

Spring 2020

Effective Principals, Effective Turnarounds: Considering the Role of the “Turnaround Principal” in Public School Transformation

Emil Friedman
Yale College, New Haven Connecticut

Abstract:

This project examines the role of the “turnaround principal,” who leads their school through the critical first years following a comprehensive restructuring. It conducts this examination through the lens of literature on school turnaround and principal longevity, and marshals best practices in school leadership, to grapple with the tension between the benefits of principal longevity and the practice of school turnaround. Synthesizing these diverse bodies of scholarship allows the project to take a distinct, critical view of turnaround, assessing the ways in which this kind of rapid, foundational change is effective and the ways in which it can be counterproductive. The project builds a theoretical framework by asking what the rationale is behind various school turnaround models and what the effects of principal longevity are on student performance. The project adds uniquely to the sizable field of scholarship on school transformation and building leadership by combining findings from both fields to develop a stronger understanding of what effective leadership through change looks like in the context of a struggling public school.

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**Effective Principals, Effective Turnarounds:
Considering the Role of the “Turnaround Principal” in Public School Transformation**

Emil Friedman

Education Studies Capstone Project

Yale College

Submitted May 1, 2020

Primary Advisor: Prof. Mira Debs

Abstract

This project examines the role of the “turnaround principal,” who leads their school through the critical first years following a comprehensive restructuring. It conducts this examination through the lens of literature on school turnaround and principal longevity, and marshals best practices in school leadership, to grapple with the tension between the benefits of principal longevity and the practice of school turnaround. Synthesizing these diverse bodies of scholarship allows the project to take a distinct, critical view of turnaround, assessing the ways in which this kind of rapid, foundational change is effective and the ways in which it can be counterproductive. The project builds a theoretical framework by asking what the rationale is behind various school turnaround models and what the effects of principal longevity are on student performance. The project adds uniquely to the sizable field of scholarship on school transformation and building leadership by combining findings from both fields to develop a stronger understanding of what effective leadership through change looks like in the context of a struggling public school.

Introduction

On a balmy, sticky morning in June of 2018, I accompanied my colleagues in one of the subdivisions of the New York State Education Department on a visit to a middle school. I will refer to this school as IS 123.¹ The school is tucked in a poor neighborhood in the Bronx, serving about 300 primarily low-income Black and Hispanic sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. As my team and I sat around a circular table in the principal's office to chat with school leadership over coffee before beginning classroom visits, I couldn't help but notice the abundance of educational buzzwords posted on the walls surrounding us: "We are a STEAM school!" read one poster. (Buzzwords and acronyms often go hand in hand; STEAM stands for science, technology, engineering, arts, and math.) Another proclaimed that "Leadership matters!" A large part of one side of the office was dedicated to a "data wall," listing bi-weekly computerized testing results for every student at the school. Most students' names were highlighted in red, which meant, according to the key, that they were "still struggling."

Our 2018 visit was meant to be a compliance check for just our division of the state education department, but the school's overall atmosphere was obvious: overwhelmed and frantic. As my team and I were escorted to the main office earlier, I had noticed teachers and support staff with bullhorns, ordering students to "get to class!" Several security checkpoints with metal detectors and wands faced lines so long that one guard simply waved students through. I was struck by how overburdened staff seemed: With only 300 students, this "small school" was designed to enhance

¹ As my function at the time was an intern rather than a researcher, I do not name the schools or staff in the body of the paper to maintain anonymity.

one-on-one attention between staff and students, but the hallways we walked through felt massive and impersonal.

When my team and I conducted classroom visits later in the day, meeting teachers and students across subjects and grade levels, it became clear just how many challenges faced IS 123. In an eight grade English class, students sat at their desks, annotating an article about penguins and answering questions about the text. I could not help but recall doing similar exercises during my time in middle school. Such activities were straightforward, designed mainly to practice reading for comprehension.

Meanwhile, the students' teacher sat at her desk, grading other work that students had already handed in. "Five minutes and you better be done!" the teacher shouted at her students as my team left the classroom. The students received the order, by my estimation, passively, almost defeated.

