

How to Turn Schools Around

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Educational reformers are abuzz over school “turnarounds,” a simple idea with undeniable appeal. Turnarounds offer the opportunity to take familiar educational institutions and improve them through coaching, mentoring, capacity building, best practices, and other existing tools.



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Today, in the No Child Left Behind era, the notion that turnarounds constitute a new, better way to solve the problems facing America’s schools is gaining immense popularity among reformers of all stripes. The reason? Unlike most reform efforts, which focus on incremental improvement, turnarounds seek to take schools from bad to great within a short period.

In 2005–06, about 600 schools—about 90 percent in large urban districts—officially began turnaround programs. Nearly 2,000 schools were predicted to be in turnaround modes in 2007–08 and more than 3,200 in 2008–09, according to a 2007 report from the Mass Insight Education and Research Institute in Boston.

Scholars and practitioners are seeking to answer this demand—and, in some cases, helping to fuel expectations. The University of Virginia’s Curry School of Education has developed an academic and cocurricular program designed to instruct experts charged with turning around consistently low-performing schools. Run jointly with the university’s Darden School of Business, the program takes hybrid candidates from inside and outside education and equips “turnaround specialists” to tackle some of the state’s toughest schools.

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The Chicago International Charter School, which operates 11 campuses, has launched ChicagoRise, saying that specialized teaching staffs and dynamic management practices are essential to improving chronically low-performing public schools in the nation’s third-largest district. The Louisiana School Turnaround Specialist Program seeks to recruit, assemble, and groom leaders to turn around failing campuses. In New York, the Rensselaerville Institute’s School Turnaround contracts out turnaround experts and offers money-back guarantees

for partner schools that fail to reach achievement goals.

Given their good intentions, it is hard not to root for these reformers and shower them with support and resources. Yet while turnarounds are doubtlessly an appealing idea, making them work is far more complicated.

Turnarounds in Business

The phrase “turnaround” may be relatively new to education, but the practice has been around for decades in other sectors. Its track record suggests a need for tempered claims and steely-eyed realism. Even in the business world, where management enjoys many more degrees of freedom and where competition can lend a sense of profound urgency, turnarounds are an iffy proposition.

Today, much of what experts know about turnarounds comes from private sector experience, where two dominant approaches to organizational reform—Total Quality Management (TQM) and Business Process Reengineering (BPR)—have prevailed for decades.

First introduced by Japanese firms in 1951, TQM is a turnaround strategy that emphasizes carrying out all jobs and practices correctly the first time. It treats workers as integral parts of a line and seeks to remove waste at every stage of the production process. Dishearteningly, research suggests that TQM has been largely ineffective at spurring successful corporate transformation.

BPR, developed in 1990 by Michael Hammer and James Champy, takes a slightly more aggressive tack. It differs from TQM in that it concentrates on tearing down and rebuilding the business process as a whole, rather than tweaking its functional tasks. BPR typically involves radical change or, to use Hammer’s colorful language, “taking an axe and a machine gun to your existing organization.”

Evidence suggests, on the whole, that BPR has fared about the same as TQM in spurring organizational improvement, with success rates of 25 to 30 percent.

Expanding on such findings, Barry Staw and Lisa Epstein of the University of California–Berkeley examined the outcomes of popular management techniques instituted at 100 of the largest U.S. corporations. Using informational reports on quality, empowerment, teams, and the implementation of TQM programs, they found that companies undergoing turnaround initiatives were perceived to be more innovative but showed no evidence of boosting economic performance. The researchers suggest these results provide grounds for taking a more skeptical stance toward turnarounds.

Four Key Lessons

All of this is not cause for undue gloom—just for sensible reassessment. Turnarounds can be a valuable tool for improving underperforming schools. However, the hope that we can systematically turn around all troubled schools—or even a majority of them—is at odds with much of what we know from private sector efforts.

