

SESSION 5: SCHOOL DESIGNS FOR TURNAROUND

Moderator: Kristen Ferris – Manager, Education Resource Strategies

Panelists:

- *Suzanne Gimenez, Principal, Devonshire Elementary, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools*
- *Alesia Smith, Principal, Rothenberg Prep, Cincinnati Public Schools*
- *Matt Spengler, Executive Director, Blueprint Schools Network*
- *Marc Waxman, Co-Executive Director, SOAR Schools*

Alesia Smith, principal of Rothenberg Prep in Cincinnati, summed up why turnaround work is both more challenging and more rewarding than working for improvement in non-turnaround schools:

“No matter how hard the [turnaround] work is, it is the best place to be. Because now you have channeled into [students’] thought processes and changed how they think about life Because you’re giving them something they’ve been missing for year after year after year, because somebody made excuses all the time about why these kids can’t learn. And then someone comes along and dares to be different. So you should be excited this morning -- I am!”

Panelists described many different models and approaches to turnaround, with some common components but no one big answer. Blueprint Schools Network uses a model of five strategies developed by their research and evaluation partner, while Devonshire Elementary in Charlotte-Mecklenburg uses “an eclectic

approach.” Alesia Smith stated, “I don’t want to know how you *feel* – I want to see your data,” while Marc Waxman of SOAR Schools emphasized the importance of sizing up if the school has the right “feel”:

“I have a vision of what the school should be like when it’s running well. So the assessment is me walking around the school, observing teachers, and talking to kids, and talking to parents. We’re doing all the data stuff, but that’s data.... Does it feel right to me?”

All the panelists emphasized the sense of urgency and the need to innovate and dramatically change traditional approaches. For instance, Marc Waxman, Co-Executive Director of SOAR Schools, said:

“As we think about systems change -- are we talking about changing within the system of the industrial model, or are we talking about changing the industrial model to another system? From the conversations I’ve been having, we always are talking about changing within the box. I think we need to change the box.”

However, Gimenez pointed out that we sometimes create artificial barriers for ourselves -- there is a lot you can do *within* the box, too:

“There are a lot of things that go into that box -- quality instruction, common core or state standards, effective teaching, accountability, core subjects, system and state guidelines, state goals, AYP. You don’t always have to work outside the box -- you can work inside the box. You can stir it up..., turn it upside down... and it will look totally different, and yet you’re

doing all the things you're supposed to do. One barrier is not to think, 'I have to do it this particular way -- this is the only way.' ”

Some common essential components were mentioned frequently: intense and sophisticated use of data; a culture of high expectations; access to decision-makers and timely supports from the district, partners, and peer networks; a balance of academics and non-academics and of intervention and enrichment; and a careful look at the structure of the time students and adults spend in the building to maximize learning in spite of severe time pressures.

What are the key components of your model for turnaround?

SOAR Schools

Marc Waxman outlined some unique features of SOAR Schools in Denver. It's a small CMO, with only two schools that are two miles apart -- literally a “mom and pop” operation, directed by Waxman and his wife. One is a new charter last year, the other a restart. The decision process for the restart was also unique: they identified a need for a charter in Denver, applied, and got approved -- afterward, they made a decision to be part of a restart turnaround. Waxman emphasized,

“In a lot of the turnarounds we're seeing a kind of ‘no excuses’ model. We are *not* a “no excuses” school. We are proud to say that social and emotional growth is just as important as academic, that they go hand in hand.... I like to use the bike metaphor. Bikes typically have two wheels, and if you try to ride it with just one, like the proficiency wheel, you probably aren't going to go very far -- you need the social and emotional wheel, too, to be a complete bike.”

The leadership is another unique feature -- Waxman is the Head of School and also Co-Executive Director of SOAR. “We didn't hire someone to come in and run the turnaround, we're running it ourselves.” Waxman described that in some ways the most important of the unique features is his relationship with the district. Since he worked for the district for two years, when there are issues, he can call the district and talk collegially to get the issues resolved.

Blueprint Schools Network

Matt Spengler described the work of Blueprint Schools Network, a nonprofit that partners with districts to plan and monitor implementation of five core strategies, with 20 schools in Houston ISD and 10 in Denver PS. The five strategies originated with their research and evaluation partner, Education Innovation Lab at Harvard University. In 40 charters in New York City, they looked at historical achievement data, videotapes of hundreds of hours of classroom instruction, looked at school culture in hallways, and spoke to students, principals, and teachers. They found five core elements that in combination have a huge impact on student achievement:

- *Human capital*; great schools spend a lot of time finding the right leaders and teachers -- but also removing teachers and principals who are not performing.
- *Extended day and year* -- more time on task, more time to learn.
- *Use of data*: everyone has tons of data, but great schools figure out how to boil it down into specific skills, assess kids on what they know, and then do the re-teaching.
- *School culture*: high expectations, college-going culture, tight behavioral and structural systems with low variability from classroom to classroom

- *Intense differentiation*; e.g., tutoring, very small tutor to student ratio

Blueprint partners with districts and monitors implementation of these core high-impact elements. Spengler says:

“When you walk into any one of the ten schools in Denver or the 20 in Houston you will see around the tutoring, every 4th, 6th and 9th-grade student having math tutoring every single day for 45 minutes to an hour. So there are about 75-80 math tutors in Denver, almost 300 in Houston doing this work.”