Nowhere were the challenges clearer than in the young and inexperienced, though well-intentioned, principal. A black woman who attended a private liberal arts college before returning to her hometown of New York City, the principal had taught in a different middle school for two years. After teaching but before joining IS 123, she enrolled in the city's now-defunct Leadership Academy program, which was an accelerated program to feed more principals into the shrinking pool of those willing to lead struggling schools.²

² "New York City Closes the Door on Mayor Bloomberg's Boot Camp for Principals, Marking End of an Era," *Chalkbeat* (blog), August 31, 2017, <https://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/ny/2017/08/31/new-york-city-closes-the-door-on-mayor-bloombergs-boot-camp-for-principals-marking-end-of-an-era/>.

Back in our meeting, the head of my office listened politely and nodded along as the principal spoke of the challenges in setting school-wide cultural norms and serving students with wildly different levels of proficiency in reading. “How can we build a culture from scratch when we have so few hours in the day?” she asked nobody in particular. “How can I have an ELA teacher of 28 kids differentiate her instruction to 28 different reading levels?”

The head of my office spoke with more candor as we exited the school several hours later: “That poor, *baby* principal has no idea what to do. We’ve got to keep an eye on this place.”

That principal had, in fairness, been dealt a challenging hand of cards. IS 123 was wrapping up its first year as a transformed “Renewal” school. This meant that over just the prior summer, the struggling school previously occupying that building, which I’ll call “JSH 456,” had been closed. Its principal had been fired, its teachers forced to reapply for their jobs, and its mission and structure reimagined, from implementing a longer school day to hiring “literacy coaches” to float from classroom to classroom throughout the school day.^{3,4} While the skeleton of IS 123 hadn’t undergone change — the building was identical, the stone above its entrance still etched with “JHS 456” — nearly every other part of the school had. Indeed, just 50 percent of JHS 456’s teachers were re-hired to IS 123, the rest “reassigned” to other schools throughout the city. The other half of the faculty was new and young, incentivized to teach at IS 123 by New York City’s bonus system for those who elect to teach in the city’s most troubled neighborhoods, including many in

³ “The Only School in New York Threatened with a Takeover by State Officials May Soon Learn Its Fate,” *Chalkbeat* (blog), December 13, 2016, <https://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/ny/2016/12/13/the-only-school-in-new-york-threatened-with-a-takeover-by-state-officials-may-soon-learn-its-fate/>.

⁴ Kate Taylor, “New York City to Close ‘Persistently Struggling’ School in the South Bronx,” *The New York Times*, December 16, 2016, sec. New York, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/16/nyregion/south-bronx-jhs-162-lola-rodriguez-de-tio.html>.

the Bronx. Dubbed “The Bronx Plan” by Chancellor Richard Carranza, the city Department of Education identified “hard to staff” schools and offered an additional \$7,200 per year to teachers willing to work in those buildings.⁵

This dramatic set of changes for the school reflected the urgency expressed by Mayor Bill de Blasio when he introduced the Renewal program, his signature education policy which was designed to identify New York City’s most struggling schools and rapidly transform them through personnel change, additional instructional supports, and even rebranding, as was the case for IS 123.⁶ Instead of closing failing schools and rezoning students to better performing schools, a practice that Mayor Mike Bloomberg’s administration had championed, Mayor de Blasio spearheaded Renewal as a way to reinvest resources in struggling schools, giving them a chance through enhanced support. The program allocated \$773 million across 100 schools and increased full-time equivalent (FTE) assignments for each, which included support staff such as social workers and psychologists, building on the already substantial funding those schools received through Title I federal resources.⁷ In the context of public school funding, Renewal schools became some of the highest financed public schools in the United States.

⁵ “Chancellor Carranza Announces Bronx Plan Hard-to-Staff Salary Differential,” web, accessed February 8, 2020, <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/about-us/news/announcements/contentdetails/2019/04/09/chancellor-carranza-announces-bronx-plan-hard-to-staff-salary-differential>.

⁶ Elizabeth A. Harris, “De Blasio Unveils New Plans for Troubled Schools in New York,” *The New York Times*, November 3, 2014, sec. New York, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/04/nyregion/de-blasio-unveils-new-plans-for-troubled-schools-in-new-york.html>.

⁷ Eliza Shapiro, “\$773 Million Later, de Blasio Ends Signature Initiative to Improve Failing Schools,” *The New York Times*, February 26, 2019, sec. New York, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/26/nyregion/renewal-initiative-de-blasio.html>.

