholar. He earned his B.A. at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which he attended as a Morehead Scholar.

Full Transcript

I am Bryan Hassel, Co-Director of Public Impact.

If you are an existing principal and you want to signal that things are going to be different, that things need to change, and yet you have been there for several years yourself and you have been part of the school in the situation where it wasn't working as well as it needed to, you have got a special challenge because people are not necessarily expecting you to exert the kind of bold leadership that is needed for a turnaround. So, you have a special challenge when it comes to signaling the need for change. A big part of this is taking ownership of the problems that the school has, not pointing the finger elsewhere but saying, "I have been here. I have been working on this for a few years, and I haven't done what I need to do." And the more specific a leader can get about that, the more the leader can explain to teachers and the community, the parents what's gone wrong in the past and take responsibility for that, the more credibility the leader has then to say, "Okay, we are moving to a new phase here."

A new leader who is coming in for the first time doesn't have that exact challenge. The new leader has a different set of challenges because the new leader doesn't know all the players, doesn't know all the relationships, doesn't know all the history. That can be an advantage to a large degree, but the new leader has to quickly get up to speed on the politics within the school, on the relationships that exist beforehand, on what kinds of staff and parents and community members might be allies for the change effort and which ones might be naysayers or underminers of the change effort. And that's a lot to get up to speed on quickly, but it's vital for a new leader because then the leader can signal the changes needed and what is needed to be done in order to move the school ahead.

District support is so important for turnarounds. In most successful turnarounds, we see the higher-level organization like the district giving the organization that's turning around what we call the "big yes," which means we support a dramatic turnaround in this unit. Without that "big yes," it's much harder for principals in this case to do the work they need to do.

So what's in the "big yes"? Well, the "big yes" first of all involves the leeway to do what's needed to get results for kids. So, in a school, it means being able to reallocate resources towards programs or initiatives that are going to be effective in achieving whatever quick wins the leader is setting out to meet. It means giving them the leeway to build the team they need in order to be successful in the school, and it means the leeway to use time—another key resource in schools—in ways that achieve results for kids. Without that leeway, it's still possible for schools to be much better than they are, but that's a great enabler from the district level. Support from the district in a turnaround also means backing up the principal over time as the inevitable bumps in the road come along. Any turnaround worth its salt is going to be controversial. There are going to be actions taken that some people don't agree with. Programs that some folks support are going to have to be set aside in place of new ones. Staff who once had leadership in the original school or might need to be replaced, not necessarily on the staff but in their leadership roles. Parent groups that might have been helping the school by supporting some initiative or giving funds for some purpose might need to be redirected to something that's more in line with what the new turnaround is about. And, inevitably, some people are going to complain to the district that things are not going well at the school and the district needs to be able to say, "We support this turnaround; we support the leader. We need to do what needs to be done to turn around the school and we are behind this." If the district, by contrast, responds to all of the inevitable flack by calling down the principal, by undermining the reforms the principal is trying to undertake, it can take the wind out of the sails of the turnaround before it really has a chance to get moving.

One of the most important things the district can do in a turnaround is to stay on top of it to make sure it's on track. Most turnarounds that are tried in all different kinds of organizations don't work, and so we have to expect there to be a fair amount of failure. And the key in such a case is for the district to be able to step in and restart in some way. Maybe they hired the wrong person as the leader; maybe they didn't give the right conditions, but whatever it is, the district needs to be able to say, "It's been a year, we are not on track with the turnaround, we need to try something different." Otherwise, we are in the same pattern that we have always been in with schools of letting failure languish for three, five years before anything is done, and that's not how turnarounds work.

Leadership for turnaround is a specialized leadership capability. It's not one that we have really cultivated that well in education over the years. And so, if we are going to get serious about turnarounds in the U.S., we have to get serious about developing this pipeline of leaders who have what it takes to turn around failing schools. And we need to do research to learn more about what kinds of leaders are successful. But we also need to be very clear about the kind of leaders that we are trying to hire for these jobs. It may be that a principal who has been very successful in a school that's doing pretty well and is getting better over

time is not the right person to undertake a turnaround. And so it may be that we need a different kind of person in that role and we need to look for sources of that supply. They may be outside education. We may need to reach out beyond the boundaries of schools to find the people that can be turnaround leaders. But there are probably a lot of people working in school districts as teachers and as administrators who could be very effective turnaround leaders if we found them and cultivated them over time to be successful. We need to think about this as a kind of a craft that needs to be developed and that way, we will have a pipeline of people who can do this hard turnaround leadership work over time.