



## TECHNICAL BRIEF 1: CREATING ORGANIZATIONAL CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

### A SUSTAINABLE SCHOOL TURNAROUND STARTS AT THE SYSTEM LEVEL

School systems must create conditions that enable and inspire teachers and students to achieve their full potential. When an organization is failing, efforts to dramatically change performance must disrupt existing practice and usher in new approaches that will lead to success. The University of Virginia School Turnaround Program (UVA-STP) defines **school turnaround** as a documented, quick, dramatic and sustained change in the performance of a school <sup>1</sup>. A turnaround is not incremental school improvement done louder, rather, it is a different approach to change that requires district and school leadership to examine and fundamentally alter their practice. A successful school turnaround results in meaningful improvement in 18-24 months and continuous gains in achievement for several years thereafter <sup>2</sup>.

To achieve lasting change, districts must redesign how they support schools and commit to the collaboration with schools necessary to solve the most critical challenges. As the entity charged with establishing policy, allocating resources, coaching leaders and holding various stakeholders accountable, the district – which could include a charter network – must establish an environment that enables leadership teams with demonstrated competencies to drive results. By being willing to change their own practices and create an environment of urgency and hope, districts set the stage for change to build the broad and bold leadership capacity necessary to sustain turnaround. District and school leaders must change how they typically work together (in typically either a command-and-control, autonomous or compliance-based relationship) to one where they become true partners in co-creating success.

#### **WHAT WE KNOW: TURNAROUND IS POSSIBLE**

Between 2008 and 2011, 19 K-8 or elementary schools from two urban districts in Ohio participated in the UVA- STP. The schools were identified as some of the lowest- performing schools in the state; they fell within the bottom 10 percent according to the state performance index, a weighted average of the percentage of students at each proficiency level. Comparing the state performance index and raw proficiency rates between the UVA-STP schools and comparison schools in Ohio with similar profiles, schools participating in the UVA-STP program showed statistically significant improvement (e.g., average gains of around .45 standard deviations on the state performance index) in the first year while the comparison schools actually declined. These gains grew more pronounced in year two, with several schools achieving 30-point gains or more <sup>1</sup>. Similar results with over a .35 standard deviation were shown in a similar study of several districts and over 20 UVA-STP schools in Missouri.

#### **KEY LEVERS FOR SUCCESSFUL TURNAROUNDS:**

- ✓ Leadership
- ✓ Instructional Infrastructure
- ✓ Differentiated Support and Accountability
- ✓ Talent Management

This brief is the companion to **Successful Turnaround Leader Competencies and Actions** that outlines specific competencies and proactive steps successful turnaround leaders demonstrate to drive and sustain disruptive change. We'll outline the organizational conditions necessary for turnaround success based on a review of the literature and more than 10 years of practice representing over 70 districts from 15 states. UVA-STP has identified four key levers at the district that drive successful and sustainable school turnarounds.

### **Lever #1: Leadership**

Districts must commit to lead for success by identifying priorities and aligning resources, clearly and consistently communicating that change is not optional and investing in change that is sustainable.<sup>3</sup> Districts are responsible for proactively engaging the community by providing a stark look at current performance, creating and sharing a vision for the future and publicizing “Early Wins.” District and school leaders alike must help staff bust out of their “cages” of standard operating procedures and see opportunities for positive change previously overlooked.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, districts must:

- (1) *Have will to do what is necessary.*
  - Publicly commit to success and garner school board support for dramatic growth.
  - Be willing to challenge district norms and policies to support initiative.
  - Embrace their role in driving change restructuring central office to provide intensive, tailored coaching and monitoring of efforts.<sup>5</sup>
- (2) Devote capacity to prioritize the work.
  - Establish a shared vision of success shared by multiple stakeholders
  - Ensure bandwidth to prioritize now

### **Lever #2: Differentiated Support and Accountability**

To achieve ambitious results, districts committed to turnaround must prioritize turnaround schools and provide both additional, core support beyond what non- turnaround schools receive and individualized supports aligned with unique school needs. Treating all schools in a district the same does not represent equity given diverse needs. The three core areas to differentiate are:

- (1) *Willingness and capacity to provide needed support:* Districts must commit to providing support to help schools identify their problems and provide the rapid response and strategic resource allocation necessary to meet their specific challenges. School support also should include purposeful, regular school visits that include focused instructional support and coaching necessary to grow leaders.