Yet, five years later, achievement data collected for IS 123 is nearly identical to that of JHS 456.⁸ Just as was the case pre-renewal, pre- “STEAM school,” pre- “data wall,” the vast majority of IS 123’s students are not proficient in reading or mathematics. Most score a “1” out of 4 on New York State standardized assessments. Those students were even outperformed by their peers at other middle schools in the same school district in the Bronx, meaning that even controlling for the neighborhood and socioeconomic conditions that students attending IS 123 face, the school has shown few signs of real improvement — a far cry from De Blasio’s aspirations. Indeed, the story of the school I visited, in which an intense school transformation yielded few meaningful academic improvements for students, is similar to that of many other Renewal schools. In early 2019, five years into the Renewal program and nearly 1 billion dollars deep, the program was shuttered.⁹ De Blasio himself acknowledged that his ambitious goals for transforming schools had yielded “mixed results,” with many transformed schools even posting *worse* academic results than those before transformation.^{10, 11}

While De Blasio branded his version of turnaround as “Renewal,” the program was structurally identical to other models used across the United States, though it infused more capital than most other efforts.¹² For nearly 20 years, “turnaround” has been the last-ditch model deployed to address

⁸ “School Performance Dashboard - New York City Department of Education,” accessed April 5, 2020, <https://tools.nycenet.edu/dashboard/>.

⁹ “NYC Ends Controversial Renewal Turnaround Program,” *Chalkbeat* (blog), February 26, 2019, <https://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/ny/2019/02/26/de-blasio-renewal-school-turnaround/>.

¹⁰ Isaac M. Opper et al., “Assessing the Short-Term Impact of the New York City Renewal Schools Program:” Product Page, 2019, https://www.rand.org/pubs/working_papers/WR1303.html.

¹¹ Meredith Kolodner, “New York City Is Investing Millions in Impoverished Children’s Social-Emotional Growth,” *The Atlantic*, February 9, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/02/the-renewal-school-gamble/515985/>.

¹² “The Renewal Schools Program Wasn’t a Failure, It Was a Lesson |,” *NYU Steinhardt At a Glance* (blog), accessed April 5, 2020, <https://research.steinhardt.nyu.edu/site/metroblog/2019/02/28/the-renewal-schools-program-wasnt-a-failure-it-was-a-lesson-for-the-country/>.

America's most persistently underperforming schools, built on the theory that only through dramatic, rapid reform can a failing school substantially improve academic results for students. And, in some cases, the theory holds truth: Some schools that undergo turnaround *do* make substantial gains in academic achievement.¹³ Yet other schools undergoing turnaround not only fail to show meaningful improvement, but in some cases actually perform worse than they did before.¹⁴ The question, then, is what conditions in a turnaround school are most conducive to successful reform efforts.

As I reflect on my visit to IS 123 and my meeting with the “baby principal,” coupled with the reality that leadership replacement is one of the few changes common throughout all turnaround efforts — indeed, the bones of the school, like students, parents, and neighborhoods, hold constant — I view the turnaround principal as an important independent variable in turnaround efforts that warrants serious examination. IS 123's new principal seemed well-intentioned, but given that the main strategy to improve the school was to replace the incumbent principal with her, I wondered how effective it was to place an inexperienced, young leader in a school that required rapid, meaningful change.

Needless to say, the stakes are high. Not only does school turnaround, exemplified by the Renewal program's sky-high budget, commit millions of additional taxpayer-funded dollars per building, but it also affects some of the United States' poorest, most vulnerable students. A Department of Education analysis shows that in a sample of students who attend turnaround schools nationwide,

¹³ Rachael Lawrence, “Turning around the Culture of Teaching and Learning: A Turnaround School Success Story,” *Doctoral Dissertations*, January 1, 2016, https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_2/698.

¹⁴ Coby Meyers and Marlene Darwin, eds., *Enduring Myths That Inhibit School Turnaround* (Information Age Publishing, 2017).

81 percent receive free or reduced lunch, 65 percent are black or Hispanic; 42 percent are proficient in reading, and 20 percent are proficient in math.¹⁵ Every single one of these students deserves to have access to successful schools.

More important than simply considering why some turnaround efforts fail is considering how to get turnaround right. This paper begins to grapple with this knotty question by framing it as a series of explicit inquiries about turnaround school leadership: What do schools need from their principals in order to create the best conditions for sustainable student achievement? How do those learnings intersect and, in some cases, clash with the practice of replacing incumbent principals as a part of school turnaround? By channeling the answers to the first two questions, how can best practices in building leadership *and* school turnaround be leveraged in concert to make turnaround more successful in more schools over longer periods of time? Importantly, while turnaround efforts almost always are complemented with an infusion of funding to a school, either through enhanced services or simply through grants, this project does not tackle directly the question of whether increasing school funding increases academic achievement. Instead, this project evaluates one of the central factors in turnaround efforts themselves: leadership replacement. How can we in good faith make the case to the parents of students attending schools like the late JHS 456 that only through turnaround to “renewed” schools like IS 123 can their children have access to a high-quality education and have confidence in the merit of our promises?

