Lessons Learned

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Choosing a School Turnaround Provider

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Droves of school turnaround providers are chasing the massive federal infusion of funds flowing into failing schools. They arrive armed with glossy materials, impressive sounding claims, and, often, citing their prior relationships or experiences with your school to support their promises of great service and impressive outcomes. But, are their claims supported by evidence of effectiveness and quality?

Providers are coming under increasing scrutiny by the media and Congress focused on the numbers of ill-prepared, inexperienced, and unequipped organizations whose services could do more harm than good in struggling schools. Administrators, school staff, parents, students, and the community deserve to know that when they choose an external turnaround provider they will get the support that they need.

The process of selecting a school turnaround provider can seem overwhelming, with so many choices and so little time and information. External and internal pressure to make the selection as quickly as possible can lead to hurried decisions with long-term, costly consequences—both lost dollars for districts and lost opportunities for students. The good news is that there are concrete, clearly defined steps to take that can lead you to the best provider for your local context.

This issue of *Lessons Learned* distills our school improvement experience from conducting school turnaround reviews to publishing the Catalog of School Reform Models for many years. The lessons also draw on the work of other experts during the past two decades to present a primer on choosing a school turnaround provider based on evidence and sound operating principles, not on hype and haste.

Lesson # 1 The right provider requires the right match.

There is no "best provider," only a best match. To ensure you get the right match, it is essential that you know what you need. Create a selection team that is representative of your school improvement team and key stakeholders. Conduct a thorough needs assessment and identify improvement goals before you begin the selection process. Review the prospective providers' materials, drawing up a list of questions to use to reach a "short list" of providers to interview. Cut past slogans and general statements, such as, "All children need to read fluently by the time they enter middle school," to ask *how* the provider meets a specific, targeted goal. Also, determine if your goals match those of the provider. Do your philosophies mesh, or does it look like you will struggle to agree with each other?

When interviewing providers, ask carefully crafted questions and listen to the answers with your team. Use uniform, prepared rating sheets so you can compare the results at the conclusion of the interview process and the review of documents demonstrating qualifications.

Stay focused on the match between the provider, your needs and goals, and the provider's experience and evidence of success with similar schools and districts. Ask questions such as:

- What experience have you had with districts and schools of this size and with these demographics?
- How do your services and qualifications match our needs and goals?
- What is your "theory of action" (how your services help positive change happen) and what changes

Lessons Learned About School Turnaround Providers

1. The right provider requires the right match.
2. Base your choice on evidence, not relationships.
3. Research-based is not research-proven.
4. Seeing is believing.
5. Make sure your provider is in it for the long haul.

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Four Models of School Turnaround

These four models of school turnaround, identified by the U.S. Department of Education, are the choices for schools in corrective action.

1. **Turnaround Model**
   The principal and at least 50 percent of the school's staff are replaced, among other actions, and a new governance structure and new/revised instructional program is implemented
2. **Transformation Model**
   Districts address four areas:
   - Developing teacher and principal effectiveness, including replacing the principal
   - Implementing comprehensive instructional reform strategies
   - Extending learning and teacher planning time along with creating community-oriented schools
   - Providing operational flexibility and sustained support
3. **Restart Model**
   Failing schools are closed and reopened under the management of a charter school operator, charter management organization, or an educational management organization
4. **Closure Model**
   The district closes a failing school and enrolls its students in other high-achieving schools in the district

For more information about school turnaround and the School Improvement Grants, consult our list of resources (p. 4) or the U.S. Department of Education's web page on School Improvement Grants [http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/].

- could we expect to see once you begin working with us?
- What are your beliefs, goals, and process?
- How long do you think it will take before we begin to see results?
- How do you troubleshoot?
- What are examples of turnaround where you were the provider that are similar to our situation?
- What did you learn from these experiences?

Ask the school improvement provider to walk you through their process. You will need to be fully versed in their services, from start to end, with very specific information in answer to all of your questions. Your questions should include:

- How many staff does your process require?
- How often will you be on-site?
- How do you propose to work with our staff?

