Chapter 7
Insights from Turnaround Failure

In this final chapter we present insights from research and practice in the domain of school turnaround. We begin with a short description of the three core changes that turnarounds are designed to nurture in schools. In the second section of the chapter, we present a list of 35 insights that we have culled from our work on school turnaround. All come from the earlier chapters. The goal here is simply to make them explicit. In the final section, we set out eight lessons to employ in understanding turnaround.

7.1 Core Domains

7.1.1 Organization and Management

For some time now, "critics have argued that the reforms of the Progressive Era produced bureaucratic arteriosclerosis—and the low productivity of a declining industry" (Tyack, 1993, p. 3). There is an expanding feeling that the structure of schooling that was hard wired into the system between 1890 and 1920 and that has dominated education ever since has outlived its usefulness. In particular, it is held that the management tools of the bureaucratic paradigm pull energy and commitment away from learning. Reformers maintain that the structure cemented in place during the first recreation of schooling between 1890 and 1920 is not capable of supporting excellence in education and that, even worse, bureaucratic management has actually been damaging learning.

It is also argued that bureaucracy has led to siloed schools, that the structure that defined twentieth century schooling is counterproductive to the

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needs and interests of educators in post-industrial schools. In particular, these reviewers find that the existing structure is incompatible with a professional orientation (Curry, 2008). They maintain that the hierarchical foundations laid during the reform era (1890–1920) of the industrial period have neutered teachers and prevented the development of collegial ties. Researchers contend that "it has become increasingly clear that if we want to improve schools for student learning, we must also improve schools for the adults who work in them" (Smylie & Hart, 1999, p. 421).

As might be expected, given this tremendous attack on the basic organizational structure of schools, stakeholders at all levels are clamoring for significant reform, arguing that the bureaucratic framework of school organization needs to be rebuilt using different blueprints and materials (MacBeath, 2009). There is widespread agreement that the top down, authoritarian approach to leadership has taken us about as far as it can (Gronn, 2009). There is a significant demand for new ways of organizing schools especially changes in the way they are managed.

New perspectives of education such as turnaround feature these new methods of organizing and managing schools. In the image of schools for the twenty-first century, the hierarchical bureaucratic organizational structures that have defined schooling since the early 1900s are giving way to systems that are more focused on capacity building and that are more organic.

In these redesigned, post-industrial school organizations, there are basic shifts in roles, relationships, and responsibilities: Traditional patterns of relationships are altered; authority flows are less hierarchical, for example, traditional distinctions between administrators and teachers begin to blur; role definitions are both more general and more flexible—specialization is no longer held in such high regard; because influence is based on expertise, leadership is dispersed and is connected to competence for needed tasks as well as formal positions; and independence and isolation are replaced by cooperative work. Furthermore, the traditional structural orientation of schools is overshadowed by a focus on the human element. The operant goal is no longer maintenance of the organizational structure but rather the development of human resources (Tichy & Cardwell, 2004). Building learning climates and promoting organizational adaptively replaces the more traditional emphasis on uncovering and applying the one best model of performance. A premium is placed on organizational flexibility and purpose and values (Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010).

A new model for turnaround acknowledges that shared influence strengthens the organization (MacBeath, 2005). Institutional perspectives no longer dominate the organizational landscape. Rather, schools are reconceptualized

as communities, professional workplaces, and learning organizations. Professional community-oriented conceptions that challenge historical bureaucratic understandings of schools as organizations move to center stage (Bulkley & Hicks, 2005). Ideas such as community of leadership, the norms of collaboration, inquiry communities, and the principle of care are woven into the fabric of the school organization (Robinson, 2007). The metaphor of the school as community is brightly illuminated (Murphy, 2013).

7.1.2 Environmental Dynamics

Some analysts of the institutional level of schools— the interface of the school with its larger (generally immediate) environment—argue that the industrial approach to education led to a privileging of government and a cult of professionalism and to the "almost complete separation of schools from the community and, in turn, discouragement of local community involvement in decision making related to the administration of schools" (Burke, 1992, p. 33). Critiques of extant governance systems center on two topics: (1) frustration with the government-professional monopoly and (2) critical analyses of the basic governance infrastructure—bureaucracy.

Many chroniclers of the changing governance structures in schools envision the demise of education as a sheltered government monopoly dominated by professionals. As noted above, in its stead they forecast the emergence of a system of schooling driven by economic and political forces that substantially increase the saliency of market and democratic forces. Embedded in this conception are a number of interesting dynamics. One of the key elements involves a recalibration of the locus of control among levels of government. Originally called democratic localism, it has more recently come to be known simply as localization or, more commonly, decentralization. However, it is labeled, it represents a backlash against "the thorough triumph of a centralized and bureaucratic form of educational organization" (Katz, 1971, p. 305) and governance of the industrial era of education.

A second ideological foundation of turnaround can best be thought of as a recasting of democracy, a replacement of representative governance with more populist conceptions. While we use the term more broadly than does Cronin, our conception of the solidifying convergence here shares with his grounding in: (1) the falling fortunes of representative democracy, a "growing distrust of legislative bodies... [and] a growing suspicion that privileged interests exert far greater influence on the typical politician than does the

common voter" (Cronin, 1989, p. 4), and (2) recognition of the claims of its advocates that greater direct voice will produce important benefits for society.

A third foundation encompasses a rebalancing of the control equation in favor of lay citizens while diminishing the power of the state and (in some ways) educational professionals. This line of ideas emphasizes parental empowerment. It is, at times, buttressed by a strong strand of anti-professionalism that underscores citizen control, and local involvement.