Methodology

¹⁵ “Tinkering Toward Transformation: A Look at Federal School Improvement Grant Implementation | Center on Reinventing Public Education,” accessed February 8, 2020, <https://www.crpe.org/publications/tinkering-toward-transformation-look-federal-school-improvement-grant-implementation>.

My project surveys the existing literature about the relationship between principal longevity and student achievement and the main components of school turnaround as dictated by state and federal law — especially the practice of replacing the incumbent building principal. The survey includes a discussion on how school leaders build trust (earn “buy-in”) with other school stakeholders. While substantial scholarship exists surrounding each of these two fields, the literature thus far fails to combine the two areas to in order to develop a theoretical framework on principal replacement during turnaround. More practically, this approach will help to elucidate best practices for schools and leaders.

We have access to substantial scholarship on the best practices that principals in general can employ, and we have access to literature on school turnaround. The meaningful contribution this project makes is putting one of the primary insights from scholarship on school leadership — that trust, relationships, and longevity matter — in conversation with the feature of school turnaround that principals are by definition replaced with a new leader. It attempts to grapple with the contradictions and tensions that the scholarship can create with the practice of turnaround. Indeed, as a subsequent section of this paper shows, a school undergoing turnaround will *necessarily* replace its principal, meaning that changes in leadership are one of the few common threads running through all turnaround efforts nationwide. As such, my project devotes sections to provide context on school turnaround models in the United States; principal longevity as an independent variable in school performance; best practices in school leadership during rapid change; and then a synthesis of these diverse categories to create a new framework for the “turnaround principal.”

Specifically, the following sub-sections build a theoretical framework with which to understand the role of the “turnaround principal” by examining four distinct domains of literature on turnaround, school leadership, and their intersections. First, I outline the basic premise behind school turnaround and the four federal models from which local education agencies (LEAs), or public boards of education, can choose. Next, I begin developing an understanding of the role of a school principal by examining two key independent variables that are known to be most directly associated with positive school achievement: one, longevity in a single building, and two, trust between the principal and school stakeholders. Finally, I adapt these learnings about principal leadership by applying them to literature on school organizational design and change management, since this project focuses particularly on the role of the principal during moments of rapid change. This series of sections as a whole is meant to sift through and synthesize diverse bodies of literature in order to develop a rich theoretical grounding for the conclusion of the project, which will include specific policy recommendations with an eye on the future of school turnaround efforts.

Last-Ditch Efforts: Turning Around America’s Bottom 5 Percent

The federal government has historically taken a limited role in dictating education policy at the level of LEAs, instead allowing most jurisdiction over schooling to remain at the district and state levels. In the case of IS 123, for example, most of the school’s policies and operations sit with the New York City Department of Education. Concurrently, contemporary federal education policy leverages grant incentives to promote compliance with national initiatives, drawing states and local

education agencies to follow policy priorities through overwhelmingly tempting funding opportunities.¹⁶

Compiled beginning in the early 2000s, a compelling body of statistical analyses showed the disproportionate effects that America's "bottom 5 percent" of schools have on overall student success.¹⁷ Building on these data, the Obama administration effectively increased the power that the federal government has over school policy through its 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). This legislation enforced compliance with a suite of school reform measures through billions of dollars in competitive grants.¹⁸ ARRA marked a major change in the national educational agenda, as it became abundantly clear that the ambitious universal proficiency goal of No Child Left Behind would be all but impossible to achieve. The Department of Education subsequently pivoted to focus explicitly on America's lowest-performing schools.¹⁹

As a part of ARRA, schools across the country that fell in the "bottom 5 percent," measured as schools which had perpetually not met adequate yearly progress (AYP) on standardized assessments, were eligible for substantial funding from Race to the Top and Title I School Improvement Grants, totaling on the order of millions of dollars per school, if they adopted one of four models of rapid and dramatic school change. In other words, using significant fiscal resources

¹⁶ Maris Vinovskis, *From A Nation at Risk to No Child Left Behind: National Education Goals and the Creation of Federal Education Policy* (Teachers College Press, 2015).

