

Turning Around Underperforming School Systems

Guidelines for District Leaders

A paper commissioned by the College of Alberta School Superintendents

Kenneth Leithwood

June, 2010



CASS

College of Alberta School Superintendents

This is the third in a series of research papers commissioned by the College of Alberta School Superintendents designed to extend evidence informed school system leadership practice in the province of Alberta.

Additional information may be found at www.cass.ab.ca

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Introduction

This paper is part the College of Alberta School Superintendents' (CASS) ongoing efforts to help district leaders in the province raise overall levels of student achievement in their systems and reduce gaps in the achievement of more and less advantaged and culturally diverse groups of students. Earlier products of this ongoing work include *The CASS Framework for School System Success* (2009), a systematic review of evidence about the characteristics of high performing school districts (Leithwood, 2008) and a survey instrument used as part of a pilot test of the framework in more than a dozen districts. Extending these initiatives, the current paper brings together several bodies of empirical evidence that should provide useful guidance to those district leaders in the province facing the challenge of “turning around” student performance in their systems.

This account of how districts successfully turn themselves around draws on four distinct sources of evidence. One source is a small body of original empirical evidence directly focused on school systems or districts and how they can move from unacceptable performance to at least satisfactory, and preferably, to high performance. While this is the most direct source of evidence for purposes of this manuscript, it is also very limited in amount, hence the value of looking to additional relevant sources.

Research on *school* turnaround processes and leadership is one of these additional source. While the unit of analysis is smaller (the school), the challenges facing schools include, although they do not fully encompass, the challenges facing districts. Successful district turnaround is necessarily a function of successfully turning around multiple underperforming schools. Another source of evidence is the relatively large body of research on organizational turnaround processes and leadership conducted primarily in the private sector and non-education public sector. And finally, evidence is derived from research about initiatives designed to “improve” district performance. The context for these initiatives is not as critical or urgent as turnaround context but there is much to be learned about the components of successful turnaround from such initiatives.

The educational research community often treats the problem of school and district turnaround and the problem of closing achievement gaps as two different problems; for example, Murphy has recently published books entitled *Turning Around Failing Schools* (2008) and *Understanding and Closing Achievement Gaps* (2010). While there are distinct literatures developing around these foci, they are treated in this paper not as two problems but as parts of a single whole. Much of the research concerned with closing achievement gaps explores the socio-economic, cultural and racial roots of achievement differences. However, these are also the root causes of a large proportion of the underperforming schools and districts considered to be in need of being turned around.

As a way of bringing some needed coherence to this eclectic literature, the paper is organized around seven “knowledge claims”; these are claims about how districts can successfully turn themselves around for which there is a reasonable, but still quite variable, amount of evidence.

These claims are as follows:

1. The fundamental capacities required of system leaders to successfully turnaround their districts are those associated with expert problem solving.
2. An underperforming districts cannot be turned around without turning around the under performing schools within it.
3. Organizations turnaround in “stages”, each of which requires at least partly different forms of leadership and improvements to at least partly different organizational conditions.
4. There are many possible causes of school underperformance and the causes specific to each school and district should be carefully diagnosed before initiating turnaround strategies.
5. District turnaround strategies need to be differentiated for each school in the district based on the causes of its underperformance and the turnaround stage in which the district and school finds itself .
6. Commonly used sequences of district turnaround strategies have been identified in a small body of research but their value to a district depends on similarities in the causes of district underperformance.
7. There are a significant number of individual strategies for turning around underperforming districts. These strategies ought to be treated as a menu of “solutions” following a careful diagnosis of the “problem”.

The paper concludes by emphasizing the importance of district leadership in successful district turnarounds and describing key tasks for which district leaders should be accountable.

Claim 1: The fundamental capacities required of system leaders to successfully turnaround their districts are those associated with expert problem solving.

Superintendent’s problem solving capacities, claim Datnow et al. (2006), are an understudied but important feature of district improvement processes Turning around an underperforming school system, however, is a classic example of what psychologists refer to as an “unstructured problem”. In the world of those who study such things, a *problem* is defined as the gap between a current state (the underperforming system in this case) and a goal state (a high performing system). Problem *solving* entails “transforming” the current state into the goal state or transforming the low performing school system into a high performing system.

A problem can be “structured” or “ unstructured” depending on the extent and certainty of one’s knowledge about how to do the transformation. Substantial relevant and robust knowledge means the problem is “structured”; not much valid knowledge means the problem is unstructured. Whether or not a problem is structured or unstructured, however, is a subjective matter. For the novice school system leader, for example, building the board’s annual budget might well be a very unstructured problem. She has never had to deal with this problem before and none of her on-the-job experiences or formal training have shed light on the nature of the task. The superintendent of the adjacent school system, on the other hand, has led the

construction of her district's annual budget over the past five years, each year gaining new insights about how to do it better. For this more experienced superintendent, the problem is gradually becoming quite structured. This doesn't mean that it is an easy or smooth process, but she is now reasonably confident that she knows what needs to be done.

One of the key lessons to be derived from this simple example is that expert problem solving is highly knowledge dependent. While this might seem self evident, consider all the debates you have been privy to about the value of "processes vs. content". Evidence on this matter indicates that about 80% of a person's expertise depends on "domain-specific" knowledge, (knowledge directly relevant to the problem at hand) while the remaining 20% can be explained by variation in the nature and quality of problem-solving processes such as setting goals, brainstorming solutions, backward mapping and the like. Indeed, those processes are just strategies for acquiring domain-specific knowledge.

Once relevant or domain-specific knowledge has been acquired, experts are able to routinize their problem solving, engage in high levels of "automaticity" or run on "automatic pilot". This is why someone with a high level of expertise in solving a problem often seems to do so with very little effort. The cognitive processes required of them has changed. They are no longer puzzling over the right strategies or actions to transform the current to the goal state, they are just applying their existing knowledge with, importantly, an eye to what might be new that they should actually deliberate about.

There are two particularly important implications of conceiving of school system turnaround as a problem in the terms outlined above. First, since the experience of turning around school systems will be (subjectively) unstructured for many of the intended readers of this paper, further understanding how experts solve unstructured problems of any sort should be useful. Expert problem solving processes are briefly described in this section of the paper. Second, since problem solving expertise is so knowledge dependent, ready access to what others have learned about how to turnaround underperforming school systems should be invaluable. Figuring out "from scratch" how to solve a problem about which there is already a body of codified knowledge is not very productive, even though that know-how will certainly require some adaptation for use in one's own own context. Summarizing this evidence is the primary purpose of this paper and is the focus of the remaining sections.

While Datnow et al. (2006) are correct in their claim that direct evidence about superintendent's problem solving is meagre, there is a relatively large body of knowledge about the nature of expert problem solving in fields outside of education (e.g., Isenberg, 1987). And though modest in amount, research specifically about the problem solving of expert school system leaders including both principals and superintendents(e.g., Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995) is quite useful for present purposes. While neither of these sources of evidence are especially new, they are quite durable and there is little conflict in the results. So we likely know more about superintendent's problem solving than would appear to be case on first glance.

Evidence about superintendents' problem solving distinguishes between how expert and either novice or typical superintendents go about responding to unstructured problems within six different categories of their thinking or cognition. These are categories associated with problem interpretation, goal setting, values, anticipation of constraints, identification, of solutions and mood. In sum, as compared with typical superintendents:

1. Experts spend more time and work harder to ensure they fully understand the nature of the problem which they face. They do not make assumptions about the nature of the problem without collecting relevant information and they often seek the interpretations of others.

For example, the widespread lack of engagement in classroom instruction on the part of the large population of native students served by a district might be widely attributed by the mostly non-native staff in the district to a lack of motivation by such students to succeed at school, whereas further inquiry points to culturally insensitive approaches to instruction and a school climate contributing to native students' disengagement (Oaks & Maday, 2009).

