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# LEARNING ABOUT LEADERSHIP FROM SCHOOL TURNAROUND EFFORTS IN ONTARIO

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KENNETH LEITHWOOD AND TIU STRAUSS

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### Foreword

*Turnaround Schools and the Leadership They Require* was commissioned by the Canadian Education Association (CEA) in 2006. The research, conducted by Kenneth Leithwood and Tiu Strauss, was a two-year study of Ontario schools identified as in need of “turnaround,” meaning that a significant improvement in school achievement was required. The study examined the impact of leadership on school improvement. We believe that this report will be of value to all who strive to understand the urgency and actions required to both increase and sustain levels of achievement in schools that have been unable to meet emerging outcome standards.

Young people are constructing their identities as learners in a pluralistic society of great complexity; and more than ever, their learning is recognized as a complex social process. An enduring challenge within our school systems, and in Canadian society at large, has been our failure to adequately meet the needs of all students, especially those from the most vulnerable groups in society. The pressure emanating from this failure generates turnaround efforts of many kinds and intensities. In this study of school turnaround efforts in Ontario, the point is made that the turnaround concept itself prompts schools to confront failure and to accept responsibility for “making things right.” The study focuses on the critical role of school leadership in beginning school improvement initiatives which can ultimately, and ideally, lead to a significant increase in student performance.

Schools across the country are making efforts to ensure that they are meeting the needs of *all* students to ensure successful outcomes for *all* young people. By uncovering the processes which are evident in schools trying to increase their students’ academic performance, we begin to explore new ways of thinking about public education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Successful leadership practices certainly prompt change on the part of teachers and – as CEA is exploring in the *What did you do in school today?* initiative (<http://www.cea-ace.ca/res.cfm?sub-section=pro&page=wdy>) – improving the educational experience of students requires the active engagement of their teachers.

## Background

The idea that underperforming schools can and should be “turned around” inserts a level of urgency, energy, and hopefulness into a longstanding professional conversation dominated until recently by the much more guarded language of “school improvement.” The turnaround concept prods us to confront failure head on and to accept responsibility for “making things right” – and not at some vague time in the distant future, but soon. This concept is also, in our view, the practical face of efforts to achieve.

There is, of course, a significant strand of theory and research about turning around underperforming organizations. Unfortunately, very little of it speaks to the unique mission and character of schools.<sup>1</sup> This literature is unambiguous, however, in its claim that leadership is the pivotal explanation for turnaround success. So efforts to better understand the nature of successful school turnaround processes, this suggests, would do well to begin with a focus on successful school turnaround leadership.

The province of Ontario provided an especially productive context for this research. Through its newly established *Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat*, the provincial government had, for example: established clear and ambitious targets for province-wide student achievement; poured significant new resources into districts and schools to help meet those targets; created teams of people with impressive expertise to work directly with underperforming schools; and made special funds available to schools to use for professional development and other purposes. Underperforming elementary schools could choose to be part of the province's Turnaround Teams Project, making them eligible for these additional resources and external sources of assistance. The elementary schools in the first phase of our study were chosen from the cohort of schools in the Turnaround Teams Project.

## Our Approach to the Study

The study was guided by a staged conception of the school turnaround process within which successful leadership practices are enacted in forms uniquely suited to the turnaround context. These practices give rise to a set of school improvement initiatives which, if successful, prompt change on the part of teachers which leads to increased student performance. In line with considerable evidence, especially from the non-school sector, three turnaround stages were identified: Declining Performance; Crisis Stabilization; and Sustaining and Improving Performance. Within each of these stages, successful leadership was assumed to include a set of “core” leadership practices found to be successful across many locations, sectors, and conditions.<sup>2</sup> Depending on the data source, from 14 to 19 specific leadership practices were located within four broad dimensions or categories including: direction setting; developing people; redesigning the organization; and managing the instructional program. While considerable evidence suggests that these practices are used by successful leaders in a wide array of contexts, we also assumed that their enactment would change in ways highly sensitive to the contexts in which leaders found themselves. Each of the three stages of school turnaround would provide a unique context calling for different forms of enactment.