¹⁷ "Tinkering Toward Transformation: A Look at Federal School Improvement Grant Implementation | Center on Reinventing Public Education," accessed February 8, 2020, <https://www.crpe.org/publications/tinkering-toward-transformation-look-federal-school-improvement-grant-implementation>.

¹⁸ "Federal Funding and the Four Turnaround Models - The School Turnaround Field Guide," Knowledge Center, accessed November 11, 2019, <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/federal-funding-school-turnaround-field-guide.aspx>.

¹⁹ "School Improvement Grants," Program Home Page, May 25, 2018, <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/index.html>.

as the incentive, the federal government all but compelled America's lowest-performing schools to select one of four standardized, nationalized models of change. Importantly, while this question is beyond the scope of this project, scholars remain conflicted whether school turnaround is an effective practice altogether.²⁰ Still, the theory of action behind this dramatic initiative was bold: If the bottom fraction of schools in the country could be improved, overall academic performance in the country could be lifted up, too.²¹

The first model, *closure*, is the most extreme option, shuttering the failing school in question and distributing its students to neighboring schools. The option is practical only when there are sufficient alternative buildings to the failing school that can absorb the student population, circumstances which are relatively rare.²² The second model, *restart*, hands over operation of the school in question to a charter or education management organization. The third model, *turnaround*, involves a dramatic and swift change in human capital: The principal and at least half of the staff of the school in question are replaced, in an attempt to infuse the building with a fresh faculty and leadership. In some cases, like that of IS 123, the school is renamed and rebranded, sometimes with a new theme or curriculum, as well. This practice serves twofold: It helps to build a new identity for the school, but it also seeks to attract students from outside the school's neighborhood, interested to a specialty field, like STEAM. The fourth model, *transformation*, modifies *turnaround* by still replacing the principal, but maintaining staff and providing them with enhanced professional development; the fourth model is meant to be used in schools where the

²⁰ Alyson Klein, "Turnaround Momentum Still Fragile," *Education Week* 31, no. 28 (April 18, 2012).

²¹ Joseph F. Murphy and Joshua F. Bleiberg, *School Turnaround Policies and Practices in the US: Learning from Failed School Reform* (Springer, 2018).

²² Rebecca Herman, "Scaling School Turnaround," *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)* 17, no. 1–2 (January 1, 2012): 25–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2012.637166>.

core instructional staff is competent, but consistent between both the third and fourth models is replacement of the principal.²³

While schools have broad agency to select which turnaround model to adopt, 94% of turnaround schools since School Improvement Grants were introduced considered *closure* and *restart* to be off the table, instead selecting either *turnaround* or *transformation*.²⁴ The figure below summarizes the percentage of schools that selected each of the four models, drawn from a body of roughly 5,000 schools undergoing turnaround per school year.

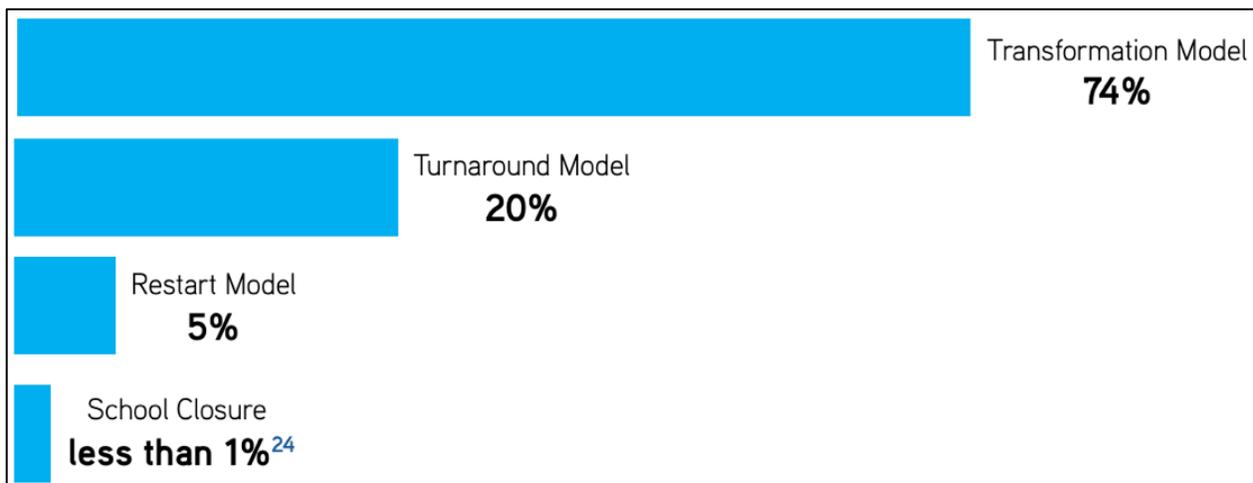


Figure 1: Models chosen by turnaround schools through SY 2010-2011. Adapted from “School Turnaround: A Pocket Guide.”²⁵