2. Experts set a larger array of goals for problem solving. These goals are more likely to address the perspectives and interests of other district stakeholders and are more likely to clarify the relationship between the problem and priorities established for the district. Experts establish connections between individual problems and the overall purposes of the district. This frequently means defining even unanticipated problems as opportunities to further the district's goals.

Now aware of the culturally insensitive teaching in many of his schools Superintendent Gene, with his central office and school staff, set as turnaround goals for the district, (a) increasing teachers' capacities to provide culturally relevant forms of instruction, (b) improving school leaders abilities to assess the cultural sensitivity of instruction in their schools, (c) establishing a consultant position in the district to help schools implement more culturally relevant forms of instruction, and (d) undertaking an evaluation of the cultural relevance - including bias, stereotypes, and accuracy - of the curriculum materials being used in the district.

3. When identifying values most relevant to guiding the problem solving process, experts make greater use, than do their more typical peers, of "professional values" (vs. general human or moral values), invoking two sets of values in particular - their own role responsibilities and consequences for the district's immediate clients (parents and students).

Neither successful school nor district turnaround seems likely unless those leading the turnaround are strongly committed to the rights of all children to receive equitable opportunities to learn, accompanied by a similarly strong belief that the district can develop the capacity to provide those opportunities.

¹ These designations have usually been made using some combination of reputation among peers or other expert judges and objective measures of district performance.

4. Experts are better at anticipating constraints or challenges likely to be encountered during the problem solving process and they prepare in advance to avoid or address many of those constraints.

Expert district turnaround problem solvers are, for example, likely to anticipate and prepare for initial resistance by many teachers to the need for dramatic changes in their classroom practices, possible union challenges to such changes requested of teachers, the difficulty many of their school leaders will face in transforming themselves into effective leaders of instructional improvement in their schools, and the need to much more fully engage the parents of students in these lowest performing schools in supporting their children's' school work at home.

5. Experts identify solutions with much less difficulty and with the expenditure of much less effort than do typical problem solvers because of the substantially greater effort they devote to clarifying the nature of the problem and the goals to be accomplished during problem solving before attempting to find solutions. Solutions often "suggest themselves" after this extensive background work has been done.
6. As with most expert problem solvers, expert district leaders remain relatively calm and confident even in the face of "crises". This mood control allows for greater flexibility of thought. The appearance of confidence on the part of the senior leadership team also helps instill confidence in others and contributes to the willingness of staff to move forward with the district's turnaround plan (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008).

Evidence reviewed in subsequent sections of the paper uncovers knowledge likely to be useful to district leaders especially as they set goals for solving the turnaround problem (part of # 2 above, which entails diagnosing the underlying causes of their district's underperformance) and as they identify solutions (#5 above, selecting and developing strategies that will help turnaround their district's performance). District turnaround research has produced few results related to the other elements of problem solving summarized above.

Claim Two: An under performing districts cannot be turned around without turning around the under performing schools within it.

This claim does not require empirical evidence for justification, only rudimentary, if sometimes neglected, logic. But it is quite important to remind ourselves that everything we know about successful *school* turnaround is part of the essential knowledge base for turning around underperforming districts; this knowledge is necessary although not sufficient for successful large-scale turnaround . As some wise person once said, "the problem of change is the problem of the smallest unit".

District performance will not improve if school performance does not improve. And school performance won't improve unless individual student performance improves. At least a noticeable portion of the available district turnaround literature does not begin with this acknowledgement. That said, it would be beyond the scope of this paper to summarize, in a

comprehensive way, evidence about successful school turnaround. Some of this evidence will be described when it seems essential to the purposes of this paper but beyond that, the reader is referred to several recent sources of empirical evidence about how to lead school turnarounds².

The designation of a district as “under performing”, or in need of being turned around, is not self evident and the meaning of satisfactory district performance might well be contested.

Designation as a turnaround district rests on a stipulated standard for satisfactory performance and a stipulated means for calculating performance. Among the possible ways in which a district might be designated a turnaround district are, for example:

- The average performance of the district’s student body, as a whole, falls below an acceptable standard of achievement stipulated by some agency (e.g., the district itself, the province) on specified measures;
- The average performance of the district’s student body, as a whole, falls below a stipulated standard of achievement by a designated amount (e.g., 10%) on specified measures;
- The average performance of designated groups of students within the district falls below a stipulated standard of achievement on specified measures. This is the approach found in the U.S. *No Child Left Behind* policy;
- The average performance of designated groups of students within the district falls below a stipulated standard of achievement, on specified measures, by a designated amount.

One can certainly imagine other methods by which a district could be designated in need of turnaround. But a refined and agreed on method of doing this is likely irrelevant in most settings. Aspirations for student achievement will vary across districts and within almost all districts there will be schools which the district will consider sufficiently underperforming to warrant the school turnaround designation. What this means is that the guidelines for district turnaround found in this paper apply to a wide array of circumstances, from the very large challenge faced by districts with many underperforming schools, to districts with only a few – and everything in between. Almost all districts, from this perspective, face a turnaround challenge of some sort.

Claim Three: Organizations turnaround in stages, each of which requires at least partly different forms of leadership and improvements to at least partly different organizational conditions.

The earlier CASS review of evidence about high performing school districts (e.g., Leithwood, 2008) described those features shared by many districts whose students were achieving at relatively high levels, especially in light of the socioeconomic backgrounds of their families. While multi-dimensional in nature, this description was, nonetheless, static; put differently, these districts had “arrived”. From a problem-solving perspective, the earlier review outlined the “goal state” for district leaders intent on turning around underperforming systems.

The present review of evidence, in contrast, captures how underperforming districts transform their current states into something approximating that goal state. Because this needs to be a

² See Fullan (2006); Duke (2010); Leithwood, Harris and Strauss (2010).

dynamic rather than static account of district success, our primary focus (after briefly considering the importance of clearly diagnosing starting points) is about processes. For school systems, these are processes that occur both within and across schools.

Within schools, it is important to acknowledge, as much of the research conducted in private sector organizations (Burbank, 2005) tells us, that the turnaround process is multi-staged. These stages, some evidence suggests, may be less distinct in public sector turnaround cases (Paton & Mordaunt, 2004). Murphy and Meyers (2008) begin their recent book-length review of turnaround research conducted in the non-education sectors, with a general framework for understanding the turnaround process consisting of four stages.

Recent research in schools (e.g., Leithwood, Harris & Strauss, 2010) also used a fourfold conception of stages, for example:

- A *declining performance* stage: while declining or poor and stagnant performance may exist in a district over a long period of time, turnaround begins at the point when someone or group with sufficient power and influence “notices” the decline or stagnation, considers it unacceptable, and announces the intent to do something about it;
- A *crisis stabilization* stage: the early work of “doing something about it” typically entails making quite visible to all stakeholders evidence which unambiguously demonstrates the inadequate nature of the district’s performance. This stage includes, as well, establishing a leadership team to undertake the turnaround, allocating new human and material resources to the turnaround effort, implementing strategies for building staff capacity, starting the process of moving toward a high performance culture, and building systems to hold school and district staff accountable for improving the performance of the district’s students.
- A *return to satisfactory performance* stage. During this stage the school’s performance becomes at least “average” or acceptable by local standards. A culture of high performance and widespread sense of accountability by staff for the performance of all students have become firmly rooted across the district. Staff have developed a greater sense of efficacy about their ability to help previously at-risk students succeed to fairly high levels.
- A return to satisfactory performance is followed by efforts to sustain that performance and *Build Toward Excellence*. Success at this stage often depends on finding the means to sustain capacities temporarily added to under performing schools during the crisis stabilization stage.