One of the things Blueprint supports districts with is the recruiting, selection, and training of those folks. They spend half a day in each of the schools and provide feedback on how the schools are doing.

Rothenberg Prep

Alesia Smith explained that her school was one of the group of 16 lowest-achieving schools in the district. They went to the University of Virginia School Turnaround Specialist Program, and came back calling themselves “Sweet 16.” They started with the motto, “The mission is possible.”

Rothenberg did a redesign, removing the entire staff. Smith was selected by the community and allowed to select her own team. Key components to her strategy:

- The *instructional framework* in all 16 schools: 90 minutes of reading and math; data folders, data talks with the kids and teachers all the time.
- “*Data, data, data*” -- “I don’t want to hear how you *feel*, I want to see data.” Your data says this -- why? You have the same materials, tutors, as everyone else.

- “*Monitor, monitor, monitor.*” As the leader in my building, if I want to get anything done, I have to monitor.
- *Assessment.* We assess the kids all the time. You hear people say, “We assess too much” -- no, we don’t. Develop a culture where kids know they’re going to be assessed on what they know, and that they have multiple opportunities to improve. If a kid doesn’t know something, he doesn’t feel so bad because he knows the teacher will re-teach it or he will get a tutor. Then the student expects to do better on the next assessment, feels better about himself, and feels better about coming to school.
- *Incentives* for staff and kids. Have to keep people motivated -- and in a low-achieving school that’s hard work. Kids come to school with so many different issues. “We celebrate everything. It’s a big old party at Rothenberg. . . I know my kids -- I can say, ‘Girl, you went up 10 points on that assessment.’” Try to make sure that everyone is part of the celebration -- celebrate any growth you have. Kids with behavior plans go see her at the beginning and end of each day -- they need some extra love.
- *Resource allocation.* If you have all these people walking around your building and you’re still not making AYP, why is that? Every adult should be aligned with what can you do to help kids -- even if you can’t teach reading, you can listen to a child read.
- *District support.* The deputy superintendent provides professional development -- monthly meetings with a list of things she expected from each one of us, based on what we need and whatever we were doing that month: tutoring, afterschool

program, monthly walkthrough feedback, weekly walkthrough with lead principal, monthly check list, funding for staff and school needs. It was great to have access to her, one on one – she could get you what you needed, which really helped.

The only barrier to this work is time, time, time -- with the kids, teachers, in the day, to get things done. The staff created the vision together -- they knew they came to a situation where kids and the school were on the low-performing list for 10 years and on Obama's list of the worst schools in nation. In two years, the school is off both lists.

Devonshire Elementary

Principal Suzanne Gimenez declared it “an honor and privilege to be a strategic staffing principal in Charlotte-Mecklenburg.” Gimenez described her model of school turnaround as “eclectic” – whatever it takes to do the best for the kids in the building. Her model is different from Smith's: Gimenez kept all staff and added teachers because they had 28 kids in a classroom – way too many. She worked with existing staff -- many did leave in the first year, which was necessary. She formed a core team with some teachers and staff that she brought with her and some new staff. She doesn't have the kind of support system from the district that Smith has – she's one of seven people selected in June 2008 with the marching orders to “go forth and turn it around.” They all used different processes and they all moved forward, but with different styles. Gimenez described ERS, their partner organization, as “my best friends.”

The school was in total chaos: the first thing she did was to put simple structures in place -- basics. The major components of her approach:

- Develop *trust* with staff and *relationships* with kids – “Kids will do anything in this world for you if you believe in them.”

- Focus on *instruction* -- she started with the basics, because the teachers didn't know how to teach -- they had never been held accountable. It was important to tell them what good instruction looks like -- to model everything. They do collaborative team planning every day, 60 minutes a day, led by math or literacy facilitators, while students go to special areas linked to what's going on in the classroom.
- Constant use of *data* to group and regroup students with flexible grouping. They do push-in for everything -- no child is pulled out from instruction.
- She uses the *instructional rounds model* from Harvard -- a real eye-opener for teachers.
- *Cutting-edge instruction for students in poverty*, always research based -- gets the staff more motivated.
- Summer *professional development* for teachers; bring them in a week before schools starts to plan the first week of school plus professional development all through the year
- Single-gender classes 1–5.
- *Curriculum mapping*: plan backwards from where they want to be, how they want to get there.
- *Student accountability*: students maintain assessment notebooks – the kids work together and help each other where their skills are weak.
- This year, a new *intervention/enrichment block* to hold teachers accountable for what their students know. They added 7 hours of instruction: based on which students need more help, which are ready to fly away, they either get enrichment or intervention.
- *Daily pledge* to be responsible and respectful and do high-quality work.

