

# TURNAROUND SCHOOLS: LEADERSHIP LESSONS

**THE IDEA** that underperforming schools can and should be 'turned around' inserts a level of urgency, energy, and hopefulness into a longstanding professional conversation dominated, until recently, by the much more guarded language of 'school improvement'. The turnaround concept prods us to confront failure head on and to accept responsibility for 'making things right' - not at some vague time in the distant future, but soon. This concept is also the practical face of efforts to achieve equitable outcomes for students in our schools.

There is a significant strand of theory and research about turning around underperforming organizations; however, very little of it speaks to the unique mission and character of schools.<sup>1</sup> This literature is unambiguous in its claim that leadership is the pivotal explanation for success, suggesting that efforts to better understand the nature of successful school turnaround processes would do well to begin with a focus on successful school turnaround leadership.

The province of Ontario provided an especially productive context for our research. Through its newly established Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, the government established clear and ambitious targets for province-wide student achievement, poured significant new resources into districts and schools to assist them in meeting those targets, created teams of people with impressive expertise to work directly with underperforming schools, and made special funds available to schools for professional development and other purposes. Underperforming elementary schools that chose to be part of the province's Turnaround Teams Project were eligible for these additional resources and external sources of assistance. The elementary schools in this study were chosen from the cohort of schools in the Turnaround Teams Project.

## TURNING AROUND IN STAGES

The study was guided by our belief that the school turnaround process unfolds in stages, within which successful leadership practices are enacted in forms uniquely suited to the turnaround context. These practices give rise to a set of school improvement initiatives that, if successful, prompt change on the part of teachers, which leads to increased student performance.



**EN BREF** Cette étude dégage trois étapes pour réussir le redressement d'écoles sous-performantes : les résultats à la baisse, la stabilisation de la crise, le soutien et l'amélioration des résultats. Lors de chacune des étapes, on constate qu'une direction réussie englobe un ensemble de pratiques de base qui se répartissent en quatre catégories générales : l'établissement de l'orientation, le perfectionnement des gens, la refonte de l'organisation et la gestion du programme éducatif. On a constaté que chacune de ces catégories joue un rôle à chaque étape du redressement, mais que leur mise en œuvre et leur importance relative varient d'une étape à l'autre. Bien que le processus de redressement ait d'abord découlé de politiques du ministère ontarien, il s'est accompagné de changements d'attitudes au niveau scolaire, notamment la reconnaissance que tous les élèves sont capables d'apprendre, que les écoles peuvent compenser les effets des situations familiales et que le processus d'amélioration des résultats des élèves est connu et qu'il peut être appris.

## **AT THE DECLINING PERFORMANCE STAGE, SCHOOL CULTURES ENCOURAGED TEACHERS**

### **TO WORK ALONE, AND STRUCTURES IN THE SCHOOL REINFORCED THAT ISOLATION.**

## **DURING THE CRISIS STABILIZATION STAGE, THESE CULTURES, AND THE STRUCTURES**

### **SUPPORTING THEM, UNDERWENT CONSIDERABLE MODIFICATION.**

In line with considerable evidence, we have identified three turnaround stages: Declining Performance, Crisis Stabilization, and Sustaining and Improving Performance. Within each of these stages, successful leadership was assumed to include a set of 'core' leadership practices found to be successful in most contexts,<sup>2</sup> all of which fall within four broad dimensions or categories: Direction Setting, Developing People, Redesigning the Organization, and Managing the Instructional Program. Each of these dimensions encompasses several more specific practices. While considerable evidence suggests that successful leaders use these practices in a wide array of contexts, we assumed that their enactment would change in ways highly sensitive to the school turnaround stage in which leaders found themselves.

The study was carried out in two stages. During the first stage, interview data were collected in four elementary and four secondary schools (a total of 73 individual interviews, as well as eight parent focus groups and eight student focus groups). The schools were selected as successful turnarounds based on their performance over three years on Ontario's EQAO achievement tests in Grades 3 and 6, as well as the province's Grade 10 literacy test. During the second stage, surveys were sent to a total of 472 teachers and 36 administrators in 11 elementary schools and three secondary schools. Of these schools, nine met our criteria for being turnarounds (beginning from a very low starting point and improving significantly within three or four years), and five schools were clearly 'improving', beginning from a starting point slightly below district average and improving to above the average within three or four years, again based on EQAO data. Synthesizing the evidence from both stages of the research produced eight key findings about successful turnaround leadership.

#### **1. Low performing schools require effective leadership to turn around.**

This is no surprise. Evidence, mostly from non-school organizations, portrays leadership as the major factor accounting for successful turnarounds. We found that all four dimensions of leadership were significantly and strongly correlated with schools' improvement initiatives and teacher changes.

#### **2. 'Core' leadership practices are the keys to success.**

Our interviews about leadership – with teachers, administrators, and parents – identified virtually no important leadership practices that were not included in the list of core practices mentioned above (Direction Setting, Developing People, Redesigning the Organization, and Managing the Instructional Program).