The main purpose for briefly describing typical turnaround stages here is to sensitize district leaders to the changing nature of the work that will have to be done in under performing schools as those schools move forward. For example, both the nature of school leadership and the focus of such leadership systematically varies with each turnaround stage. However, while the specific demands for improvement are at least partly unique to each stage, the basic processes for ensuring success are common, including diagnosing the obstacles preventing increased performance, taking action in response to those obstacles, and monitoring the impact of those actions, refining and reapplying as needed.

Claim Four: There are many possible causes of school underperformance and the causes specific to each school should be carefully diagnosed before initiating turnaround strategies.

Perhaps the most useful (and deceptively simple) advice to district turnaround leaders is to *identify the right problem to solve*. This means diagnosing, rather than assuming, the underperformance problem, not jumping to conclusions about the causes of underperformance, and not being fatally diverted by the surface features of the problem.

Each significant cause of district underperformance ought to become a goal for problem solving. For example, if many underperforming schools in the district have not altered their instructional practices in the face of significant changes in the nature of their student populations, then one important goal for district leaders is to assist those schools in better understanding the norms, values and beliefs the new groups of students bring to school and what that means for culturally sensitive instruction. If the average reading performance of primary-grade students in the district has stalled for the past four years, then identifying more powerful approaches to reading is also a goal for problem solving.

Considerable evidence now points to the multiple potential causes of district and school underperformance, causes which may vary widely from school to school and from district to district. So, for example, while student and family poverty is a part of the “presenting symptoms” in the majority of underperforming districts and schools, it is also largely unalterable by their leaders. At best, it ought to be considered a surface feature of the problem, where it exists. There is not much practical point in defining it as the cause of underperformance. If you did, you would be defining a problem you could not solve. However, as we note below, there are other aspects of students’ family environments which schools should consider alterable with appropriate intervention.

A more productive focus for leaders serving high poverty students and families would be to ask “Why are our schools not able to foster acceptable levels of success among our [high poverty] students? This question directs your attention toward, for example, the integrity and “coherence” (Newman et al., 2001) of the curriculum experienced by these students, the capacities of teachers to provide disadvantaged students with instruction that is meaningful to them, and expectations for their children’s educational success that schools might help parents develop. Causes such as these are “actionable” by district and school leaders. They help define the underperformance problem so that school and district leaders stand some chance of solving it.

Table 2 summarizes the results of research about the causes of both district and school “underperformance”. These causes have been culled from several relatively comprehensive sources: two recent, comprehensive, reviews of evidence about closing the achievement gap (Murphy, 2010; Duke, 2010) and a synthesis of evidence from a large group of reputationally effective school and district leaders in Ontario (Leithwood, 2009), as well as other sources specific to only one or a few causes. As a whole, this evidence points to eight broad types of causes listed in the table, those concerned with school staffs, students, their families, curriculum, instruction, school culture, district and school structures and organization, and leadership.

Table 1
Causes of School and District Underperformance

1. **School staffs:** *underperforming schools and districts may have school staffs who...*
 - are poorly qualified, poorly prepared or inexperienced
 - have relatively low expectations for student achievement
 - as a whole, lack instructional expertise because of teacher transfers, retirements, and turnovers due to illness, maternity leaves and the like. Frequent administrator turnovers are also common
 - use traditional instructional methods not well-suited or appropriately adapted to the purposes of the current curriculum or the needs of current students
 - lack access to effective staff development

2. **Students:** *underperforming schools and districts often serve significant proportions of students who...*
 - experience physical deprivation, mental illness or emotional disorders;
 - have learning disabilities and related challenges that place students at risk of failure
 - face social challenges arising from the conditions in which some aboriginal students find themselves.
 - have a first language other than the language of instruction
 - have relatively poor records of attendance and truancy
 - have low levels of engagement, motivation to learn and connection to school which results in less time on task

3. **Family conditions:** *families served by underperforming schools and districts ...*
 - sometimes change residences relatively frequently resulting in high student turnover which reduces achievement.
 - often participate less in their children's education (for a variety of reasons) with typically large negative consequences for student achievement.

4. **Curriculum:** *students in underperforming schools and districts may experience a curriculum...*
 - that has a relatively low level of cognitive demand
 - places excessive focus on lower-level skills
 - not aligned with instruction and assessment
 - not well integrated and sequential across the grades

5. **Instruction:** *students in underperforming schools and districts may be exposed to...*
 - forms of instruction that are relatively less interactive, less task oriented, less academically oriented and cover less content because the pace of instruction is slower,
 - poorly designed lessons, lost instructional time, poor homework assignments etc
 - a less caring environment and lower quality of relationship with teachers
 - advice inappropriately directing them into courses with less academic content
 - inadequate instructional material in their classrooms

- instruction uninformed by good data about its contribution to student learning

6. School Culture: *underperforming schools, districts and their staffs may be characterized by...*

- discontinuity between the dominant culture of the school and its staff and the culture of the home
- an inability on the part of the school and its staff to meaningfully appreciate that culture and build on it for instructional purposes, This may reduce the quality of instruction for students from minority cultures
- a disproportionate number of students who feel unsafe in their schools
- a defensive culture more focused on teacher than student needs
- norms of teacher isolation

7. Structures and Organization: *among the causes of school and district underperformance are...*

- Larger district, school and classrooms sizes which are disproportionately harmful for disadvantaged students.
- Lack of structures to allow for teacher collaboration and teamwork
- Lack of inclusion for special education students
- Ineffective scheduling, such as the time needed for collaboration in the school day
- Lack of focus and energy on a small number of priorities
- Inadequate facilities
- Relatively low average student SES which has negative influences on achievement through peer effects
- Disproportionate placement of minority or disadvantaged students in uniformly low ability tracks

8. Leadership: *the underperformance of schools and districts can sometimes be traced to*

- district and school administrators adopting either laissez- faire or largely managerial approaches to leadership
- elected leaders (trustees) not sufficiently focused on improving student achievement
- political conflict among those in professional and elected leadership roles

School staff. This set of causes of school underperformance are about lack of instructional capacity for students being served by the school, a lack of capacity that is rooted in both individuals lacking experience and skill (Snipes & Casserly, 2004) and institutions (inability to attract and retain well-qualified teachers and administrators, lack of access to useful professional development opportunities) (Finnigan & Stewart, 2010). Rapid staff turnover, both teachers and administrators, is an especially serious cause of school underperformance over which districts have considerable influence. While it is common for new teachers placed in challenging schools to move to more congenial schools after gaining experience, unsupportive administrators magnify this trend (Leithwood & Beatty, 2008).

Underperforming schools are often staffed by teachers and administrators who, with the best of intentions, have low expectations for the academic achievement of their students. By now, there is a large body of evidence which indicates that such expectations have negative consequences for the nature of the curriculum experienced by students, the quality of instruction provided by teachers and the motivation of students to learn (Miller, 1995).

Students. Causes of underperformance associated with *students* are challenges to learning that frequently result from economic disadvantage, for example: limited access to food and health care; disabilities that make conventional approaches to learning difficult and; home environments that do not encourage school engagement or which compete with schools for the student's time (Murphy, 2010).

Family conditions. Conditions causing underperformance which can be traced to family conditions (e.g., Leithwood, 2010) include lack of a stable home location, resulting in the frequent moving of students from school to school (Snipes & Casserly, 2004) and minimal engagement of parents in the school for a large handful of possible reasons including, for example: lack of flexible work hours; extremely long work hours, feelings of intimidation by school staffs, inability to speak the language of the school and; uncertainty about their role in school and their child's education.

Curriculum. In his review of evidence about the causes of achievement gaps, Murphy (2010) identifies significant differences in the curricula experienced by majority and minority groups of students. These differences, which reduce the opportunities for learning on the part of disadvantaged and minority students in most school settings, include placement of minority and disadvantaged students in lower ability tracks. Alos part of the problem are curricula, as implemented, pitched at lower cognitive levels and which is less meaningful to students, and the displacement of academic goals with social and emotional goals.

