

**Reference Desk Response 493:
The Role of School Leaders in Turning Around Low-Performing Schools**

Question/s:

1. What does the research say about the roles of school leaders—both teachers and administrators—in turning around low-performing schools?
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Report:

Following an established REL-NEI Reference Desk research protocol, we conducted a search for research reports as well as descriptive and policy-oriented briefs and articles in this area. The sources included federally funded organizations, additional research institutions, several educational research databases, and a general Internet search using Google and other search engines. We also searched for appropriate organizations that may act as resources on this issue. We have not done an evaluation of these organizations or the resources themselves, but offer these resources to you for your information only.

In responding to this question, our researchers used the definition of turnaround schools used in the IES Practice Guide (see Herman 2008) to guide our search. This refers to schools that have demonstrated significant improvement in three years or less and does not include more general studies on school improvement or comprehensive school reform models. Our researchers found that “school leadership is a key part of school change and turnaround” (Herman, 2008; see resource below).” One consistent finding across the reports was the need for school leaders to have a clear vision and unwavering commitment to that vision. While the reports listed here focus primarily on the role of the principal, each report includes discussions of the principal’s relationship with staff, role as instructional leader, and capacity to share leadership of the school. One report (Public Impact, 2008) explicitly addresses the role of teachers and their required competencies to support the turnaround process.

Question/s:

1. **What does the research say about the role of school leaders – administrators and teachers – in turning around low performing schools?**

1.1. Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools: A Practice Guide. 2008; Herman, R., Dawson, P., Dee, T., Greene, J., Maynard, R., Redding, S., and Darwin, M.; NCEE 2008-4020; National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education; 43 pages.

Source: US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences

(http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/Turnaround_pg_04181.pdf)

According to the abstract, this guide “identifies practices that can improve the performance of chronically low-performing schools—a process commonly referred to as creating ‘turnaround schools.’ The four recommendations in this guide work together to help failing schools make adequate yearly progress.” Recommendation 1 – Signal the need for dramatic change with strong leadership and Recommendation 4 – Build a committed staff are specifically dedicated to discussion of the role of principals in the turnaround process. The role of teachers and their

impact in the classroom is discussed specifically in Recommendation 2 –Maintain a consistent focus on instruction. Practice guide companion resources are available at the Doing What Works (DWW) Website (http://dww.ed.gov/topic/?T_ID=21). For more information about DWW, see *Additional Organizations to Consult*.

1.2. School Turnaround Teachers: Competencies for Success. 2008; *Public Impact*; 33 pages.

Source: General internet search using Google

(http://www.publicimpact.com/publications/Turnaround_Teacher_Competencies.pdf)

One in a series of four documents addressing turnaround teachers and leaders, this guide “seeks to clarify the most critical competencies – or patterns of thinking, feeling, speaking and acting – that enable people to be successful in attempts to transform schools from failure to excellence quickly and dramatically.” The guide refers to teachers as “turnaround leaders for their classrooms with the additional responsibility of collaborating to implement successful tactics and reduce failed ones across the entire school.” The guide organizes required turnaround teacher competencies into four clusters – Driving for Results, Influencing Results, Problem Solving, and Personal Effectiveness. Three companion documents, *School Turnaround Teachers: Selection Toolkit*, *School Turnaround Leaders: Competencies for Success*, and *School Turnaround Leaders: Selection Toolkit* can be found at <http://www.publicimpact.com/act-strategically-when-schools-fail/competencies-for-turnaround-success>

1.3. Breaking the Habit of Low Performance: Successful School Restructuring Stories. 2009; Brinson D., and Rhim, L. M.; *Center on Innovation & Improvement*; 52 pages.

Source: Center on Innovation and Improvement

(<http://www.centerii.org/survey/>)

Note: To download publications, visitors will need to complete an online form selecting the desired publication from a list of resources.

According to the website, this report “provides five brief profiles of schools that dramatically improved student performance and successfully restructured under federal accountability systems.” Three of the five districts replaced the principal, one replaced targeted staff and one hired additional staff to support the improvement efforts. The report outlines the steps school leaders – administrators and teacher – took to improve student achievement. While different approaches were used in each school, principals played a primary role in creating a vision and securing buy-in and active participation from the rest of the faculty including teachers. Specific strategies employed are outlined in each school’s profile. The Center on Innovation & Improvement has an entire body of work in this area and is also listed as a resource below.

1.4. School Turnarounds: A Review of the Cross-Sector Evidence on Dramatic Organizational Improvement; 2007; *Public Impact*; 62 pages.