When teachers were asked to rate the value of each of these core practices to their schools' turnaround efforts, they awarded moderately positive values to all four categories, with Direction Setting capturing the highest ratings and Developing People the lowest (an apparent contradiction to other findings about the importance of professional development). Among the specific leadership acts or behaviors (as distinct from the four broad categories) rated as most valuable, three stand out: providing resources, building a learning community (or collaborative culture) in the school, and ensuring adequate amounts and types of professional development.

#### **3. The 'core' leadership practices encompass most of what is required to successfully lead a school turnaround.**

Although the context changes as schools move from one stage of the turnaround process to the next, the importance of leadership does not. Teachers in 'Turnaround' and 'Improving' schools show very little difference in response to survey questions about the value of the core leadership, in both the four broad categories and the more specific practices within them.

#### **4. As the school turnaround process evolves, the 'core' leadership practices are enacted differently.**

Although we expected the core leadership practices to capture what successful leaders do in almost all contexts – an expectation confirmed by our first three findings – we also expected that the enactment of those practices would be sensitive to context, in this case the three turnaround stages. Our results show that leaders do, indeed, enact core practices differently as the school turnaround process moves from Declining Performance to Crisis Stabilization. (Due to the timing of our study, only a few schools showed indica-



tions of moving toward the third stage, Sustaining and Improving Performance.)

**Direction setting.** This set of leadership functions evolved quite noticeably during the turnaround stages. At the Declining Performance stage, leaders paid little explicit attention to direction setting. While some leaders had a sense of direction themselves, it was unlikely to be shared with staff, who were thus left to forge their own directions.

In these Ontario schools, the Crisis Stabilization stage began with a government-imposed goal of improved literacy for all schools that were not performing well, and so goal-setting at the school level, related to that provincial goal, became a prominent leadership function. Principals (and department heads at the secondary level) articulated their visions to staffs. Even though there was considerable urgency to improve student performance in our eight case schools, successful leaders made goal setting a shared activity and maintained significant staff involvement. During this stage, high performance expectations flowed from the top down, and effective channels of communication were developed to serve as a conduit for these expectations as well as a means of ensuring agreement on goals.

**Developing people.** From the Declining Performance stage to the Crisis Stabilization stage, the schools in our study experienced a dramatic change in the nature and quality of their capacity development efforts. Initially, provincial turnaround teams provided professional development that teachers and principals generally regarded as the most beneficial they had ever experienced. As the process continued, teachers began to assume much greater ownership for their own development. They looked more to their immediate colleagues as sources of insight and valued their ability to access highly specialized and focused professional development resources from outside the school.

Many teachers began the Crisis Stabilization stage with a strongly felt need to change and improve their own classroom practices. Their personal commitment – and the emerging culture of accountability for implementing new practices and improving student performance evident in the turnaround schools – made the capacity-building efforts in which they participated more meaningful.

**Redesigning the organization.** At the Declining Performance stage, school cultures encouraged teachers to work alone, and structures in the school reinforced that isolation. During the Crisis Stabilization stage, these cultures, and the structures supporting them, underwent considerable modification. Leaders began to clearly value collaboration, and they established teams, committees, and working groups to both allow and encourage it. They also made structural changes to accommodate different approaches to literacy instruction. As these changes began to bear fruit, the wider community began to acknowledge the contribution of all levels of schooling to the success of students on provincial tests.

**Managing the instructional program.** From the Declining Performance stage to the Crisis Stabilization stage, the purpose of leaders' management functions shifted from providing routine maintenance of ongoing work in the school to aligning the standard operating procedures of the school with the overall goal of significantly improving student literacy. For example, 'monitoring' shifted from simply scan-

ning the environment for potential disruptions in the schools' routine work to diagnosing the progress of students, assessing the impact of existing approaches to instruction, and designing strategies to meet the unique needs of individual students and groups of students.

### 5. Effective turnaround school leadership is narrowly distributed.

Evidence about who provided turnaround leadership indicates that formal teacher leaders were always rated as having the greatest influence, suggesting that their content knowledge and instructional expertise were of prime importance to turnaround success. School administrators were second in importance, followed by teacher teams and informal teacher leaders. In response to a direct question about relative influence, provincial turnaround teams were rated fifth, an overall influence much lower than they reportedly had in helping schools make the initial transition to the Crisis Stabilization stage. Parents and students were typically awarded least influence.

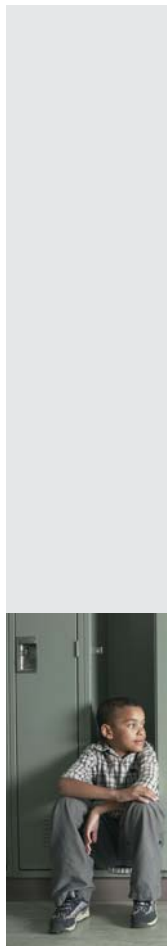
Approximately 75 percent of the turnaround leadership in elementary schools was provided by just three sources: principals, formal teacher leaders, and the Ministry's turnaround teams. In secondary schools, district staff replaced the Ministry's teams as a primary source of leadership. Principals were seen as key (although not always the most important) enactors of the core practices in school turnaround contexts, as in most other contexts.