The study was carried out in two stages. During the first stage, interview data were collected in four elementary and four secondary schools (a total of 73 individual interviews, as well as eight parent focus groups and eight student focus groups). The schools were selected as successful turnarounds based on their performance over three years on Ontario's Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) achievement tests in Grades 3 and 6, as well as the province's Grade 10 literacy test. During the second stage, surveys were sent to a total of 472 teachers and 36 administrators within 11 elementary schools and three secondary schools. Of these 14

schools, EQAO data were used to identify nine schools which met our criteria for being turnarounds, and five schools which were “clearly improving” from a starting point slightly below the district average to above the average within three or four years. Synthesizing the evidence from both stages of the research produced eight key findings about successful turnaround leadership.

### **1. Low-Performing Schools Require Effective Leadership to Turn Around**

This is no surprise. Evidence mostly from non-school organizations portrays leadership as the major factor accounting for successful turnarounds. Results of this study are consistent with the importance attributed to leadership in school turnaround contexts, as well. None of the schools we studied could reasonably have been expected to significantly improve their students' achievement in the absence of effective leadership. All survey measures of leadership used in the study were significantly and strongly correlated with schools' improvement initiatives and teacher changes.

### **2. The “Core” Leadership Practices Encompass Most of What is Required to Successfully Lead a School Turnaround**

Our study of turnaround leadership was framed by a four-dimensional conception of successful or core leadership practices – direction setting; developing people; redesigning the organization; and managing the instructional program. Included within these four broad dimensions are several more specific leadership acts or behaviours. We refer to these dimensions and behaviours together, as “core” leadership practices. One of our hypotheses was that these practices would encompass almost all of what leaders do in most contexts, including turning around low-performing schools.

Both the qualitative and quantitative evidence provided by the study confirm this hypothesis. In particular, when the core leadership practices were used to code the interview data about leadership from teachers, administrators, and parents, virtually no other practices were identified. The teacher survey asked respondents to rate the value of each of the core leadership practices, as experienced in their schools, to their schools' turnaround efforts. Moderately positive values were awarded to all four categories of practices, with “direction setting” capturing the highest ratings, and “developing people” the lowest (an apparent contradiction to other findings about the importance of professional development). Among the specific leadership acts or behaviours rated as most valuable by respondents, three stand out: providing resources; building a learning community or collaborative culture in the school; and ensuring adequate amounts and types of professional development.

### **3. The Core Leadership Practices Hold Approximately the Same Value for Schools Improving from an Acceptable Level of Performance as They Hold for Turnaround Schools**

This claim emerges from a comparison of survey responses from teachers in turnaround and improving schools. There was very little difference between the responses of these two groups of teachers to questions about the value of the core leadership practices to their schools' efforts to improve student learning. This was the case for the following results: the ratings of value attached to each of the four categories of leadership practices; the ranking of importance attached to the four categories; and the specific leadership practices rated as being of greatest value to the schools' improvement efforts.

#### **4. Changes in School Turnaround Processes are Accompanied by Changes in How Core Leadership Practices are Enacted**

Although we hypothesized that the core leadership practices capture what successful leaders do in almost all contexts, we also hypothesized that the enactment of those practices is quite sensitive to context. In the case of turning around a school, each of the three turnaround stages presents a different context, potentially calling for different forms of leadership enactment. Results of this study support this hypothesis and provide a relatively detailed picture of how leadership enactments change as the stage of school turnaround changes.

***Direction setting.*** These functions evolved quite noticeably during the turnaround stages, according to our evidence. At the Declining Performance stage, little explicit attention was paid to this category of practices. While some leaders had a sense of direction themselves, it was unlikely to be shared with staff, who were thus left to forge their own directions. The Crisis Stabilization stage began with a government-imposed goal for all schools not performing well, and goal setting at the school level related to that provincial goal became a prominent leadership function. Principals, and department heads at the secondary level, articulated their visions to staff. Even though there was considerable urgency to improve student performance in the eight case schools, goal setting was a shared activity and successful leaders maintained the need for the significant involvement of their staff. High performance expectations flowed from the top down during the Crisis Stabilization stage, and effective channels of communication were developed to serve as a conduit for these expectations, as well as a means of ensuring agreement on goals.