Instruction. If struggling students are to become sufficiently engaged in school to significantly improve their levels of learning, then meaningful content and instruction is a requirement. Struggling students, on the other hand, often find themselves exposed to the least engaging learning experiences that schools offer; these are experiences aimed almost exclusively at building the "basic skills" struggling students are thought to lack. But such "drill and kill" experiences further alienate struggling students and add to the difficulty students have imagining what purpose is to be served by continuing in schools. Summing up the evidence about forms instruction often experienced by disadvantaged and minority, as compared with middle class and majority students, Murphy (2010) points to less interactive instruction, limited task orientation and academic focus, and a slower pace of instruction. He also identifies as art of the experience of minority students' school experiences more stress on behavior rather than achievement, less time devoted to instruction because instruction starts later and ends earlier, more time is spent on transitions from one lesson to another and there is more off task behavior. These students often experience more distant and impersonal relationships with their teachers, as well.

Considering curriculum and instruction together, Snipes & Casserly (2004) found the underperforming districts in their study suffered from a "lack of instructional coherence". Such incoherence included multiple, different, and often incompatible initiatives across schools in the

district, lack of alignment between instruction and state standards, along with fragmented professional development, much of it “one shot” in nature.

School culture. Inappropriate curricula and instruction for struggling students is, in turn, often the product of a school culture which fails to understand, acknowledge and make use of norms, values and expectations that are part of family’s sometimes minority cultures (Miller, 1995). North American schools, it is frequently argued, are captured by a deeply rooted, white, Anglo culture that fails to recognize differences in the beliefs, norms and behaviors embedded in the cultures of minority students (Murphy, 2010).

The school may also feel unsafe to students who are viewed as outsiders by majority culture students or because the disciplinary climate of the school, as a whole, is dysfunctional. In some low performing schools, decisions may be influenced more by staff preferences and needs than about what is in the best interests of students.

Organizational structure. A sixth class of reasons for student underperformance can be found in district and school organizational structures. Some of the causes in this category are the object of considerable political influence and have striking financial implications – in particular, district, school and class size. While evidence suggests that, *on average*, variations in these structures make only quite small differences to student success, they have quite significant consequences for disadvantaged students, in particular. Research on school size, for example, indicates that for disadvantaged students, the smaller the school the better (e.g., Leithwood & Jantzi, 2009). No matter the size, evidence also indicates that assigning a majority of low SES students to the same school or classroom reduces their chances for learning by depriving them of positive peer role models, for example. Low performing schools are also guilty of overlooking the gains in teacher effectiveness to be realized by opportunities for them to collaborate with one another. In addition, neither schools nor districts can successfully manage to work on more than a quite small handful of improvement initiatives at one time, a case of “more” being “less” in terms of contributions to student learning.

Leadership. Some types of leadership are always better than others and some organizational circumstances call for particular approaches to leadership. Laissez-faire leadership never helps, no matter the circumstances, and some underperforming schools get to be that way because of neglect and complacency on the part of their formal leaders. While evidence in support of this claim is especially strong at the school level, it seems quite probable that this claim is equally true for district leadership, even though the empirical evidence is still sparse.

A managerial orientation on the part of administrators has dominated district organizations historically³. And in schools, the growing focus on both transformational and instructional forms of leadership pushes against a long history of preoccupation by principals with the management of school operations (Barnes, et al., 2010). Such an orientation by both district and school leaders has often been cited as a primary cause of school underperformance (Firestone & Riehl, 2005). In their study of large urban U.S. districts, Snipes, Doolittle & Herlihy (2002) also found political conflict among and between professional and elected leaders to be a cause of district

³ For U.S. districts see Honig (2003). For Canadian school systems, see, Boitch, Farquhar, & Leithwood (1987).

underperformance, along with minimal focus on improving student achievement (also see Snipes & Casserly, 2009)

Claim Five: District turnaround strategies need to be differentiated for each school based on the causes of underperformance and the turnaround stage in which the district finds itself .

Some of the more practically-oriented literature on district turnaround could be interpreted as suggesting a one-size –fits-all approach - for example, Kowal, Hassel and Hassel’s (2009) “Seven steps for district leaders”. But this is rarely the underlying intent of that literature and previous sections of this paper concerned with the multiple stages of school turnaround and the many different causes of school underperformance make it quite clear why. So if districts need to provide differentiated support to their underperforming schools, what could and should that look like?

In their recent analysis of a large data set collected in about three dozen U.S. districts over a five-year period, Mascall, Anderson and Stiegelbauer (2010) offer one answer to both parts of this question.

First, what forms or approaches could differentiated district support take? The authors identify five different approaches districts currently use to differentiate support (or intervention) to their schools:

- *Phased intervention*: the district begins its work with a sub-set of grades or schools with the intent of scaling up the intervention to all grades and/or schools in the long run;
- *Targeted intervention*: the district identifies a specific set of schools with common characteristics (e.g., low performance on the part of their culturally diverse students) and provides the same intervention or support to each of these schools;
- *Responsive intervention*: districts respond to school-identified needs growing out of their own school improvement efforts;
- *Categorical intervention*: schools are targeted for intervention using bureaucratically defined categories that typically are associated with extra funding such as ESL students, special needs students;
- *Micro-political intervention*: this category of differentiation depends on personal relationships between school and district personnel rather than the nature of a school’s improvement plan or the district’s priorities. Personal connections prompt this form of support.

While there may be other approaches available to districts for differentiating their support to schools, the large-scale study on which these five categories are based did not detect them. Assuming this is the universe of choice for districts, for the moment, which form of differentiation is best suited to the school and district turnaround challenge? Mascall, Anderson and Stiegelbauer (2010) are justifiably circumspect, in light of their evidence, but come down clearly on the side of district support differentiated to the needs of individual schools. This could actually include versions of the phased, targeted and responsive categories. And so the further refinement of their conclusion:

While it is clear that the district should lead with an integrated approach which includes a strong shared vision and collective expectations for achievement, and common curricula and programs to facilitate success, the ability to diagnose individual needs and to provide supports appropriate to those needs is likely to strengthen the achievement of the district as a whole. (p. 33)

Much of the evidence about successful district turnaround focuses on these elements of what is referred to as an “integrated approach”, also sometimes considered an approach that productively balances top down and bottom up responsibilities for performance improvements. However, when the multiple potential causes of underperformance are combined with the several possible stages of a school’s turnaround process, it is not hard to imagine a point at which centrally provided supports associated with an integrated approach become not especially relevant to many school turnaround efforts.

Once a school, for example, has moved beyond attaining satisfactory performance and faces the challenges of sustaining and improving on that performance, the common district supports associated with an integrated approach are likely to have lost much of their leverage. This evidence also calls into question, of course, the value of micro-political and categorical approaches to differentiating district support, at least for turnaround purposes.

Claim Six: Commonly used sequences of district turnaround strategies have been identified in a small body of research but their value to a district depends on similarities in the causes of district underperformance.

This section provides three examples of sequences or sets of strategies found in a one body of case study district turnaround research. This body of research describes individual district turnaround processes but then looks across districts for strategies which the study districts enacted in common. What successful district turnarounds have in common is of some potential interest because many of the district studied shared a common set of challenges, typically challenges in providing effective instruction for disadvantaged children and children from culturally diverse families. Results of some of these studies also suggest a temporal ordering of strategies. Turnaround processes are undoubtedly messy and interactive but exercising leadership requires one to create some temporal order to guide one’s actions. So examples of these findings may be useful for district leaders. Three are described briefly here.