The “restart” and “school closure” models, since they essentially rebuild a school from the ground up — and only cover a small fraction of schools participating in turnaround — are outside the scope of this paper. Rather, this paper focuses on the single unifying factor in federal turnaround

²³ *School Turnaround: A Pocket Guide. Reauthorizing ESEA: Making Research Relevant* (American Institutes for Research, 2011), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED530797>.

²⁴ “School Turnaround Efforts: What’s Been Tried, Why Those Efforts Failed, and What to Do Now,” *Rockefeller Institute of Government* (blog), accessed February 8, 2020, <https://rockinst.org/issue-area/school-turnaround-efforts-whats-been-tried-why-those-efforts-failed-and-what-to-do-now/>.

²⁵ *School Turnaround*.

models in buildings that are not closed or restarted: *replacing the principal*. Indeed, to follow any federal model, a school cannot engage in turnaround while leaving itself intact and *not* replacing its principal. Taking the signal from these federal models that turning around a school *necessarily* involves replacing the leader, this project puts the turnaround leader at the center of these rapid instances of change. This focus is especially pressing, because school turnaround efforts over the past 10 years have seen dramatically varied degrees of success. Some turnaround schools not only fail to demonstrate adequate yearly progress (AYP), but even perform worse than they did before turnaround efforts took place; other turnaround schools exceed AYP projections and make dramatic gains in student achievement.²⁶ Because replacing building leadership is one of the characteristic components of turnaround, a study of best practices in turnaround principals *is implicitly a study of best practices in turning around schools*. It is, more concretely, a study of the “baby principal” in IS 123 and how her background, experience, and characteristics work in a turnaround situation. School leadership is a central challenge, and potential key, in school turnaround.

The next section examines the first of two key factors in school leadership: principal longevity, important because it helps inform the paper’s later discussion of the intersection between turnaround efforts and school leadership.

Commitment to the Long Run: Principal Longevity as a Factor in Academic Success

²⁶ Judy Jackson May and Eugene T. W. Sanders, “Beyond Standardized Test Scores: An Examination of Leadership and Climate as Leading Indicators of Future Success in the Transformation of Turnaround Schools,” *Journal of Urban Learning, Teaching, and Research* 9 (2013): 42–54.

Given the importance of a principal to a turnaround school, focusing on best practices in school leadership — that is, the leadership characteristics that matter — is crucial. One of these characteristics, importantly, is length of tenure, and the literature on principal longevity is clear. Whether measured in terms of standardized test scores or in terms of building-wide stakeholder trust, principals who stay in their schools for longer periods of time tend to be associated with better results for students. While this project does not specifically address principal training, in general, as principals amass experience and context-specific knowledge, their instructional and building leadership becomes stronger.

Still, rare is the principal who stays in their building for the long run; in 2019, only 11 percent of principals in the United States had been in their schools for 10 years or longer. Thirty-five percent of principals had been in their schools for two or fewer years, and the overall yearly turnover rate of principals was 18 percent; 21 percent in high-poverty schools.²⁷ For context, the yearly turnover rate for teachers is 10 percent and the yearly turnover rate for federal white-collar jobs is around 15 percent.²⁸ In short, school principals tend to be a highly transient population, especially so in high-poverty buildings. This rapid turnover can have detrimental effects on a school community; high principal turnover rates are associated with high teacher turnover and lower student achievement.²⁹ Without consistent, dependable leadership, teachers and students alike can feel a sense of whiplash on everything from school behavioral standards to instructional practices.³⁰

²⁷ “Understanding and Addressing Principal Turnover: A Review of the Research,” Learning Policy Institute, accessed November 11, 2019, <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/nassp-understanding-addressing-principal-turnover-review-research-report>.

²⁸ Desiree Carver-Thomas and Linda Darling-Hammond, “Teacher Turnover: Why It Matters and What We Can Do About It,” n.d., 60.