- *Culture of high expectations* through a sense of urgency around improvement. Every nine weeks they look at where they are and where they need to go, using a philosophy of continuous improvement.

What would it take to sustain the core elements of your model at scale?

Spengler: Before we partner, we look for: district capacity to build out an internal team; the ability to change teaching staff and principal; financial sustainability over three years. We need veto power on key hires in every single school -- not every district is willing to do that.

Waxman: Access to decision makers to quickly get support they need. In Denver, “You can get everyone who needs to make a decision around the table: (a) they fit around the table, and (b), they’ll actually come to the table, so it doesn’t take a long time to make decisions.” Waxman contrasted this with New York City.

Smith: Someone at the district level you can communicate with when you need something: in Cincinnati, for the 16 schools, the Deputy Superintendent cuts down on bureaucracy. Partnerships with the community: We don’t pay for tutors – we have a partnership with the business community, hospitals, churches – they provide volunteers, we train them and give them materials. People believe that if schools are better, the community is better.

Gimenez – the Chief Academic Officer and Deputy Superintendent can get just about anything you ask. Devonshire is fortunate to be a model lab for the district for turnaround schools. We train teachers to go into other turnaround schools and co-teach. It’s important for district support.

Smith: The 16 schools that trained together and work together have made their own support system – it’s important to have someone talk to.

What are the other biggest barriers to successful turnaround work?

Gimenez: It’s important to be innovative. You need to be willing to work within the box, but in new ways.

Smith: When you look at urban kids, the time you have with them is the time you control. You have to create opportunities to expand the school day – morning, middle of day, afterschool. You have to look at the schedule -- using appropriately all the time they’re with you to get what they need. Afterschool should have an academic component, not just recreation, but also include enrichment so the kids will want to come.

Spengler: you have to acknowledge the tremendous impact of turnaround, which is a shock to the system: many big changes in a short period of time. Turnaround schools are in the spotlight, using resources from many different places, part of a high-profile district reform. You have to think about how to work through this shock -- on some level it’s not sustainable. People get tired -- how do you keep that momentum going?

Waxman: everyone acknowledges that a huge barrier is human capital – in a startup or turnaround school, attracting people ready and able to do that work is hard.

How do you assess the effectiveness of interventions?

Gimenez: We do lots of assessments on students – it’s easy to get overwhelmed. One lesson is that “you can’t do everything and do it well.” You have to have some priorities and flexibility – you don’t have to do everything -- do what you feel you

need to do for what's best for the kids in the building.

Smith: We have curriculum managers out looking for the best resources for our 90-minute block – reading and math intervention, enrichment. It's part of best practices -- we have good materials for intervention that doesn't look like the instruction kids already get.

Spengler: every month to 6 weeks we go to the school, do a data analysis, and provide feedback to the school and district leadership. Our work is actually part of a three-year study by our R&E partner, Ed Innovation Lab, who collects student data from impact and control schools. Every year there is an extensive analysis and they monitor the five tenets, looking at where you get the biggest return for your investment over time.

Waxman: We have one big intervention – opening a new school and restart. In addition to quantitative data, we use qualitative, more informal data such as walking around the school and talking to students, teachers, and parents.

Have the parents of kids had a say in the percentage of original kids retained in the turnaround school?

Waxman: We're a zoned neighborhood school -- if you live within that boundary there, you're coming to that school. This is not typical of charters. But we are trying to serve the community, balancing best practices learned from the charter and the reality of what needs to be done to serve the neighborhood. We gave families the opportunity to make an affirmative choice to stay -around 20% left -- some because we moved from a bilingual to an immersion model. The district called every family for us and told them the child wouldn't be receiving instruction in Spanish any more, and told them where they

could go if they still wanted that. Some families took them up on that.

Spengler: In Denver there was an outreach effort to families – a rigorous attempt to bring back kids who left. In Houston families had a choice and many left – there was a drop in enrollment when they found out there was a longer day and year.

Smith: We're a neighborhood school -- everyone is admitted. We did a campaign to let kids know we were coming – the district did a good job – we were at 350 and are still there. We sent postcards, teachers met with the neighborhood, we had cookouts. We started working on building trust early.

Gimenez: While we were under school improvement, parents were sent a choice letter at the beginning of every school year that they can opt out. We're a neighborhood school. Most stayed – we have 80% of the students we started with.