Kowal et al (2009)

These researchers suggest “seven steps” for senior district leaders turning around their underperforming districts including:

1. Commit to success: this is about making sure that staff understand that you will “stay the course”;
2. Chose the right schools to turnaround: since the number of schools to be turned around will often exceed the leadership and other resources required, carefully selecting the schools most in need and most likely to respond to district intervention is essential;
3. Develop a pipeline of turnaround leaders: this is about building a pool of school leaders capable of doing the unusual and difficult work of school turnaround. Many principals who

are perfectly competent in typical school contexts, for example, will lack either the skills, dispositions or both to do this urgent, intense and potentially conflict-inducing work;

4. Give school-level leaders “the big yes”: provide the autonomy they need to work around bureaucratic constraints hindering their progress;
5. Hold school leaders accountable for results
6. Prioritize teacher hiring in turnaround schools: the quality of teaching will be one of the most important features of many schools targeted for turnaround and teacher turnover in these schools is often excessive
7. Proactively engage the community: at minimum, stakeholders in the wider community should know about and support the school turnaround effort. But more helpful would be active support in the form of community expertise and resources in the school or district.

Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (2006)

Research carried out by this organization resulted in a series of key “actions” for turning around a district:

1. Take a system-wide approach to improving instruction: this includes the development of a shared vision for student success and how that success can be achieved.
2. Create a district curriculum aligned with standards and assessments.
3. Make decisions based on data: this action replaces tradition or hunch with evidence that is systematically acquired.
4. Redefine leadership: such leadership needs to be focused on teaching and learning and distributed widely in the district and school.
5. Implement strong accountability system: staff members are held to high standards of performance, the outcome of which is intended to be improved student learning.
6. Embed professional development: to play its part in school and district turnaround, staff development should be ongoing, intensive and aligned with the district’s vision for students.
7. Commit to sustaining reform: while turnaround processes are often aimed at producing quick results, sustaining turnaround requires building new capacities into the district and its schools. Realistically, this requires time and shortcutting such capacity building is likely to diminish the chances for turnarounds to “stay around”.

Snipes, Doolittle and Herlihy (2002)

A third and final example of prescription-oriented district turnaround strategies is provided by evidence based on a qualitative study of five large urban districts which had demonstrated significant improvement in student achievement. This study first identified a large handful of necessary “pre-conditions for success”. These pre-conditions included adoption by the elected board of a new role focused on policy-level decisions supporting student achievement (not daily operations). Pre-conditions also included the creation of a vision, shared by the superintendent, of what was to be accomplished for students and how the district would accomplish it.

The capacity to diagnose instructional problems as well as the ability to elaborate on the vision for student success and create district wide support for that vision were also among the pre-conditions for successful district turnaround. Finally, these districts retooled their operations to support the student achievement vision, and aligned their resources accordingly.

After establishing these pre-conditions, the districts in this study engaged in a series of strategies that resulted in significant improvements in student performance. In brief, these strategies involved:

1. Setting specific achievement goals for students aligned with the district's vision, state standards and local curricula.
2. Creating accountability systems much more ambitious than those set by the state.
3. Adopting an intense focus on their lowest performing schools, often adding resources and improving the quality of teaching and leadership in those schools.
4. Reducing variation among schools by introducing district-wide curricula and approaches to instruction.
5. Providing professional development to district and school staffs aligned to the turnaround effort.
6. Redefining many district leadership roles to provide support for instructional improvement in schools and classrooms.
7. Modeling data-driven decision making and instruction and providing relevant and timely data to principals and teachers.
8. Beginning turnaround efforts at the elementary school level and gradually expanding from there (an example of what Mascall, Anderson and Stiegelbauer's (2010) termed a *Phased Intervention* approach to diversifying district support to schools).

Claim Seven: There are a significant number of individual strategies for turning around underperforming districts. These strategies ought to be treated as a menu of “solutions” following a careful diagnosis of the “problem”.

This section describes a total of 8 “primary” strategies and 3 “secondary” district turnaround strategies. The only basis for classifying a strategy as primary or secondary, however, is the frequency of its mention in the literature. A secondary strategy might well be the key to success for a district depending on the causes of its underperformance. Most of these strategies were briefly mentioned in the previous section. This section describes them in more detail and offers some implications for senior district leaders in Alberta.

Primary Strategies

1. Clarifying Beliefs and Vision for Students

Successful district turnaround strategies usually include going significantly beyond the “all students can learn” rhetoric and devote ongoing time to articulating “a set of shared beliefs about learning and how school systems should operate, and a vision of the future” (Cawelti, 2001, p. 34). Leaders in these districts provide time for school staffs to identify shared beliefs about learning, come to agreement on standards for such learning and establish indicators of progress.

As they move beyond the early turnaround stages and face the challenges of sustaining and improving on their satisfactory performance, some districts raise the bar significantly beyond their states' or provinces' standards for student achievement (Louis et al, 2010). Districts in the

Snipes, Doolittle & Herlihy (2007) study also went much deeper by working with schools to identify specific achievement goals to be accomplished on a set schedule with defined consequences, a strategy that adds considerable urgency to the turnaround process (see also Iatarola & Fruchte, 2004; Fullan, 2005).

District leaders in Alberta begin with a provincially-established vision for student learning, accompanied by relatively high expectations for such learning. In this context, the job of district turnaround leaders is at least to:

- Create a version of the provincial vision for student learning that captures the challenges and aspirations specific to the district's community;
- Assist each school to refine the provincial and district vision in ways that make it useful - even inspirational - for each school;
- Insist (and assist) underperforming schools to set high but achievable goals for their students;
- Model the importance of using the vision and goals for decision making and keeping the vision a "living aspiration" to work toward.

2. Improving Curriculum Quality and Aligning Elements of the Curriculum

Many successful turnaround districts engage in processes to align curriculum standards, assessment and related policies. These (U.S.) districts often develop a centralized and coordinated approach to curriculum adopted across the district (Snipes & Casserly, 2004). Some evidence suggests that these districts also provide staff development time to ensure that "the intended, taught and tested curricula are the same" (Cawelti, 2001, p35). These districts work hard to ensure that teachers are routinely able to assess student skills and knowledge before introducing new material, differentiate instruction for students as needed and reinforce learning throughout the year to ensure retention. Datnow et al. (2006) claim that significant district improvement is associated with the creation of a system-wide curriculum tied to state standards with clear expectations.

The context in which Alberta district leaders work has long provided province-wide curricula and sustained efforts to align those curricula with student assessment. In this context, the major challenge for district turnaround leaders is to:

- Monitor implementation of the provincial curriculum in their schools;
- Provide direct assistance to schools for building the capacities teachers need to implement the provincial curriculum effectively in their classrooms;
- Support individual school efforts to adapt the curriculum in response to challenges that may be unique to some of their students.

3. Improving Instructional Quality

The quality of instruction received by students has an enormous impact on their learning. In a recent summary of evidence on this point, for example, Springer and Gardner (2010) point to research which indicates that:

If a student encounters and above-average teacher for five years in a row, that could overcome the achievement gap typically found between students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches and those from higher-income backgrounds. (p. 11)

Darling-Hammond (2006) summarizes research demonstrating that "poorly prepared teachers are unable to plan curricula that meet student needs, less able to implement a range of teaching

strategies – especially those that support higher order learning...and are less likely to know what to do when students are having difficulty” (p. 152). She also points to substantial evidence indicating that “the principal-teacher relationship is the most powerful predictor of teachers’ willingness to participate in personnel, curriculum, staff development, and administrative decision making” (p. 154). National surveys in the U.S., Darling-Hammond reports, indicate that teachers decisions to stay in the profession are influenced much more by the level of administrative support they receive than the nature of their students or their relationships with parents.

As this evidence suggests, improving the quality of instruction in classrooms will be the primary task facing turnaround efforts in many schools and districts. In most cases, instructional quality is a function of the size of teachers’ instructional repertoires, their skill in enacting each of the elements of that repertoire, and their ability to chose appropriately from that repertoire in the face of different student needs. Turnaround districts are advised (Kowal, Hassel & Hassel, 2009) to target their teacher recruitment, hiring, placement, development and appraisal efforts, over the long haul, on improving each of these dimensions of teaching quality (Calkins et al, 2007).