The ideology of choice is a fourth pillar that is also rebuilding linkages between the school and parents and community stakeholders. Sharing a good deal of space with the concepts of localism, direct democracy, and lay control, choice is designed to open up both the demand and supply side of markets (Murphy, 2012).

7.1.3 Learning and Teaching

From the onset of the industrial revolution, education in the United States has been largely defined by a behavioral psychological model of learning—a model that fits nicely with the bureaucratic system of school organization. This viewpoint in turn nurtured the development of the factory and medical models of instruction that have dominated schooling throughout the twentieth century. Under these two models, the belief that the role of schooling is to sort students into the able and less able—those who would work with their heads and those who would work with their hands—became deeply embedded into the fabric of schooling.

A shift in the operate model of learning is a fundamental dynamic of the struggle to turn around schools. Of real significance, if rarely noted, is the fact that this new model reinforces the democratic tenets embedded in turnaround views of governance and administration discussed above. The behavioral psychological model that highlights the innate capacity of the learner is replaced by cognitive or constructivist psychology and newer sociological perspectives on learning. Under this approach to learning, which is at the heart of real turnaround efforts, schools that historically have been n the business of promoting student adaptation to the existing social order are being transformed to ensure equality of opportunity for all learner.

The emerging redefinition of teaching means that teachers, historically organized to carry out instructional designs and the implement curricular materials developed from afar, begin to exercise considerably more control over their profession and the routines of the workplace. Analysts see this

reorganization playing out in a variety of ways at the school level. At the most fundamental level, teachers have a much more active voice in developing the goals and purposes of schooling—goals that act to delimit or expand the conception of teaching itself. They also have a good deal more to say about the curricular structures and pedagogical approaches employed in their schools. Finally, teachers demonstrate more control over the supporting ingredients of schooling—such as budgets, personnel, and administration—that affect the way they carry out their responsibilities.

Advocates also see teaching becoming a more collegial activity. Isolation, so deeply ingrained in the structure and culture of the profession, gives way to more collaborative efforts among teachers. At the macro level, teachers are redefining their roles to include collaborative management of the profession, especially providing direction for professional standards. At a more micro level, new organizational structures are being created to allow teachers to plan and teach together and to make important decisions about the nature of their roles. A culture that recognizes the importance of collaborative efforts at professional development also characterizes teacher role redesign in turnaround schools.

7.2 Insights from Failed Turnarounds

We close with lessons that we learned by studying turnaround over the last 15 years. Some lessons were quite visible. Others became visible by examining missing material, material that if present would have helped prevent failure.

- Students need to be the center of gravity
- Things work best when customers (parents) are active supporters
- Decisions should be based on evidence
- Schooling is a moral enterprise
- Positivism trumps negativism
- Collective community works better than individual cells
- Failure is the norm
- Structures do not predict performance
- Specific interventions are less critical than the process
- Turnarounds are never permanent
- Getting turnaround right is hard work
- Turnaround should anchor on “academic press” and “care”
- There is no universal panacea
- Leadership is essential

- District and state support is essential
- Turnaround is uneven in implementation and unpredictable in process
- Use test results appropriately
- A comprehensive set of strategies seems wise
- Turnaround work is really costly
- Capacity building is essential
- Relationship building is critical
- Evidence free strategies are problematic
- Doing turnaround right is hard to do
- Ongoing assessment is essential
- Help people be successful before deciding that they are not capable
- Watch for unintended consequences
- Context is key
- Teachers must believe in the work being undertaken
- Address both internal and external problems and issues
- Telling professionals what to do does not work particularly well
- Be proactive in establishing goals
- Develop goals that are a stretch but attainable
- Address problems when things do not operate as expected
- Share leadership
- Focus on the quality of instruction

7.3 Lessons for Moving Forward

1. Turnarounds can work, although success is not guaranteed. Of the turnaround initiatives, no one intervention appears to be significantly more successful than others. Such interventions are difficult to sustain, especially stronger ones that seem to be more difficult to manage as well as more costly.
2. Since single turnaround interventions do not always succeed, mixing and matching to develop a comprehensive approach seems promising. A comprehensive approach to turnaround failing schools for contextualized packages that are able to address specific concerns for a given school.
3. Successful turnaround schools almost always have good, if not exceptional, principals. As a common strand across successful school turnarounds, leadership is crucial. The principal typically sets the turnaround agenda while leading teachers, involving the community, and building general capacity.
4. Capacity building appears to be an imperative component of turning around failing schools. Developing relationships is integral in creating a positive environment in which to learn and in establishing a shared vision. Cooperation and human development are two elements of capacity building that failing schools often lack but need to move forward.

5. Teachers must believe in the turnaround interventions being implemented. Their opinions should be weighed when deciding upon turnaround strategies, especially considering their role in implementing the plans. When teachers do not buy in to the turnaround intervention(s), failing schools do not improve. Therefore, teachers should be seen as partners.
6. Connecting with parents is another important aspect of school turnaround. Since many of the students in failing schools face disruptive factors to learning outside of school, turnaround initiatives should engage parents on some level.
7. Failing schools need ample fiscal resources to turn around. Some failing schools lack these resources at the outset, while some others receive significant financial support immediately after being deemed failing. However, there are cases where the additional financial resources have ended too soon for the schools to completely implement their interventions fully.
8. In their attempts to turn around, failing schools should consistently assess themselves. State and federal measures do not address some aspects of failure. Self-analysis enables failing schools to monitor successes as well as focus on areas that continue to lag.

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