

Leadership Development

A Systems Approach

What kind of leader does it take to turn around a persistently low-performing school?

In spite of being asked with increasing urgency in education policy circles, the question itself may suggest the wrong focus: An individual leader can start the transformation process, but it takes a system to ensure that necessary changes are sustainable.

“Turnaround isn’t about one charismatic leader who comes in and saves the school,” says Marie Mancuso, Associate Director of the Southwest Comprehensive Center (SWCC) at WestEd. “The district has to be wholly engaged and has to take ownership of its struggling schools.”

Building systems of support for school transformation is the focus of a unique leadership development program at the University of Virginia, which is expanding its mission in partnership with WestEd’s SWCC. Combining the talents and resources of the university’s respected Curry School of Education and the Darden School of Business, the program enlists state, district, and school leaders in the kind of executive education that traditionally has prepared business leaders to manage large corporations.

The School Turnaround Specialist Program places educators in boot-camp intensive sessions where the mind, rather than the body, gets conditioned. Participants analyze and apply case studies and work with school and school district teams to design 90-day action plans targeting urgent problems. After experts visit their schools, they revise their strategies and engage in follow-up training.


Ripe for Innovation

“We see school turnaround as an area ripe for innovation,” says LeAnn Buntrock, Executive Director of the School Turnaround Specialist Program. “Underperforming schools and districts have a mandate to get better. It can’t be about tweaking or manipulating the status quo. We tell people: ‘You’ve got a real chance to do something different. Grab that opportunity and leverage it.’”

After helping more than 95 schools in eight states since 2004, the School Turnaround Specialist Program seems to have found a formula for success. On average, schools completing two-plus years of the program have shown gains of 36 percent in reading proficiency and 46 percent in math proficiency after their leaders complete the program.

Now, through a partnership with WestEd, the program is poised to extend its influence. Working for the first time with a multistate collaborative, the university program aims to develop the capacity of schools, school districts, and states to sustain improvements in leadership and student achievement.

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"It's a mutual benefit to both of us," Buntrock says of the partnership with WestEd. "We're learning, too, because they have a lot of experience with professional development and working with state leaders."

With funding from the U.S. Department of Education, WestEd's SWCC was established in 2005 to help state education agencies in Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, Nevada, and Utah implement the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act. In 2011, when schools at the bottom of the performance scale were required to make drastic changes in staffing, curriculum, and leadership, state leaders asked the SWCC for help preparing principals for the new roles.

"The state chiefs said, 'We don't have a pipeline of people to do this,'" says Paul Koehler, Director of the SWCC. "This is a specialty and not for the faint of heart."

While working with state leaders to identify needs of school transformation principals, Koehler kept hearing about the University of Virginia program and discovered that it addressed the group's goals. Originally set up to assist principals in Virginia, the School Turnaround Specialist Program received a \$3-million grant from Microsoft to extend the training to people outside the state. From the SWCC, 26 principals, 19 district administrators, and 8 state-level leaders started training in the summer of 2011. Another group of 32 principals, 22 district administrators, and 10 state-level leaders started in the summer of 2012.


"State leaders want the program expanded. They want more slots," Koehler says. "The participants have told us they'd never been involved in leadership training as good as this one."

Key Elements of Leadership Development Success

Several factors distinguish the program from other school leadership development models. First, the University of Virginia program focuses on systemic change. It does this by building understanding of turnaround work at all levels, including state, district, and school; by having state leaders participate in trainings alongside district and school leaders; and by requiring districts to commit to establishing the infrastructure, support, and accountability measures necessary for implementing bold and sustainable turnaround initiatives. District representatives must go through an individualized program to find out what's working and what's not; and they participate in all aspects of the program with principals and school leaders.

Second, a district-readiness assessment is conducted to determine whether this is the right program for interested districts (i.e., do they have the willingness and capacity to initiate and support bold change). Once district leaders and the Darden/Curry Partnership mutually agree to work together, potential turnaround principals participate in a competency-based assessment that correlates with what research has shown to be essential attributes of effective school turnaround leaders. Not everyone who is interested in participating makes the cut. Because the program focuses on building capacity, school districts learn how to use the same assessment system to hire principals in the future.

The assumption is that not every good administrator has the expertise and disposition for what many consider the toughest job in education. "You might have a principal who's very nice and caring and could be effective in a high-achievement school where most kids come ready to learn," says Koehler. "That principal may not have the specialized skill levels to go into low-performing schools."



And third, the two-year program involves ongoing training, accountability, and support. Professors expect high-level thinking, participation, and learning that is then applied and evaluated. Typically, professional development for school leaders includes workshops at conferences or graduate courses in college—short-term sessions that do not offer on-the-job feedback.

Consistent with its system focus and ongoing support, the University of Virginia program visits school districts before they are accepted and throughout the program to determine whether they are willing to establish the infrastructure, conditions, support, and accountability measures to effect sustainable change efforts. This includes removing barriers that can directly or unintentionally impede principals' progress.

In Arizona's Whiteriver School District, for example, Superintendent Jeff Fuller says he learned that principals were overburdened with paperwork. In some cases, they were being asked to submit the same information about teacher qualifications or other categories every time a state or federal compliance form required it. Fuller spearheaded the creation of an online tracking system that is being developed for data collection, maintenance work orders, and other administrative functions that once bedeviled principals.

"We're trying to reduce the load on principals—an objective easier said than done," Fuller explains. "The shift was to go from compliance to 'I want principals focused on what's happening in classrooms.'"

But more support carries the expectation of better results. Fuller says the five schools in Whiteriver, which serves the Fort Apache Indian reservation, once had inconsistent curricula and instruction and too much tolerance for failure. Participating in the School Turnaround Specialist Program showed school and district leaders not only that they had to get better, but how.


Whiteriver educators have altered school schedules and changed how they assess students and use diagnostic information. Every school now has a room dedicated to tracking achievement data, and teachers meet weekly to discuss individual students—"where they are, whether they're moving up or down, and what we're doing about it," Fuller says. "This week I am telling our elementary schools we're going to have transportation for students involved in after-school tutoring, and we have to figure out how to do that." Participating in the University of Virginia program showed everyone how to move from talking about problems to solving them.

Scaling Up

Fuller, who calls the School Turnaround Specialist Program training "the most meaningful, best thing we've ever done," says he is trying to figure out how to sustain the lessons learned.

Koehler and Buntrock have the same goal, which is why they've begun shaping a strategy to help the SWCC spread the turnaround leadership practices throughout the states served by the center. The regional collaborative will seek to align leadership training and develop a common understanding of what it takes to transform low-performing schools. As they learn how to scale up the model, they will share that knowledge with other states and school districts.

They'd also like to extend the principles to help all schools improve, not just those at the bottom. "Superintendents know that if their schools are going to be better, they have to have better leaders," says Koehler. "And they need new approaches to school leadership training." Marie Mancuso



says districts are considering providing incentives to principals who have graduated from the University of Virginia program to mentor and coach other leaders.

“A lot of times districts mean well, but in education we are not really used to thinking about the system and everyone being in it together,” Buntrock says. “If you start thinking about systems, and you have structures and a culture in place to help and hold people accountable, then you’re not so dependent on a ‘hero’ principal. When he or she moves on, there’s less likelihood that the school will go back in decline.”

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