Evidence from Snipes and Casserly (2004) indicates that turnaround districts improve teaching and learning by introducing high expectations for adults in the system, and by coordinating and embedding staff development oriented to the capacities required to implement the district’s curriculum. Iatarola & Fruchter (2004) found that the districts included in their study more likely to provide support for schools’ efforts to improve instruction than mandating instructional programs.

Alberta district leaders receive less policy guidance from the province about instruction than they do about curriculum and assessment. So there is more flexibility to enact forms of instruction based exclusively on best evidence and the unique challenges of the district. But doing so is not straightforward. The direction of much contemporary instructional reform is driven by constructivist models of learning that recommend high degrees of student-centred classroom activity. These forms of instruction align well with the instructional philosophies of a large proportion of the teaching force. However, significant bodies of empirical evidence support relatively high levels of sequential, carefully scripted and teacher directed forms of instruction for many of those students whose performance districts will often have to target for significant intervention if their turnaround efforts are to succeed. Programs such as *Success for All* which embody these forms of instruction, encounter considerable resistance from teachers in their early implementation, although their impressive contributions to achievement often remove such resistance over the longer term (e.g., Bowers, 2008).

4. Using Systematically Collected Evidence to Drive Instructional Improvements

Most studies of successful district turnaround report that improving the quality, timeliness and uses of systematic evidence for instructional improvement to be critical (e.g., Center for School Reform and Improvement, 2009). Iatarola and Fruchte (2004), for example, claim that districts in their study made better use of data for instructional decisions; they also diversified the sources and types of data used, moving beyond only student test scores. Districts in Cawelti’s (2001) study developed information management systems with school staffs capable of quickly retrieving and providing to schools and their teachers evidence about student performance.

Datnow et al.'s (2006) review of evidence indicated that improving districts also make use of high-quality research and multiple kinds of data are used for planning, problem solving, and decision making.

Building an information management system which makes data easily accessible to schools, providing opportunities for school staffs to improve their data interpretation skills, modeling productive data use at the district level, and providing access to direct support for data use in schools are all district strategies that strongly encourage data use in schools (Anderson, Leithwood and Strauss, in press). Such data use in schools, this same evidence suggested, is strongly influenced by these forms of district encouragement and assistance.

5. Developing and Distributing the Capacities of School-level Leaders

Turning around underperforming schools requires an orientation on the part of principals that is significantly different than is the case under more typical circumstances. While the same basic practices associated with successful leadership in most contexts (e.g., Leithwood et al., 2006) also are useful in turnaround school contexts, their enactment, especially in the early turnaround stages, is more intense, focused and unyielding.

While laissez-faire leadership never works, it usually takes quite “focused” leadership to stop performance decline and start the school or district back on the path to improvement (e.g., Finnigan & Stewart, 2010). Typically, this is leadership provided by one person, or a small team of people, who insist that performance must be improved, create mechanisms to hold people accountable for contributing to that improvement, and begin to alter what is often a culture of complacency in the direction of a culture of performance and high expectations.

Once performance has been stabilized and begins to show signs of improving, leadership needs to be distributed to many more people in the district or school who then take ownership for moving their organization toward acceptable levels of performance and beyond (Leithwood, Harris & Strauss, 2010). Such distribution only has its desired effects, however, when those engaged in leadership take steps to ensure that their efforts are aligned and coordinated (Leithwood et al., 2007)

Evidence provided by Leithwood, Harris and Strauss (2010) provides a more detailed account of the nature of successful leadership practices and how they are enacted by turnaround school leaders. There are four categories of such practices.

Direction setting. Most successful leaders engage in actions aimed at establishing a widely shared sense of direction on their schools but turnaround leaders must often do this more rapidly than would be possible through a highly collaborative process during the early stages of their work. They are more likely to establish the vision themselves and then work to build staff support for it. This direction-setting process on the part of turnaround leaders also entails more than average attention to the establishment of high expectations for all students. These leaders believe that their teaching colleagues and students are capable of much more than they have been accomplishing and seize every opportunity to increase their expectations significantly; they never quit communicating the school's purposes, plans, and expectations to staff, students, parents, and other stakeholders.

Capacity development. Most successful leaders also spend considerable effort on building the capacities of their staffs. For turnaround leaders, however, this is an extremely urgent matter. Staff unwilling to quickly become part of the capacity-building effort need assistance in finding other contexts in which to work. These leaders need the flexibility and autonomy to hire new staff who have the capacities needed to work effectively with at-risk children and/or children from disadvantaged family backgrounds. This will often mean working around established hiring practices in the district. Turnaround leaders also provide many forms of psychological support for their individual teaching colleagues as they pursue the directions established for the school. They use a wide array of formal to informal methods for stimulating the development of their colleagues' professional skills and knowledge and model desirable practices and values as a means of encouraging their colleagues to reflect on their own practices and become or remain actively engaged in improving them.

Organizational redesign. Turnaround leaders design their schools' organization and structures to align with the schools' directions, a task that must be done quickly in most cases. Turnaround leaders: nurture the development of norms and values that encourage staffs to work together collaboratively on the improvement of their instructional practices. They do this as part of their efforts to build a culture of high performance in their schools. They restructure their schools so that teacher collaboration is possible, likely and expected. The opportunities these new structures provide for teachers to work together also act as symbols of the value attached to the school's collective commitment to dramatically improving achievement in the school. Successful turnaround leaders also understand the enormous effect that family environments have on students' potential for academic learning. They focus considerable energy on building productive educational cultures within families and between families and their children's schools. They also encourage connections with other schools and stakeholders. And while most successful leaders connect their schools to the wider environment, leaders of schools in challenging circumstances aim, in particular, to ensure that their families and students have access to other social service agencies.

Managing the instructional program. Turnaround school leaders take special care to recruit and assign to turnaround classrooms and schools teachers who have the capacities and dispositions required to solve the unique challenges their schools face. These leaders constantly monitor evidence about the learning of students and the efforts of staff to improve such learning, continuously adjusting their own decisions and actions in response to this evidence. They buffer staff from distractions to their work with students, especially their classroom work (see also Finnigan & Stewart, 2010) and they provide significant amounts - and multiple types - of support to teachers for their instructional work, in addition to formal professional development opportunities.

Beyond the successful practices of turnaround school leaders described above, a growing body of evidence argues that districts should work to create more stable leadership in schools, as well as across the district (Datnow, et al., 2006) and to ensure that school leaders are part of peer networks (Calkins et al, 2007; Fullan, 2006); stability has been encouraged by some turnaround districts by hiring primarily from within (Iatarola & Fruchte, 2004), although such a policy

seems likely to exhaust the limits of the school turnaround leadership talent pool fairly quickly (Kowal, Hassel & Hassel, 2009).

This evidence about the importance of stable leadership is in line with leadership succession studies, more generally, which report very short average tenure of principals, in U.S. schools at least, often less than 3 years (Mascall, in press) and quite debilitating consequences for school improvement of rapid principal succession (Leithwood, Jantzi & McElheron-Hopkins, 2006). Research focused on school turnaround reports both rapid leadership turnover in underperforming schools and its negative effects on efforts to improve student achievement.

6. Transforming District Leadership Toward a Focus on Instruction

From their seven “steps” for turnaround district leaders to follow (described above), Kowal et al.’s (2009) first step is committing to success. This means demonstrating persistence in turning around the district and its schools and being prepared to stay the course. District turnaround leaders must expect some of their efforts to fail and be prepared to keep trying until they find strategies that work.