Make sure you are philosophically aligned with the provider and that the provider will help you to build central office, community, and school-level buy-in for the hard work ahead. This is the time to find out if you differ on key points, not partway into the turnaround process. Also, gauge what premium is placed on teamwork. Turning around a low-performing school must be done by a team, not a collection of lone rangers with different philosophies. Anticipating barriers and troubleshooting problems is a critical part of the process from the outset, and a solid provider will be able to tell you past scenarios and examples of successful resolutions to problems encountered.

To ensure that the provider does not neglect your stakeholders, include them in your questions: What practices does the provider use to build buy-in from the central office, community, and school? Can the provider produce a detailed work plan that will become the foundation of your contract? What mutually agreed-upon timeline and benchmarks can you set for the work? Will you use a third-party evaluator to measure fidelity of implementation? What data will be collected to track progress and make midcourse corrections?

Lesson # 2 Base your choice on evidence, not relationships.

Your best friends are not your best improvement partners, and familiarity does not ensure excellence. Popular wisdom often claims the opposite. Many school personnel, as well as providers, believe that relationships are the key to success and emphatically state this belief. While it is never productive to be adversaries, too much familiarity can actually interfere with success. Friendship can ruin the turnaround process if friends shield friends from bad news, soften discouraging outcomes, make promises that can't be kept, cherry-pick data, and work harder on the relationship than on the evidence of what must be done to turn around the school.

Lesson # 3 Research-based is not research-proven.

Most providers will tell you that their services are "research-based." This is misleading. Almost every program is based on some evidence regarding what works in schools. But there is also confusion about what "research-proven" means. Consider a simple analogy. Every airplane that a manufacturer rolls out of a hangar as a prototype is research-based in that it has all of the data and research about aerodynamics and other topics incorporated into its design. However, until it flies successfully, repeatedly, and in various conditions for its designated purposes, it is not research-proven.

School improvement, like flight, is a complex process requiring testing and verification of effectiveness before any passenger should be asked to "hop on board."

Above all, look for demonstrated evidence of effectiveness under the conditions in which your school finds itself. Ideally, you will find research on the provider's approach that used large, multiyear, well-controlled studies (such as randomized trials or quasi-experimental designs) to measure success. Carefully conceived data analysis or case studies are also useful. Yet another helpful type of evidence is a synthesis of research in which a third-party researcher examines a number of studies of programs, ranking them by the quantity and quality of research and the strength of outcomes. There are also reports issued by blue-ribbon panels and commissions that can be helpful since they review a broad array of material and summarize professional wisdom in the field.

Avoid ideology, advocacy, and unsubstantiated claims. There is a large amount of literature that is "research" in appearance only. This research may be based on personal opinion or consist of advocacy—advancing a particular cause or point of view with biased or limited information. It is usually possible to find some support for a particular point of view, cite it, and call it research. Always seek evidence to support an assertion. If a provider has a claim of success that sounds too good to be true, it probably is. As a purchaser of services, you have the right to demand the evidence behind any claim.

Lesson # 4 Seeing is believing.

Nothing is quite as powerful as seeing the provider in action, in a setting similar to yours. Ask the provider for a full list of sites with contact information. School improvement expert Sam Stringfield recommends calling five schools from the list at random to ask them about their experiences. Calling sites at random ensures you are not contacting only the provider's most successful "showcase" sites. Narrow the five to two to three sites, taking pains to find sites similar to your own. Visit the two to three sites (virtually or in person) to conduct an inquiry. Interview a variety of staff who work with the provider to ensure you have different viewpoints. Go to your site visits with a well-prepared agenda and a coordinated team for the visit.

Ask staff at the site their view of working with the provider. Questions such as these are helpful:

- How many contacts per week do you have with a representative of the provider? How much continuity do you have with the provider's personnel?
- What is the substance of your contacts?
- Are your goals and responsibilities aligned with the turnaround process?
- Is your work plan clearly articulated and realistic? Do you know your role in the entire turnaround plan?
- How are you held accountable for outcomes?
- How does the provider work with staff to resolve problems?
- What would you change about the way the provider works with your school?
- How do you function as a team member with the provider's personnel?

Lesson # 5 Make sure your provider is in it for the long haul.

