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Video

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Differences Between Successful and Unsuccessful Turnaround Efforts

Joseph F. Johnson, Jr., Ph.D. • June 2008

Topic: Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools

Practice: Focus on Instruction

Highlights

- There are many ways to address a school's needs, but if instruction does not change, achievement will not change.
- Programs alone do not make the difference between high- and low-performing schools. The entire school staff must believe in the new practices being pursued.
- Successful schools focus on a small number of practices that match their students' needs, rather than getting caught up in making many changes for the sake of making changes.
- All practices must acknowledge that the ultimate goal is improving student learning. Teachers cannot merely present content—they must ensure that their students are learning.

About the Interviewee

Dr. Joseph Johnson is the Executive Director of the National Center for Urban School Transformation and the QUALCOMM Professor of Urban Studies at San Diego State University, in San Diego, California. In this position, he works with

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school district leaders, researchers, and educators throughout the nation to improve academic achievement in urban schools. As well, he teaches in the university's doctoral program in educational leadership.

Previously, Dr. Johnson has served as a classroom teacher in San Diego, as a school and district administrator in New Mexico, as a state department official in both Texas and Ohio, as a researcher and technical assistance provider at the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas, and as the Director of Student Achievement and School Accountability at the U.S. Department of Education where he was responsible for directing the federal Title I Program and several related programs.

Dr. Johnson earned a Ph.D. in educational administration from the University of Texas at Austin's Cooperative Superintendency Program. He earned a Master of Arts in education from San Diego State University and graduated Magna Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh.

Full Transcript

I'm Joe Johnson. I am the Executive Director of the National Center for Urban School Transformation at San Diego State University.

In my work, I have spent a lot of time visiting and studying high-performing schools, and I have also spent a lot of time visiting and working with schools that weren't doing well. Sometimes, I see in those high-performing schools, the same programs and sometimes the same practices that I see in schools that aren't doing so well. So I have become somewhat skeptical about if there are magical practices or magical programs that are the solutions. I think that there are some critical issues about how educators pursue those practices. And so one very important issue is the extent to which everybody in the school, all of the teachers and support staff and administrators, they all have a real commitment to whatever practice it is that they're going to pursue. If people don't believe in what they're doing, they will pursue, kind of, compliance behavior. They won't put their heart in it, and so the results are not likely to be as strong.

The other thing is that in schools that are getting better results, they're very careful about picking practices that align to the strengths and needs of their students. So, they don't just pick willy-nilly, or, you know, this is the flavor of the month, but instead they pick what they have carefully thought out was going to address the needs of their students. Then, I'd also say that what I see in very successful schools is that as they decide to address a few practices—it is truly just a few—having clarity about what this is supposed to look like is essential, and how they are going to measure their implementation. But then similarly, what's also important is having a clear notion of what is the real result that they're trying to achieve by implementing this practice so that they know what's the real goal and they are not getting distracted thinking that the goal is the practice. The goal is actually getting students to learn this mathematics, or the goal is getting students to learn this reading approach. And so when they are clear about what the goal is and how they are going to measure their pursuit of the goal, then that also, I think, influences why some practices are actually

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more effective at some schools than at other schools.

As schools work to do that, they need to be mindful that improving instruction means improving student learning, improving student understanding. It's not really about what we present. It's about what students learn, and that has to be the perennial focus. One of the first high-performing schools that I studied was a school in Brazosport, Texas, Brazosport High School. And when I went to that school, and I spent quite a bit of time visiting classrooms and talking to teachers, and then I sat down with the principal Doug Boone, and I said, "Doug, I need the bottom line. Six years ago your school was a low-performing school, and now it's one of the highest-performing schools in the state. What's the bottom-line difference between back then, six years ago, and now?"

And Doug thought about it for a minute, and he said, "Well, six years ago we taught school like we were feeding the chickens."

I said, "Excuse me?"

He said, "Well, you know about feeding chickens don't you?"

I said, "Well, why don't you explain it to me, Doug."

And he said, "Well, when you feed the chickens, you strap on your bag of feed, you go out into the yard, and you toss your feed onto the ground. And if the chickens get it, well, fine, and if they don't get it, well, fine. But after you have tossed your feed, you're done." He said, "That was pretty much the way we taught school. We strapped on our lesson plans. We went into our classrooms. We tossed out the information. If the students got it, well, fine, and if they didn't get it, fine. But after we had tossed out our lessons, we were done. We were done for the day." He said, "The main difference between back then and now is that now we are not done until we know that our students have learned what we have attempted to teach. We are constantly looking for evidence."

Are they learning it? Are they making sense of it? Can they give it back to us? Can they apply it in different ways? Can they teach it to the student next to them? Can they write about it? Can they pull it apart and put it back together again? They're constantly looking for that evidence. I suggest that in this work of improving instruction that that's what great schools do. They are constantly focused on, "Are the students learning, and are they learning well?" And wherever they are not, then they are constantly asking themselves, "How can we change our instruction? How can we improve it? How can we make it more effective?" So that the bottom-line result is that children are able to demonstrate that they have in fact learned.