The second step is to choose turnarounds for the right schools. This means aligning the turnaround leadership “resources” available to the district with the schools most in need of being turned around. It is unlikely, in many turnaround districts, that there will be sufficient numbers of principals, for example, capable of effectively turning around all schools that might qualify as turnaround candidates. So many school leaders within a district needing to be turned around are unlikely to have either the disposition or interest to take on such a challenge. The implication for districts is that considerable care needs to be taken in the selection of schools to attempt turnaround since there is likely a quite limited pool of suitable leaders available. In the face of scarce turnaround leadership talent, it may sometimes be more productive to close an underperforming schools and disperse their students to more successful schools.

Given this potential, if not probable, scarcity of leaders skilled in school turnaround processes, the third step Kowal and her colleagues (2009) recommend is to develop a pipeline for turnaround leaders. Turnaround districts are advised to deal with the relative scarcity of talented turnaround principals by building a cadre of qualified turnaround leaders through “proactive recruitment, targeted selection and training and strategic placement in turnaround schools (Kowal, et al, 2009, p. 3).

Step four, according to Kowal et al. (2009) is to give school-level turnaround leaders considerable autonomy to do whatever is necessary (also see Calkin & Guenther; 2007). Once placed in their schools, it is widely recommended that these turnaround leaders be given considerable autonomy to do more or less whatever it takes to reverse the downward trajectory of student performance (e.g., Duke, et al, 2005). This autonomy often touches on uses of budget, hiring of staff, scheduling, and the like. The remaining steps recommended by the Kowal et al. (2009) review are to hold school leaders accountable for results, prioritize teacher hiring in turnaround schools, and proactively engage the community.

Datnow et al.’s (2006) review of evidence points to effective leadership on the part of the superintendent including “the capacity to solve problems, set clear goals, generate clear district

norms, rally support, develop and sustain trusting relationships and strong political networks, and secure needed resources to sustain reform” (p. 45).

A recent study by Knapp and his colleagues (2010) examined the efforts of three large U.S. districts to move from their traditional preoccupation with operations and management to an intense and sustained focus on improving teaching and learning. This study found that such central office transformation in all three districts entailed:

- “Creating direct, personal relationships specifically focused on helping every school principal become a stronger instructional leader” (p. v). This included the creation of assistant superintendent-like roles called “Instructional Leadership Directors (ILDs);
- Providing professional development to those central office leaders (ILDs) directly responsible for building school leaders’ instructional capacities, removing responsibilities not associated with the ILD’s development work and collaborating with, rather than going around the ILDs for non-instructional purposes;
- Reorganizing and reculturing other central office units to support teaching and learning improvement (p. vii).

The districts in this study were very large and located in the U.S. Nevertheless, their efforts to reduce “silos”, give priority to the work of central office staff most responsible for principal development, and to place other central office roles in a supportive relationship with them seems like a promising direction for much smaller turnaround districts, including those in Alberta.

The role of the senior district leadership team in turnaround is revisited and further clarified in the Conclusion to this paper.

7. Provide the Professional Development Needed for Staff to Achieve the District’s Vision and Goals

Datnow et al.’s (2006) review of research concludes, as does most other relevant research, that districts aiming to improve teaching and learning, provide school staffs with sustained and appropriate professional development. Considerable evidence now indicates that such professional development is job embedded, ongoing and sustained, “client” directed, aimed at building capacities directly related to the turnaround challenges facing the district and school, interactive, and “social” - often carried out in communities of practice (Horn & Little, 2010).

Because lack of capacity for high quality instruction teaching and effective instructional leadership are major causes of school and district underperformance, building a comprehensive system for delivering the meaningful professional development staff require must be considered a major priority for the great majority of district turnaround leaders.

8. Create a Widespread Sense of Accountability For Improving the Learning of All Children

A significant proportion of district turnaround studies identify, as important, the development of procedures to hold leaders and teachers accountable for improvements in student learning (e.g., Snipes & Casserly, 2004; Snipes, Doolittle & Herlihy, 2002). Jamentz (2006) argues, however, that common and relatively punitive views of accountability (NCLB is often cited) are unlikely to accomplish the goal of turning around student learning and that what is needed is a different

“mental model” of accountability -one embedded not in measurement and management systems but in a personal system of values” (p. 175).

An accountable school and district, Jamentz argues, is one in which accountability is a widely shared norm, accompanied by a sense of urgency for turning around student performance. District leaders, in this model aim to strengthen relationships among staff members and create conditions in which staff, students and parents recognize and accept their responsibility for improving student performance. To do this, according to Jamentz, districts need to be clear about acceptable standards of student performance and make use of professional development to create the sense of urgency and shared responsibility.

Districts also should use timely and relevant data about student achievement as the basis for most decision making and deprivatize the instructional practices of individual teachers in order to foster the collective learning of staff,. Districts are also urged to engage parents and other community stakeholders in turnaround efforts and to clarify expectations and standards for all adult members of the school community.

Secondary Strategies

1. Focus Elected officials on their Role in Improving Student Achievement

Historically, school trustees have not been viewed, nor have they viewed themselves, as central actors in furthering the student achievement agenda in districts. This is increasingly interpreted as squandering a valuable resource, however. Trustees often have unique connections with parents and other school stakeholders in the community, and so influence the support available in the community for engaging in the disruption accompanying district turnaround efforts. Trustees exercise considerable control over the amount and distribution of resources available in the district and so must at least agree to the realignment of resources inevitably required by district turnaround. And perhaps as critical to the turnaround process as anything, trustees are directly responsible for the stability and quality of senior district leadership. When trustees are primarily concerned with operational issues and individual problems raised by constituents, the challenge is to refocus them on the district’s efforts to improve the achievement of all students.

Some studies of successful district turnaround have been conducted in districts where this refocusing of trustees was an important strategy accounting for success. The most comprehensive evidence about what such a focus consists of has been captured in a comprehensive review of empirical evidence by Land (2002). She reports, in sum, that boards of trustees make significant contributions to improving student achievement in their districts when they:

- Lead or participate in assessing community values and interests and incorporating them into a the school system’s beliefs and vision for students.
- Help mobilize parents and the wider community in developing and supporting the vision?
- Help mobilize teachers and administrators in developing and supporting the vision?
- Help create a climate of excellence that makes achieving the vision possible?
- Use the board’s beliefs and vision for student learning and well being as the foundation for strategic planning and ongoing board evaluation.

- Focus most policy making on the improvement of student learning and well being consistent with the beliefs and vision.
- Identify and fund policies and programs that provide rich curricula and engaging forms of instruction for all students and eliminates those that do not.
- Maintain productive relationships with senior staff, school staffs, community stakeholders and provincial education officials.
- Provide systematic orientation opportunities for new trustee members and ongoing training for existing members.
- Support and act, individually, in accordance with decisions made by the board of trustees, as a whole.
- Avoid becoming involved in school system administration.

2. Build Relationships with Parents and the Wider Community

Parents. Without doubt, parent engagement in their children’s school work is a key explanation for variation in students’ achievement at school. By now, there is a substantial body of evidence about those features of parent engagement that make the most difference to such success (e.g., Hattie, 2009). This evidence indicates that it is primarily parent engagement in the home, not the school, that matters most. High but realistic parental expectations for student success at school, a quiet space in the home for homework, active and interactive reading with one’s young child, and access to valuable “social capital” in and through the home are all elements of children’s family experiences that make significant contributions to learning at school.

While the “educational culture” of the home, rather than parent engagement in the school, seems to matter most to student achievement, there is also a considerable body of evidence about the multiple ways in which parents might also be engaged more directly in schools (e.g., Epstein, 2001) and how principals and teachers might foster such engagement (Leithwood, 2010). However, there is very little evidence about district roles in fostering parent engagement in either the home or the school.