## **EXAMPLES OF DISTRICTS REDESIGNING ORGANIZATION TO DRIVE SUCCESS**

### **LEADERSHIP: SHOWING BOLDNESS**

One example of district leaders leveraging their position is changing incentives while creatively working around the CBA, such as revisiting existing policies related to class size in order to place more students in effective teachers’ classrooms (Hess, 2013, p.154). The district CBA required the district to pay a penalty for exceeding contractual class sizes and teachers were unhappy despite the extra money. Without changing the language of the CBA but rethinking the interpretation of this clause, district leadership began to offer effective teachers more money if they chose to increase their class size. By doubling the bonus from \$1,000 to \$2,000 per student and presenting it as an opportunity, many effective teachers were eager to take on more students. This ultimately saved the district money while placing more students in front of better teachers, a move supported by parents.

Many UVA partner districts including Cincinnati Public Schools have experienced success due in part to leadership’s willingness to deal with resistance, specifically when organizational change bumped up against grey areas in the teacher union’s collective bargaining agreement (CBA). When changing the teacher hiring process, extending the school day, adding days to the year and requiring additional paperwork associated with analysis of student achievement data, CPS leadership met resistance head on by taking charge of how grey areas in the contract were interpreted based on what was best for children. CPS helped school leaders focus on students by being brave in the face of grievances and respectfully and transparently taking action.

### **SUPPORT: CREATING STRUCTURE TO DRIVE EFFORT**

When Fort Worth Independent School District implemented a turnaround initiative in 11 schools in 2012, the superintendent stated his expectations for all stakeholders to rally around these efforts. This prioritization was necessary in an environment where district and school leaders did not collaborate effectively. An Office of Transformational Leadership and School Improvement with goals to intensify support to high risk campuses, remove roadblocks and expedite response time to turnaround schools.

- (2) *Willingness to provide principals and initiative leaders with the authority to drive change:* Districts can extend focused and meaningful autonomy to turnaround schools to enable highly capable leaders flexibility in decision making to alter school schedules, modify transportation plans to accommodate specialize programs and alter staff working conditions to create the conditions necessary for success.
- (3) *Follow-through to hold schools and leadership accountable for high expectations and focused implementation:* With differentiated support must come transparent accountability measures; districts must assess turnaround efforts beyond student performance on annual exams and monitor principal and teacher performance.

**Lever #3: Talent Management**

Public education is human capital intensive and efforts to turnaround low-performing schools must prioritize how talent policies and approaches will change to support turnaround. In particular, districts can:

- (1) *Ensure strong leadership selection.* Prioritize recruitment and hiring of principals based on competencies necessary for success in turnaround.
- (2) *Strengthen teacher talent management.* Enhance the number of highly effective teachers via recruitment, placement and retention, changing incentive and job structures and providing priority access to applicant pools as possible.
- (3) *Strengthen teacher development and accountability.*
  - Establish a robust strategy to build capacity of teachers in turnaround schools. Ensure growth and impact opportunities of teachers are appealing enough for schools to become a talent magnet.
  - Examine human resource policies and support structures to hold teachers and leaders accountable for results and enable schools to reward or dismiss staff based on their performance.

New systems established included strategic allocation of funds, a blueprint for school improvement with clear focus areas and development aligned with those areas and clear plans of improvement at each campus that included the operational flexibility requested by leaders in defined areas. The willingness to do what was necessary resulted in streamlined support to each campus and the eleven schools outperforming other Title 1 schools in the metropolitan area for three consecutive years.

**DEFINED AUTONOMY: SOLVING PROBLEMS**

By having the autonomy to rethink the traditional organizational design of the school day, CMO Rocketship Education utilizes technology and blended learning to maximize instructional time and financial resources. By using Learning Labs staffed by classroom aides that supplement the 5 hours of classroom instruction required by California law, students gain additional personalized academic learning time via computer programs. This hybrid model allows Rocketship to increase instructional time at a cost savings of \$500,000 per school because the time spent in the computer lab reduces one out of 4 teachers per grade (Hess, 2011).<sup>1</sup>

**ACCOUNTABILITY: CREATING ROBUST SYSTEMS**

CPS’s Elementary Initiative to turnaround 16 schools leveraged data to inform practice. Teachers and administrators across all schools were trained and expected to review progress on short-term cycle assessments, establish individualized data folders for progress monitoring and collect a variety of data to assess progress toward goals. Through regular observations and planning meetings, turnaround teams assessed progress. This shift towards data driven instruction and accountability required a shift in how the district allocated resources to prioritize regular structured school visits to ensure leaders were holding personnel accountable for changing their instructional practices (Rhim, 2011). Beyond reviewing data reports from schools, Mitchell visited turnaround schools monthly while turnaround teams visited weekly, providing concrete recommendations and timelines for expected changes. CPS principals noted that the culture of accountability increased staff sense of urgency, created high expectations that weeded out low performers, generated opportunities for schools to learn from one another and led to meaningful progress in student achievement.