***Developing people.*** From the Declining Performance stage to the Crisis Stabilization stage, schools experienced a dramatic change in both the nature and quality of their capacity development efforts. Turnaround teams provided forms of professional development that teachers and principals regarded as about the most beneficial they had ever experienced. Teachers began to assume much more ownership for their own development. They looked much more to their immediate colleagues as sources of insight, and valued their access to highly specialized and focused professional development resources available from outside the school. Not least, in many cases they began the Crisis Stabilization stage with a strongly felt need to change and improve their own classroom practices. This need gave considerable meaning to the capacity-building efforts in which they participated, as did the emerging culture of accountability for implementing new practices and improving student performance that was evident in the turnaround schools.

***Redesigning the organization.*** At the Declining Performance stage, school cultures encouraged individual work on the part of teachers, and structures in the school reinforced that isolation. During the Crisis Stabilization stage, these cultures, and the structures that supported them, underwent considerable modification through leaders' efforts. Collaboration was clearly valued. Teams, committees, and working groups were formed in order to both allow and encourage such collaboration. Changes in structures were also made to accommodate different approaches to literacy instruction. Connections to the wider community began to acknowledge the contribution of all levels of schooling to the success of students on provincial tests.

***Managing the instructional program.*** From the Declining Performance stage to the Crisis Stabilization stage, the management functions carried out by leaders shifted in their purpose from providing routine maintenance of ongoing work in the school to aligning the standard operating procedures of the school with the overall goal of significantly improving student literacy. For example, "staffing" evolved from simply finding a generally well-qualified teacher to locating someone with a specific set of skills to further the performance goals of the school. "Monitoring" shifted from simply scanning the environment for potential disruptions in the school's routine work to diagnosing the progress of students, assessing the impact of existing approaches to instruction, and designing strategies to meet the unique needs of individual students and groups of students.

## **5. Effective Turnaround School Leadership is Narrowly Distributed**

Evidence as a whole about the people and groups who provide turnaround leadership was collected from teachers and principals during both the qualitative and quantitative portions of the study. These data were provided in response to questions about the relative amount of influence exercised by different people and groups during the school turnaround process, without distinguishing among turnaround stages. Results paint a quite consistent picture.

Formal teacher leaders were always rated as having the greatest influence, suggesting that their content knowledge and instructional expertise were of prime importance to turnaround success. School administrators were rated second in importance in both data sets, followed by teacher teams and informal teacher leaders. In response to a direct question about relative influence, turnaround teams were rated fifth (much lower than the influence they had specifically in helping schools, make the transition to the Crisis Stabilization stage). District staff, parents and students were typically awarded least influence in both data sets.

In sum, approximately 75% of the turnaround leadership in elementary schools was provided by just three sources: principals, formal teacher leaders, and the Ministry of Education (i.e., the Turnaround Teams Project). This was also the case in secondary schools, but with the Ministry of Education replaced by district staff. Those in formal leadership roles are still identified as the source of most of the core leadership practices. In particular, principals remain key enactors of the core practices in school turnaround contexts, as they are reported to be in most other contexts.

## **6. As School Turnaround Processes Evolve, the Nature and Number of Sources of Leadership Change**

Earlier turnaround research indicates that leadership at the beginning of the turnaround process tends to be highly focused in one person or a small team of people. As the organization begins to turn around, leadership becomes increasingly shared or collaborative. The present study also found that successful leadership took different forms at different turnaround stages. Stimulating the move from Declining Performance to Crisis Stabilization required a fairly directive and focused form of leadership, primarily from provincial policy-makers.

For secondary schools, the transition from Declining Performance to Crisis Stabilization was prompted by the decision of provincial policy-makers to make passing the Grade 10 literacy test a requirement for graduation. This requirement made it mandatory for teachers to pay attention to the test, and began the process of aligning their efforts with the province's efforts. Without the intervention of policy-makers, it seems unlikely that staff in the four secondary schools in this study would have focused as much effort and energy on improving the literacy skills of their less successful students, and certainly not in the brief span of a few years.

For elementary schools, the government's commitment to significant improvements in primary language achievement was the key stimulant for moving to the Crisis Stabilization stage. Flowing from that commitment (or focused leadership) was the establishment of the province's Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) and the creation of the Turnaround Teams Project. Although using the new resources provided by the government remained officially "optional," there was substantial pressure on schools whose students were achieving significantly below average to take advantage of these new resources. The government's vision for improved literacy was not contested by turnaround schools in this study. Initiatives created by the focused leadership of government agents made it extremely difficult to ignore the need to act on poor student performance. But after transition to the Crisis Stabilization stage, school leadership became considerably more collaborative.