The most defensible conclusion to be drawn from the available evidence to help guide a district’s turnaround efforts is not to launch parent intervention strategies that are disconnected from the parent engagement work of individual schools. Rather districts are advised to:

- Strongly encourage individual schools to develop a parent engagement strategy;
- Include effective parent engagement among the criteria on which school leaders are regularly evaluated;
- Provide direct assistance, including professional development, to individual schools in their own efforts to foster parent engagement in the home
- Especially in the district’s lowest performing schools, realign resources to increase the opportunity for some school staffs to spend part of their time interacting with parents in their homes about how to help their children succeed at school, rather than expecting parents to find the time and have the inclination to come into the school.

The wider community. Citing evidence from both school and non-school sectors, Kowal & Hassel (2005) argue that successful turnaround leaders often find it helpful to launch turnaround campaigns to help ensure that their initiatives are welcomed in the wider environment in which

the organization finds itself. Turnaround processes are usually emotionally charged and easily breed mistrust and fear because established practices and expectations are being challenged. So a campaign in the wider community potentially brings a hopeful perspective to the process, one that generates positive energy rather than resistance. The responses of internal district staff to the turnaround initiatives are likely to be influenced by the responses of those in the wider community.

3. Create Collaborative Working Relationships with Teacher Unions

Productive relationships between districts and teacher unions, for purposes of district turnaround, have not been widely researched. However, a study carried out in two districts, sponsored by a consortium of U.S. national education associations and conducted by Rice (2007) offers compelling evidence about the importance of building these relationships around Interest-based Bargaining (IBB). In both districts turnaround success was attributed to the development of collaborative relationships between the local teachers' unions and the school district. The author describes this formerly adversarial relationship as including a single-minded focus on improving student achievement and a willingness on both sides to be flexible. This collaborative relationship in one of the two districts is described as follows:

Through the IBB process, [district and union] were able to address a range of key issues during negotiations, including working conditions in all schools, incentives for teachers in at-risk schools, incentives to bring special education teachers back from regular education positions, support for new teachers, and increased salaries for all teachers. The local administrators' association and [the union] went on to use IBB in contract negotiations to change the administrative salary schedule and attract strong, effective principals to the most challenging schools. IBB has also been widely accepted by the Board of School Trustees. It has made it possible for the Trustees to focus on creating a vision and implementing policies to support that vision instead of being embroiled in labor disputes. As the IBB process is implemented, the collaborative atmosphere makes it difficult for an observer to identify to which team — [union or districts]— each participant belongs. (Rice, 2007, p. 5)

The specific focus of the collaboration in one of the two districts, by way of example, included grievance resolution, waiver processes, assessment of work climate, provision of greater autonomy to schools, provision of mentors to assist new teachers, modified hiring procedures, and more flexible and creative salary arrangements for struggling schools.

Among the key conclusions about successful district turnaround reached by this study were the following:

Superintendents and school boards alone are not enough to sustain a reform effort. Creating and building upon a district's vision must, from the beginning, involve the full range of stakeholders: education associations' leadership and members, parents, community members, and outside funders.

District leadership must create an expectation among all staff that reforms can and must succeed, demonstrating a commitment to sustain and support the vision and resulting policies and actions over the long haul, irrespective of changes in personnel.

The district must be open and willing to share information with stakeholders and to accept them at the table as meaningful partners.

Districts must be prepared to review and to reorganize their structure, their staff assignments, their resource allocation methodology, and their data collection and dissemination methods to support reform efforts. (p. 25)

Adam Urbanski (2006), who has been central to the development of interest-based bargaining in Rochester, New York, claims that such bargaining is based on three key principles: “focusing on issues not personalities: using reason to make decisions not power; and sticking to interests, not positions” (135). Urbanski goes on to explain that IBB requires:

“forging an entirely different set of relationships and a different ethic in how teacher unions and school districts deal with each other. Genuine collaboration can exist only in an atmosphere of trust between equal partners. And collaboration does not mean just congeniality. It must be substantive, with the goal of turning goodwill into results” (p. 135)

Among the additional recommendations suggested by Urbanski to make IBB an effective tool for district turnaround are to negotiate “living contracts”, focus the interests around improving the quality of instruction, and creating a system of differentiated staffing and pay for teachers.

Conclusion: The Key Role of District Leadership

Evidence about the characteristics of high performing school systems used to help develop CASS’s initial framework (Leithwood, 2008) was mostly all of a kind - case studies of “outlier” districts; it was also distinctive and relatively finite (e.g., 31 studies). Much of the evidence about successful turnaround districts reviewed in this paper, in contrast, is of a different order and the advice it provides should be adopted with some care for at least four reasons.

First, there are relatively few studies that provide direct evidence about how significantly underperforming school districts became adequately or high performing districts in a relatively short period of time (the textbook definition of a “turnaround”). Furthermore, the number of such studies appears larger, on the surface, than is actually the case because the same evidence has been used as the basis for multiple articles, newsletters and briefing documents.

Second, district turnaround evidence often results in lists of common strategies for turnaround district leaders, often with a temporal flavor to them (see Claim 6 section above. These lists implicitly and likely unintentionally fly in the face of quite compelling evidence that district underperformance can have many causes. Different causes call for different strategies.

Third, district turnaround evidence is uniquely, and by definition, concerned with quick and substantial improvements in student performance. Furthermore, this evidence does demonstrate the possibility of such quick and substantial improvement. But growing evidence from research on both school and district turnarounds also indicates that sustaining a turnaround is much more challenging than is making the turnaround to begin with (e.g., Leithwood, Harris & Strauss, 2010). The need for significant and ongoing capacity development is the key to sustaining improved performance and this is not something that cannot be done quickly.

Finally, the individual strategies associated with successful turnaround identified by the evidence are not qualitatively different than strategies which are also associated with the more common district “improvement” contexts.

These four limitations explain why this review has not been limited only to studies of district turnaround even though turnaround was the focal problem. The review also sampled a growing body of evidence describing district “improvement” processes. These are studies of change in districts’ performance over relatively long periods of time and not necessarily beginning with unacceptably low student performance. The review also considered a much larger body of evidence, accumulated over decades, describing how changes occur within particular elements of a district such as district culture (e.g., Musella, 1995) superintendent-trustee relations (e.g., Allison, Allison & McHenry, 1995) and district-school leader relationships (Honig, 2008).

With such an eclectic data base, it is still reasonable to ask, What unique explanation is there for success in turning around a district, and keeping it turned around, as compared with simply improving it? The most defensible answer, in light of this evidence, is *district leadership*. As the broader literature on organizational turnaround (e.g., Kanter, 2003) makes very clear, leadership matters most in times of crisis and significant change. Almost all other elements of the successful turnaround processes, argue Murphy and Meyers (2008), are dependent on leaders’ problem solving and action.

In the case of school district turnarounds, key sources of such leadership will be the superintendent (CEO), other members of the senior administrative team, elected officials, and leaders of teacher unions working together. The speed of improvement associated with the concept of “turnaround”, furthermore, demands consistent communication and coordinated action from all of these sources of district leadership. Lack of consistency and coordination fosters confusion, misinterpretation and hesitation among school staffs about the direction and priorities of the district; it breeds a “this too will pass” attitude among some members of the district and a “wait and see” attitude among others. But what is needed is a crystal clear understanding by all district staff that (a) the time for change is now, (b) this is what the change entails, and (c) you will be held accountable for helping make the change.

The speed of the district's turnaround will be determined, in addition, by:

- The clarity and moral weight of the leadership team's vision for students;
- The transparency, logic and justification of the leadership team's plan for moving toward that vision;
- The frequency and urgency with which the vision and plan are communicated to other members of the school community;
- The intensity of the intervention provided to those schools and students in the district with the lowest performance;
- The provision of *inequitable* resources in support of the intervention (the size of the turnaround challenge requires a disproportionate share of the district's resources)
- The care with which interventions are implemented, monitored and revised in light of evidence about their effects in schools;
- The nature, extent and depth of the district's capacity development efforts.

These are the challenges or tasks district leaders are uniquely positioned to address and for which they should be held directly accountable.

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