### 6. As school turnaround processes evolve, the nature and number of sources of leadership change.

Earlier turnaround research indicates that leadership at the beginning of the turnaround process tends to be highly focused in one person or a small team of people. As the organization begins to improve, leadership becomes increasingly shared or collaborative. Our study reinforced that finding, and also found that successful leadership took different forms at different stages. Stimulating the move from Declining Performance to Crisis Stabilization required a fairly directive and focused form of leadership, primarily from provincial policy makers, but as the process evolved, the responsibility for implementing change broadened.

For secondary schools, the transition from Declining Performance to Crisis Stabilization was prompted by provincial policy makers' decision to make passing the Grade 10 literacy test a requirement for graduation. This requirement began the process of aligning teachers' efforts with the province's efforts. Without provincial intervention, it seems unlikely that the effort and energy of the secondary school staffs in this study would have shifted, in the brief span of a few years, to a focus on improving the literacy skills of their less successful students.

For elementary schools, the government's commitment to significant improvements in primary language achievement was the key stimulant for moving to the Crisis Stabilization stage. Although using the new resources provided by the government remained officially 'optional', there was substantial pressure on schools whose students were achieving significantly below average to take advantage of them. After transition to the Crisis Stabilization stage, school leadership became considerably more collaborative, promising to expand to more sources during the third turn-



around stage. This expansion is likely to be fostered by the changed perspectives observed among teachers: their willingness to be held responsible for what students learned; their growing awareness of the long-term effort that would be required to sustain and improve their students' performance; a new awareness of just how interdependent were the efforts of elementary and secondary schools if student performance was to be successfully nurtured; and a much broader view of the factors that account for student success.

### 7. The leadership challenges in beginning the turnaround process are predictable.

In the schools in our study, the Declining Performance stage was characterized by teachers' feelings of helplessness, denial of responsibility for the learning of all students, and resistance to external intervention. School staffs did not see their own efforts as likely to make much difference and explained poor student performance by pointing to family and community conditions and to limited learning potential. There was little evidence of teachers working toward common goals.

Based on this perspective, it was difficult for staffs to accept responsibility for significantly improving their students' poor performance, contributing to a belief that provincial efforts were largely irrelevant or not to be taken seriously. Studies of low performing schools in widely different locations have reported very similar challenges.<sup>3</sup>

### 8. Leaders turn their schools around by changing teacher attitudes and school cultures.

In these schools, transition to the Crisis Stabilization stage – initially prompted by Ministry policy initiatives, and also widely supported by districts – was accompanied by important shifts in attitudes, as well as in the school's culture.

The challenge for leaders in moving their schools to the Crisis Stabilization stage can be summed up as the need to foster three sets of beliefs among teachers:

- All students are capable of learning when appropriate instruction is provided.
- While students' family backgrounds have important consequences for their learning, schools are able to more than compensate for the effects of challenging family circumstances.
- What schools need to do for all students to achieve at improved levels is known, can be learned, and requires everyone in the school to work toward common goals.

Many teachers began to believe that the province's focus on literacy and numeracy was in the best interests of their students, many adopted this focus as their own, and principals began to hold teachers accountable for implementing what they had learned during their professional development. Teachers demonstrated significantly greater willingness to work collaboratively with their colleagues, and a sense of school-wide responsibility for student success began to pervade the professional cultures of these schools.

## CONCLUSION

The eight key findings from this study, while emerging from school-based evidence, are consistent with evidence for successful turnaround leadership to be found in the larger organizational turnaround literature. This should be a source of confidence for school leaders aiming to inform their practice with the best available evidence. |

This study was conducted under contract with CEA. The full report will be published in the late Spring of 2009.

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### Notes

- 1 For a comprehensive recent review, see J. Murphy, *Turning Around Troubled Schools: Lessons From the Organizational Sciences* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2008).
- 2 These core practices and the evidence justifying their value are described, for example, in K. Leithwood and C. Riehl, "What We Know About Successful School Leadership," in *A New Agenda: Directions for Research on Educational Leadership*, eds. W. Firestone & C. Riehl (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2005), 22-47; K. Leithwood, K. Seashore-Louis, S. Anderson and K. Wahlstrom, *How Leadership Influences Student Learning: A Review of Research for the Learning from Leadership Project* (New York, NY: The Wallace Foundation, 2004). These core practices have also been adopted, with modifications and extensions, as the province of Ontario's leadership framework
- 3 For such evidence, see D. Duke, P. Tucker, M. Salmonowicz and M. Levy, "How Comparable Are the Perceived Challenges Facing Principals of Low-performing Schools?" *ISEA* 35, no. 1 (2007): 3-21; D. Muijs, A. Harris, C. Chapman, L. Stoll, and J. Russ, "Improving Schools in Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Areas – A review of Research Evidence," *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 15, no. 2 (2004):149-175; M. Nicolaidou and M. Ainscow, "Understanding Failing Schools: Perspectives From the Inside," *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 16, no. 3 (2005): 229-248; D. Potter, D. Reynolds and C. Chapman, "School Improvement For Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances: A Review of Research and Practice," *School Leadership & Management* 22, no. 3 (2002): 243-256.

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