Although schools in this study had not yet moved solidly into the third turnaround stage, collaborative forms of leadership seemed likely to continue, with the sources of leadership continuing to expand as the capacities of school staff expand. Some related research, in contexts similar to this study, suggests that principals rely primarily on expertise as the criterion for deciding who in their schools will share leadership responsibilities.<sup>3</sup> This expansion of leadership sources in schools is likely to be fostered at the third turnaround stage by the changed perspectives we observed among teachers, which included the following: their willingness to be held responsible for what students learned; their growing awareness of the long-term effort that would be required to sustain and improve their students' performance; a new awareness of just how interdependent were the efforts of elementary and secondary schools if student performance was to be successfully nurtured; and a much broader view of all the factors that account for student success.

### **7. Leaders Face Predictable Challenges in Stabilizing the Declining Performance of Schools**

Across both elementary and secondary schools, the Declining Performance stage was characterized by teachers' feelings of helplessness, denial of responsibility for the learning of all students, and resistance to external intervention. School staff, aware in a general way about the relatively poor performance of their students on provincial tests, nonetheless did not see their own efforts as likely to make much difference. Rather, conditions experienced by students in their family and community environments, along with limited learning potential, were the primary explanations given for poor performance. There was little evidence of teachers working toward common goals.

Based on such an explanatory framework, it was difficult for school staff to accept responsibility for significantly improving their students' poor performance. This contributed to an attitude on the part of staff that provincial efforts were largely irrelevant or not to be taken seriously. With a view of their own expertise as being unrelated to the performance of many of their students, school staff at this stage had difficulty seeing much value in complying with external pressures to improve their students' performance. Studies of low-performing schools in widely different locations have reported very similar challenges.<sup>4</sup>

### **8. Leaders Move their Schools from “Declining Performance” to “Crisis Stabilization” by Changing Teacher Attitudes and School Cultures**

The challenge for leaders in moving their schools to the Crisis Stabilization stage can be summed up as the need to foster three sets of beliefs among teachers:

- All students are capable of learning when appropriate instruction is provided.
- While a student's family background has important consequences for learning, schools are able to more than compensate for the effects of challenging family circumstances.
- What schools need to do in order for all students to achieve at improved levels is known, can be learned, and requires everyone in the school to work toward common goals.

Transition to the Crisis Stabilization stage, initially prompted by ministry policy initiatives, and also widely supported by districts, was accompanied by important shifts in attitudes such as these, and in the school's culture. Many teachers began to believe that the province's focus on literacy and numeracy was in the best interest of their students, and many adopted this focus as their own. All department heads in the four secondary schools included in the first phase of the study began to take responsibility for including literacy instruction in their lessons in each subject area.

The quality of professional development that teachers received during this period was widely regarded by them as among the best they had ever experienced, and principals began to hold teachers accountable for implementing what they had learned. Teachers demonstrated significantly greater willingness to work collaboratively with their colleagues, and a sense of school-wide responsibility for student success began to pervade the professional cultures of these schools. Staff no longer looked outside of the school for explanations of student failure, but focused instead on the many things they could do in the school to ensure success.

## Conclusion

The eight key findings from this study, while emerging from school-based evidence, in no way contradict the implications for successful turnaround leadership to be found in the larger organizational turnaround literature. This should be a source of confidence for school leaders aiming to inform their practice with the best available evidence.

### Notes

- 1 For a comprehensive recent review, see Murphy (2008).
- 2 These core practices and the evidence justifying their value are described, for example, in Leithwood & Riehl (2005) and Leithwood et al. (2004). These core practices have also been adopted, with modifications and extensions, as the province's leadership framework.
- 3 See, for example, Anderson et al. (2008) and Leithwood et al. (2007).
- 4 For such evidence, see Duke et al. (2007), Muijs et al. (2004), Nicolaidou & Ainscow (2005), and Potter, Reynolds & Chapman (2002).

Note: Ken Leithwood and Tiiu Strauss began the early research for this report prior to receiving approval from the ethics review committee.

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317 Adelaide Street West, Suite 300  
Toronto, Ontario M5V 1P9  
Tel: 416.591.6300 Fax: 416.591.5345  
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