Turning around a failing school is a massive commitment of resources and expertise. Providers must be able to show a track record of long-term delivery of effective services. As well, they must demonstrate the financial and organizational capacity of a successful business. Working with a provider who is unskilled or inept with management and fiscal practices is a fast track to failure somewhere during the turnaround process.

Schools and LEAs have maximum leverage with providers at the contracting phase, so use the contract as a vehicle to purchase the services you need. This is the time to ensure that you will get what you must have to move forward. Do not rush this stage of the process; nail down the details. If you experience resistance from a provider at this phase you may wish to rethink your options.

Questions for the Prospective Provider

1. What data can you show that relate directly to the outcomes of your work?
2. How rigorously, if at all, do you evaluate your process?
3. What internal checks do you use to ensure you are on course in providing services?
4. At what point do you make internal corrections so that you meet your benchmarks?
5. How do you communicate a lack of progress toward your goals or those for the school?
6. What research and data do you rely on to guide your process?

Resources

American Institutes for Research, Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center. (2006). *Seeing improvement: A guide to visiting schools that use effective whole school improvement models and promising practices.* Retrieved from www.csrq.org/documents/SeeingImprovement81606_FINAL.pdf

Center on Innovation & Improvement. (n.d.). *Selecting the intervention model and partners/providers for a low-achieving school: A decision-making and planning tool for the local education agency* [Word document]. Retrieved from www.centerii.org/leamodel/

Datnow, A., & Stringfield, S. (2000). Working together for reliable school reform. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 5*(1/2), 183–204. Available by subscription and at libraries.

Fleischman, S. (2006). Moving to evidence-based professional practice. *Educational Leadership, 63*(6), 87–90. Retrieved from www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/mar06/vol63/num06/Moving_to_Evidence-Based_Professional_Practice.aspx

Padgette, H.C., & Sherman, R.H. (2006). *Choosing an education contractor: A guide to assessing financial and organizational capacity.* Retrieved from American Institutes for Research, Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center website: www.csrq.org/documents/CSRQConsumerGuide08-01-06.pdf

Stringfield, S. (1998). Choosing success. *American Educator, 22*(3), 1–5. Retrieved from www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/fall1998/ChoosingSuccess.pdf

You may find this edition of Lessons Learned *along with these resources on Education Northwest's web page [educationnorthwest.org] by typing "Lessons Learned" into the search box.*

Think through how the key personnel will be deployed. Get guarantees on who will manage the process and deliver the services. All else being equal, quality of personnel may steer you to select one provider over another. Simultaneously get time commitments for each of these individuals equal to their delineated tasks.

At the point of contract, discuss and specify in the document how you will resolve issues that arise. Make sure you have an articulated plan of action, a time line, and specified benchmarks. Be as specific as possible. Discuss how you will resolve issues that arise and specify a resolution process in the contract.

A common problem in school improvement is the blurring of roles and responsibilities, leading to frustration and conflict. To the extent possible, articulate roles and responsibilities in the contract to fall back on once the process is underway. This is particularly critical for any type of oversight, governance, or community involvement. For example, if you are going to include a team of stakeholders in the turnaround process, stipulate to that in your contract and clarify its role so that there will not be misunderstandings at a later point.

Summary

The turnaround process is a difficult one. The chances of its success are much greater if a well-qualified provider, who understands your school and its improvement needs, is brought in as a partner in the process. Choosing a provider is a key decision, with potentially life-altering consequences for students. Choose wisely.

Education Northwest offers school improvement services that focus on building the capacity of school and district staff to turn around low-performing schools; transform high schools into more personalized learning communities; and implement collaborative, ongoing professional development.

The authors of this Lessons Learned *—Anne Turnbaugh Lockwood and Steve Fleischman—have several decades of experience working with school and district personnel on making evidence-based program adoption decisions. For more information on our school turnaround services, contact Deborah Davis at Deborah.Davis@educationnorthwest.org or 503.275.9644.*

Founded in 1966 as Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Education Northwest works with schools, districts, and communities on comprehensive, research-based solutions to the challenges they face. Four priorities frame our work: supporting educators; strengthening schools and districts; engaging families and communities; and conducting research, evaluation, and assessment. Watch for additional issues of Lessons Learned, a series that distills our experience and research, in the Resources section of educationnorthwest.org.

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