This is why it makes sense to look outside education to learn how to improve the odds of staging a successful turnaround. In a comprehensive search of business and management literature from 2000 to the present, we identified roughly a dozen articles that provided empirical analysis of major turnaround initiatives—namely, TQM and BPR. Our research suggests that experiences in the private sector offer four key lessons for making turnarounds work:

- Staging a successful turnaround entails setting high expectations and then being flexible with regard to how principals, teachers, and staff go about meeting them. Successful turnarounds are most likely where districts unravel bureaucratic constraints and permit educators great freedom in solving problems. This includes the ability to hold employees accountable within an accelerated time frame and allocate resources swiftly and optimally with few external restrictions.
- Reformers should not hesitate to change principals and school leaders to jump-start the turnaround process. Some researchers have estimated that leadership disparities may explain almost a quarter of differences in student performance accounted for by schools. In a turnaround situation, despite the K-12 preference for professional development rather than termination, new leadership can yield both symbolic and substantive benefits. It also can convey a commitment to wholesale change and provide a leader with the skill set appropriate to the particular challenges at hand.
- Reformers need to view school turnarounds as an all-or-nothing proposition to avoid the pitfalls caused by unclear or conflicting objectives. To achieve success, they must be willing to invest the time and resources required to implement comprehensive measures. Turnarounds are not a time to cherry-pick the more popular or painless components of reform or pursue them incrementally. Unless leaders, staff, and personnel are deeply and irrevocably committed to making a turnaround work, school reform efforts are likely to fail.

“Schools must create a culture in which employees have two options: We either turn it around or we lose our jobs,” says John Lock, CEO of the Charter School Growth Fund and a former private investor and manager in turnarounds, venture capital, and leveraged buyouts. “Sometimes, burning the employee manual, making everyone reapply for their jobs, and then axing those structures that created the problem is the only way to convey that you’re serious about turning the organization around.”

- Finally, once the decision is made to go forward with a turnaround, reformers should avoid forcing change on the school through organization-wide, top-down mandates. Instead, they should establish high goals for individual teachers and staff, while giving them the tools and flexibility they need to be successful. Based on our research, turnarounds require each individual employee to commit to their role. Teachers and staff cannot be content merely to take marching orders from administrators, but must be ready, willing, and trained to drive the educational innovations that make a

turnaround possible.

Where to Go from Here

Nearly 11,000 schools are deemed in need of improvement under No Child Left Behind, and many states and districts need expert assistance to fix their troubled schools. Most lack such skill capacity.

This is not just an education problem, of course. Yet we know of no sector—public or private—in which thousands of entities are each capable of assembling the know-how, talent, and organizational machinery to turn around troubled operations. Instead, such capabilities tend to be concentrated in a handful of organizations such as turnaround specialists and niche consultants.

If revitalizing low-performing schools is to occur with any consistency, we need to develop effective operators who can contract with multiple districts or states to provide the oversight, leadership, knowledge, and personnel to drive restructuring. Operating on that scale will permit specialization and cooperation, while allowing providers to build deep expertise.

Ultimately, whether it is in schools or private firms, a successful turnaround requires transforming culture, expectations, and routines. That may not always be possible in organizations burdened by anachronistic contract provisions, rickety external support, and years of accrued administrative incompetence.

“In short, while turnarounds are difficult in the private sector, they may be even more challenging in schools,” Bryan Hassel, co-director of Public Impact, argues in his 2005 book, *Turnarounds with New Leaders and Staff*. “[No] factors are complete barriers to success, but they indicate a high bar for the district and school leaders effecting turnarounds.”

In this light, sometimes the best bet is allowing a failing concern to go dark. This may require shutting down a school, moving out administrators, faculty, and curricula, and “vacuum-sealing” it before allowing an accomplished operator to start fresh. Meanwhile, new organizations—freed from a rigid mentality about how things should be done—can crop up, more easily take advantage of new opportunities, and more nimbly tackle looming challenges.

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