#### **Lever #4: Instructional Infrastructure**

Districts often have invested heavy resources in producing curriculum and data that teachers either do not have the capacity, understanding or willingness to use. Districts must own this challenge and create an instructional infrastructure where data is well organized and the pathway on how to use data to adapt instruction is clear:

- (1) *Ensure valid assessments.* Create a rigorous assessment strategy aligned to clear standards: Each assessment must serve a clear purpose and provide item analysis opportunities that help teachers understand how to adjust.
- (2) *Execute quality curriculum strategy.* Provide clear, coherent and quality curriculum: Curriculum mapping and pacing guides aligned with state curriculum should be comprehensible and accessible, allowing deviation only when well-supported by data and when quality teaching standards are met.
- (3) *Establish strong data culture and data-management system.*
  - Ensure robust and user-friendly data tools are in place: Districts must make access to data simple and provide results of assessments promptly. Key data points include assessment data, student and staff attendance, discipline incidents and any other data that allow districts to understand trends, principals to understand teacher performance, and teachers to understand individual student needs.
  - Establish culture where data is used from the top: Districts use data to understand the overall trends and determine where to intervene and what professional development to prioritize based on the data. District leaders can model effective data cycles through periodic, deep dives with school leadership teams.
- (4) *Ensure strong instructional support and monitoring.* Establish practices and systems to ensure high-quality instruction through alignment to curriculum demands and assessments, through coaching and monitoring of defined instructional expectations.

#### **TALENT: ENHANCING USE OF COMPETENCIES**

Each year, consultants working with UVA train districts preparing to participate in the UVA-STP to use a competency-based hiring approach (i.e., the Behavior Event Interview or BEI – a tool most commonly used for hiring key personnel in Fortune 500 companies). Brad Smith, the superintendent of Ogden City School District (OSD), implemented BEI to transform talent management in the district after being trained in the process as a part of UVA-STP. Using the BEI now to hire all school leaders and many non-educator positions has enabled OSD to understand their willingness and ability to drive change and hire accordingly. As a result of using the BEI, OSD hired a business administrator who would have been their third choice using a traditional interview system. Within six months of hiring this person, the business administrator completely redesigned the business process, expediting processing time and increases cost savings as a result. According to Brad Smith, “The BEI is simply an extension of resource allocation and meaningful and intelligent use of available resources.” While the BEI requires an upfront investment of time, it enables leadership to hire people with the mindset and competencies the district needs and is less costly than having to remediate an unfortunate hire.”

#### **ASSESSMENTS: PROVIDING TEACHERS WITH TOOLS**

As Anadarko School District began their turnaround initiative in 2013, the leadership had a true opportunity to transform the way their schools used and prepared data. Anadarko leadership began by reimagining the content and use of assessments to provide the opportunity for deep data analysis and root cause understanding of poor performance. The district then created a data management system that housed diagnostic, interim, and state summative assessment results. Using this aggregated data, the Anadarko team crafted user-friendly templates in order to provide teachers useful and transparent data tools and conducted tailored training for turnaround schools to help teachers leverage the tools. By integrating elements from UVA and Paul Bambrick-Santoyo’s training, Anadarko was able to more intentionally monitor student progress, which led to a more effective targeted intervention model for the district. They also better targeted teacher coaching based on true needs and thereby their five turnaround schools made on average 20-point gains in math compared to state average in two years.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Public Impact. (2007). *School Turnarounds: A Review of the Cross-Sector Evidence on Dramatic Organizational Improvement*. Lincoln, IL: Center on Innovation & Improvement; Kowal, J., Hassel, E. A., & Hassel, B. C. (2009). *Successful school turnarounds: Seven steps for district leaders*. Washington, DC: Public Impact for The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement

<sup>2</sup> Rhim, L. M., (2012, February). *No time to lose: Turnaround leader performance assessment*. Academic Development Institute and University of Virginia: <http://www.darden.virginia.edu>

<sup>3</sup> Public Impact. (2007). *School Turnarounds: A Review of the Cross-Sector Evidence on Dramatic Organizational Improvement*. Lincoln, IL: Center on Innovation & Improvement

<sup>4</sup> Hess, Frederick M. *Cage-busting Leadership*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> University of Virginia Partnership for Leaders in Education (2013). *District Readiness Assessment Rubric*.