Source: Center on Innovation and Improvement

(<http://www.centerii.org/survey/downloads/Turnarounds-Color.pdf>)

According to the abstract, the report “synthesizes literature from multiple sectors - business, nonprofit, government, and education - and identifies the factors that have been shown to influence turnaround initiatives in schools and other types of organizations. The findings are organized into two broad themes: environmental context and leadership. The section on environmental context looks at five areas that influence turnaround strategies: timetable, freedom to act, support and aligned systems, performance monitoring, and community engagement. In looking at leadership, the authors focused on pre-existing capabilities of the leaders and the common set of activities undertaken by the leaders.” Specific discussion of Turnaround leaders begins on page 13. Appendices include a matrix of the literature indicating the factor(s) to have played a role in the turnaround success.

Additional Organizations to Consult

- **The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (CCSRI)**

(<http://www.centerforcsri.org/>)

The CCSRI operated under federal contract to locate and promote research-based improvement strategies; create tools, guides, and products for practitioners; and provide web-based technical assistance through September of 2009. The website now archives these resources and offers an Ask-the-Expert area featuring previously asked questions as well as access to a searchable

database of over 5,000 research articles on school reform and improvement. The Center also published its own articles and newsletters. Of particular interest to the requestor might be:

- September, 2009 Issue Brief, *Successful School Turnarounds: Seven Steps for District Leaders* (<http://www.centerforcsri.org/files/CenterIssueBriefSept09.pdf>).
- December, 2005 Newsletter, *Teacher Leaders: The Backbone of Sustained Improvement*. (http://www.centerforcsri.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=259&Itemid=5).

- **The Doing What Works School Improvement Website**

(http://dww.ed.gov/topic/?T_ID=21)

Doing What Works offers a number of resources intended to be used in conjunction with the IES Practice Guide. The site includes sections aligned with each of the four recommendations outlined above. Under each recommendation, there are multimedia presentations, tools, and templates for implementing the recommendation. Each recommendation highlights the role of the school leadership – administrative and instructional – in turning around schools. Specific examples from successful school-based initiatives are included.

- **The Center on Innovation & Improvement (CII)**

(<http://www.centerii.org/>)

According to the website: CII is a national content center funded by the U.S. Department of Education that “supports regional centers in their work with states to provide districts, schools, and families with the opportunity, information, and skills to make wise decisions on behalf of students.” CII offers publications in addition to those already cited here, to support states in their efforts to turn around low performing schools. CII also collaborates with the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) to offer the National Network of State School Improvement Leaders (NNSSIL) which engages state leaders “in developing an evidence-based body of knowledge that can lead to accelerating sustainable school, district and state improvement to raise educational results for all learners. Its mission is to provide collegial support among state leaders of school improvement to build, utilize and disseminate a robust body of knowledge of professional practices leading to systemic educational change.” The network accomplishes this through the website resources, periodic webinars and a newsletter. Find these resources at <http://centerii.org/leaders/>

Key words and search strings used in the search:

“School leaders” OR “principals” or “teacher leaders” AND “turnaround” OR “low-performing schools”

Search databases and websites:

Institute of Education Science Resources (IES): Regional Educational Laboratory Program (REL); IES Practice Guides; What Works Clearinghouse (WWC); Doing What Works (DWW); Institute of Education Sciences (IES);

Other Federally Funded Resources: The Assessment and Accountability Comprehensive Center; The Center on Innovation and Improvement; The Center on Instruction; The National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality; The National High School Center; Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement;

Additional Resources: Center on Education Policy (CEP); Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO);

Search Engines and Databases: EBSCO Databases; ERIC; Google, Google Scholar;

Criteria for inclusion:

When Reference Desk Researchers review resources, they consider, among other things, four factors:

1. **Date of the publication:** The most current information is included unless in the case of nationally known seminal resources
2. **Source and funder of the report/study/brief/article:** Priority is given to IES, nationally funded, and certain other vetted sources known for strict attention to research protocols);

3. **Methodology:** i.e. Random control trial studies, surveys, self-assessments, literature reviews, policy briefs, etc. Priority for inclusion is given generally to random control trial study findings; however, the reader should note at least the following factors when basing decisions on these resources: Numbers of participants (just a few? Thousands?); Selection (did the participants volunteer in the study, or were they chosen?); Representation (were findings generalized from a homogeneous or a diverse pool of participants? Was the study sample representative of the population as a whole?)
4. **Existing knowledge base:** Although we strive to include vetted resources, there are times when the research base is slim or non-existent. In these cases we have included the best resources we could find, which may include newspaper articles, interviews with content specialists, organization websites, etc.

REL Northeast and Islands

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