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Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Understanding and Meeting Staffing Needs

Julie Kowal • June 2008

Topic: Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools

Practice: Committed Staff

Highlights

- The turnaround leader must build a committed staff early in the process. At the beginning of the school year, look at test results and grade reports and informally observe as many teachers as possible.
- Successful turnarounds are often the product of selective staff replacement—not an entirely new staff. One or two staff members who aren't on board can bring the whole school down.
- The district must trust the school leader and give the leader control over staff decisions but can help through recruiting efforts and negotiating with the union.

About the Interviewee

Julie Kowal earned her law degree with honors from the University of North Carolina. Her background in research and policy led her to work as a consultant with Public Impact, a national education policy and management consulting firm based in Chapel Hill. At Public Impact, Julie has focused largely on school improvement and human capital, including studies of private and charter school teacher compensation and cross-sector solutions for attracting teachers

to hard-to-staff positions. Her work also includes cross-sector studies on the restructuring options under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and case studies of schools that have undergone restructuring. Based on her research on turnarounds in education and across sectors, Julie recently conducted a review of the school turnaround initiative in Chicago Public Schools and is currently engaged in an evaluation of the School Turnaround Specialist Program at the University of Virginia.

Full Transcript

My name is Julie Kowal. I'm a research consultant with Public Impact.

It's critical for the turnaround leader to build a committed staff early in the turnaround because even the best principal can't turn around a school that's been low-performing for years all by themselves. After all, they're not the one who's in the classroom with students everyday. So what we see in the literature about turnarounds, really, from across sectors—in business, government, and schools—is a turnaround leader who comes in early with a clear vision and inspires the staff to all get on the same page with the same beliefs: All of our students can learn; the success is possible. A lot of times in a low-performing school if it hasn't seen success for many years, even teachers who started out with the highest motivation and the best of intentions may lose their motivation and forget that success is possible in the school. So, for the turnaround leaders to initiate any other sort of changes outside of the staff—curricular changes, instructional changes—they really have to have buy-in, and that takes motivating the staff to believe that they can change.

When a principal starts the turnaround process, it's important for them to know what are the strengths and the weaknesses of the staff that they have, and what we see in successful turnarounds very often is a turnaround leader who starts with a detailed inventory—what they have. So they, a leader will enter the school at the very beginning of the school year and look at all kinds of data, so test results, grade reports, and the strengths and weaknesses of their school.

Ideally, principals tell me, they could get into the school before they're actually assigned as the principal, so in the previous year, and get into the teachers' classrooms as an informal observer, just to get a sense of their instruction, their style, their level of commitment, how they interact with the students. It can give the principal a lot of information about whether that teacher is going to be a strong candidate for making the sort of changes that the principal wants to make. If that's not possible, it's not always possible for the principal to get into the school in the prior year, then starting the year off with a really intense schedule of classroom observations. So not formal observations, but just drop-ins where the principal, during the first two weeks of school, is in the classroom almost all the time.

Another strategy that we see a lot, actually, in the case studies about turnarounds, is principals who meet individually with each member of their staff at the very start of the school year, so one-on-one meetings with each teacher. It gives the teachers an opportunity to say what they believe needs to change about the

school, what sort of support they are going to need to make those changes, but it also gives the principal some insight into whether or not these teachers are going to be able to buy into the changes—sometimes unpopular changes—that need to happen in the turnaround.

A lot of the information that helps the principal decide what to do after they have collected this information from their observations is to tie their sense of the strengths and weaknesses of each individual teacher to the results that they are seeing from students. So, if a teacher appears to be really energetic in the classroom and has a really great relationship with the students but is a third-grade teacher and the third-grade reading scores just aren't improving, then maybe that teacher is great in some areas but not in reading. So that's going to then inform the sort of strategies that the principal will use to assign that teacher to certain groups of students or to certain subjects.

What we see from the literature is that there is not any easy answer to the question of whether staff replacement is critical for turnaround or not. What we see most is that there is not wholesale staff replacement, just wipeout the entire staff. More frequently it's a selective staff replacement, which could mean one or two staff members or it could mean half of the staff, but that's more common. It's more common that it's not the entire staff.

What we hear from principals is that even if you have a fantastic staff, when you're doing such an enormous change effort as a school turnaround, even one or two staff members who aren't on board, who are sort of negative about the changes and who really doubt that this is going to succeed, they can really bring the whole school down. So, it's those staff members that the principal needs the flexibility to reassign or to counsel into another position. When there is no doubt about it, you have to replace a teacher. A teacher who is not going to be supportive of the turnaround, you have to counsel them out. And what principals tell me and what we see in the research is that those happen by difficult conversations, and that there's no easy way around it. There's no perfect solution, but it's a one-on-one conversation between the principal and that teacher who is struggling. And they're tough but, after all, the turnaround is about the kids. It's not about the grown-ups in the building, and so those difficult conversations are often a part of the turnaround when the principal realizes that they just can't keep that teacher in their school.

The district can support the type of staffing changes that need to happen in a turnaround setting in a lot of ways but primarily three. We don't have a good answer across the board about whether wholesale staff replacement is the answer in a turnaround or selective staff replacement is the answer. And so one of the best things that the district can do is to leave that discretion to a qualified and trusted turnaround leader. So give this leader who they trust the big "Yes" with a capital "Y" so that then when a principal does have trouble with a given staff member or doesn't quite know what to do with a weak area in their school, they already know that they have the district's support. They have greater flexibility than a traditional principal might to deal with their staffing problems at their school. Another strategy is that it's a particularly good role for the district in unionized districts to negotiate special terms with the union. So there might be an expedited transfer or hiring or exiting process for teachers in turnaround schools, and if the district can

engage in that conversation with the union upfront then district leaders can get favorable terms in the collective bargaining agreements for teachers in all turnaround schools. It's an across-the-board solution that gives principals a lot more flexibility. And finally one of the district's best roles, the role that it's best suited for, is the recruiting and hiring of really highly qualified and highly effective teachers in the turnaround setting. The district has a louder voice. They have a broader reach than any principal might, and so they can find teachers from all over the country to fill very specific needs in a turnaround school. And they not only find more teachers who are available to fill the slots that are left open by teachers who couldn't be successful in a turnaround setting, but provide incentives, either financial incentives or philosophical, imperative incentives for teacher to go directly first to a turnaround school.