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 VIDEO
7:06 min

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The Turnaround Principal: Part 2

July 2014

Topic **TURNING AROUND CHRONICALLY LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS**

Highlights

- » Michael Cormack discusses actions he has taken as a turnaround principal and the connection between these actions and the underlying competencies of Engaging in Problem Solving and Showing Confidence to Lead.
- » Students come first and everything at the school is focused on student achievement.
- » Decisions are made at the building level and based on meeting student needs and helping them gain traction towards achievement.
- » The school's leadership team serves as a sounding board for ideas and solutions, and staff meetings are directed at moving the school forward in achieving shared goals.

About the Interviewee

Michael Cormack is the principal of Quitman County Elementary School, an open enrollment public school serving 515 prekindergarten through fourth grade students in the rural Mississippi Delta. His efforts as principal include improving the quality of literacy instruction, creating a shared vision for quality instruction, and expanding prekindergarten programs to close the academic achievement gap before it begins. In the past two years, he has led QCES out of federal school improvement to a recent state rating of “Successful” by the

Mississippi Department of Education. Working as a team and family, QCES teachers, students, and parents have dramatically raised student achievement. Mr. Cormack has taught fourth through sixth grades and served in several program director roles with Teach for America. He is a graduate of Boston College and holds masters degrees in education from Delta State University and in organizational leadership from Columbia University.

Full Transcript



 **00:06 Narrator:** This two-part video series is designed to help states and districts understand the underlying competencies that enable a principal to be successful in the role of turnaround leader.

 **00:17** Turnaround principals require a unique set of competencies to bring about dramatic change. Researchers at Public Impact have identified four clusters of underlying competencies that enable principals to take action and turn around low-performing schools. The first cluster is Driving for Results; the second is Influencing for Results; the third is Problem Solving; and the fourth is Showing Confidence to Lead.

 **00:45** In Part 2 of this series, we hear from a principal who has taken successful action to turn around a low-performing elementary school. The examples described in this video illustrate the link between the principal's actions and the competencies that underlie these actions.

 **01:01 Michael Cormack:** My name is Michael Cormack and I'm principal at Quitman County Elementary School, a prekindergarten through fourth grade elementary school in the rural Mississippi Delta. I originally came to our school four years ago at the very beginning of a turnaround process.

Engaging in Problem Solving

 **01:15 Narrator:** A principal who engages in problem solving keeps reassessing what is working and what is not working, analyzing

data, and using the data for goal setting and decision making. Principal Cormack demonstrates this competency by deciding on staff allocations based on the skill sets necessary to meet the needs of students and engaging the school's leadership team in decision making directed at moving the school forward.

 **01:40 Cormack:** One of the more important decisions that I make each year is the decision of who to put in front of my students and which teachers to hire. And to be perfectly honest, there have been great choices that I've made and then there have been some duds. A few years back we actually had a teacher that we employed that we had really great hopes for, and found that a few weeks into school, that things were really not working out. There were behavior management challenges in addition to pedagogy, and just some practices that even with feedback were not, you know, coming together at the rate that we needed to for students. And so I consulted with my superintendent but then ultimately decided to make some action. And that individual was transferred to the computer lab where we needed some supervision, but then put another teacher in that place, really, to meet the needs of students; because students come first, and sometimes you may have someone who is a great person but may not have the skill set to do what you need for student achievement. And so, as a turnaround leader, it helped that I had the flexibility to be able to reallocate staff members as would be appropriate, and that would really meet the needs of students.

 **02:54** I have a leadership team composed of each of our grade-level leads. These are exemplary teachers in the classroom from each of our grade levels representing our prekindergarten through fourth grade teams, and then also great special educators and others. And so they're really a great sounding board for various ideas. I often will, you know, have an epiphany or have an idea that I think is good and kind of workshop it with this leadership team to get their sense of, if this is something that we should do, and if so, how.

 **03:26 Amber Nicole Mills:** Different, I guess, larger-scale issues are brought to the team before they're presented to the

entire school and so, again, I'm allowed to give my feedback, give my input on what I feel will best move our school in the direction that it should go.

 **03:42 Cormack:** I think it really becomes important in a school in turnaround to make certain that change is something that you can sustain, and that really helps when you have buy-in and investment from a great degree of stakeholders. So my leadership team is essential in change efforts because they are really the opinion leaders on campus and can help to smooth things over as...and help me to anticipate challenges to various things.

Showing Confidence to Lead

 **04:10 Narrator:** In a turnaround school, the principal needs to take risks and make bold decisions at the building level to improve student achievement. A principal who shows confidence to lead seeks out the challenge and accepts responsibility for the outcomes. Principal Cormack demonstrates this competency by establishing that students come first, believing in results, and taking control over the curriculum to achieve positive outcomes for students.

 **04:37 Cormack:** One of the really important competencies for turnaround leader is being able to work with the district, but obviously understanding that students come first. And sometimes that means, you know, making a decision that's best for students that may not be aligned or win friends at the central office. The challenge of working in a turnaround context is being able to have some control over your curriculum. That's really important within a building—to be able to make the changes in student achievement that will be necessary. In our example—when you really needed to make certain that the district pacing guide was aligned to our own internal school-based pacing—to make certain that students who really needed additional time to be remediated, that they weren't being held to an arbitrary standard of moving through or coverage of the curriculum but instead got really deep knowledge, that we were able to review those skills until they could master them. I mean, those are the kinds of decisions that a

turnaround leader really needs to be able to make at the building level in order to be able to gain traction for students.

Putting It All Together

 **05:42 Narrator:** The actions and underlying competencies needed to turn around a school are interrelated. Principal Cormack's actions are unified through an unwavering focus on student achievement, on what really matters, and promises the best outcomes for students.

 **05:47 Cormack:** The impetus behind everything that we do is about students and about student achievement, and I think that really animates each of the decisions that I make. It requires a deep attitude adjustment about what really matters. And every priority has to go through the meat grinder of student achievement; and if it's something that serves the needs of kids, then that's something that I'm going to place at a higher priority than, you know, pushing a piece a paper. You'll be really amazed at what the kids are able to articulate about what it is that they want to do and have a real clear understanding of how their education today connects to their future opportunities in college and beyond. And so we're really working to plant those seeds early and often so that kids understand that if I can set a goal and I have that sense of success... Nothing breeds success like a prior experience with being successful, and we want to make certain that our kids—each of our kids—have that opportunity to build that trajectory right here.

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