²⁹ “Examining Principal Turnover,” National Education Policy Center, accessed November 11, 2019, <https://nepc.colorado.edu/blog/examining-principal-turnover>.

³⁰ Grace Casey, “Sustaining Leadership: Identifying Factors That Inform Principal Longevity.,” February 22, 2016, <https://digital.library.txstate.edu/handle/10877/6028>.

Yet, when principals *do* remain in their positions for longer periods of time, the downstream effects on student achievement can be impressive, surpassing the odds dictated by socioeconomic and racial conditions.³¹ Schools with principals who remained in their positions for 10 or more years are associated with higher achievement than circumstantially similar schools with more inexperienced principals.³² The trend can be credited to several of principals' core roles that depend on experience and relational trust, particularly in low-income buildings, according to an analysis by researchers at the National Bureau of Economic Research of schools in Florida. First, low-income schools tend to have younger, more inexperienced teaching staff, so a veteran principal has the opportunity to develop a durable instructional culture for even first-year staff through professional development, mentorship, and observation. Second, principals who remain in their school longer are more effective partners in professional development delivery, since they have more experience in their school's context and community; their ability to observe classrooms and provide productive feedback to teachers is enhanced as well. Third, principals who remain in their school longer generally have greater credibility with their teaching staff, meaning that they can more effectively implement reforms in their building at levels much less drastic than, for instance, full turnaround.³³ Several other statistical analyses on state-level datasets support the premise of these theories, finding statistically significant correlations between principal longevity and student achievement, controlling for other factors, like teacher quality and conditions at

³¹ Tara Beteille, Demetra Kalogrides, and Susanna Loeb, *Effective Schools: Managing the Recruitment, Development, and Retention of High-Quality Teachers. Working Paper 37* (National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research, 2009), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED509688>.

³² Tara Beteille, Demetra Kalogrides, and Susanna Loeb, "Stepping Stones: Principal Career Paths and School Outcomes," Working Paper (National Bureau of Economic Research, July 2011), <https://doi.org/10.3386/w17243>.

³³ Beteille, Kalogrides, and Loeb.

home.^{34,35} In even dire circumstances, in other words, principals who stay in their schools for the long run seem to have a meaningful effect on student performance. While still other variables may confound these results, there is enough evidence that longevity matters in some fashion to warrant deeper consideration of this factor.

Yet, the premise of school turnaround asserts that replacing a principal in the service of a refreshed, disrupted school culture is to be seen as an *asset*. This suggests that there may be cases where the marginal benefits that an incumbent principal brings to a school in terms of relational trust and experience are outweighed by the advantages of introducing a new leader who compensates with, for instance, a stronger instructional vision or leadership capability. Indeed, current literature on the benefits of principal longevity does not isolate the category of bottom 5 percent schools that would be subject to turnaround. If such literature existed, we would be able to assess whether long-term leaders in the bottom 5 percent of schools still make the same positive contributions to student performance, despite their overall low rankings. Additionally, this analysis does not consider the reality that principal replacement during turnaround is, in part, a move made for optics. Replacing leadership connotes reinvention, an indication to school stakeholders that the school is foundationally being transformed from the top down.³⁶ Indeed, while the federal turnaround models do not marshal specific evidence to support the leadership replacement pillar, the alternative is more helpful to consider: It is difficult to imagine a true turnaround model that, in the spirit of transformation, does *not* replace leadership.

³⁴ Jennifer Swearingen, "Principal Longevity, Leadership Behaviors, and Student Academic Achievement," *Theses and Dissertations*, December 15, 2014, <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/3021>.

³⁵ David McDonald, "The Relationship Between Principal Longevity and Student Achievement In Middle Schools In South Carolina," *Theses and Dissertations*, January 1, 2013, <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/2443>.

³⁶ Susan McLester, "Turnaround Principals," *District Administration* 47, no. 5 (May 2011): 40.

In the absence of targeted research, we must temper our faith in the archetype of the incumbent principal with the reality that, still, these schools are deeply challenged and require urgent intervention. While no research thus far attempts to empirically determine for turnaround schools whether or not replacing a principal results in higher overall achievement in the long run, we can at least say that the learnings from existing research on principal longevity complicate the notion of principal replacement and introduce potential unintended consequences.

The implications on the project from what we know about the importance of principal longevity are clear: Turning around a school, and, thus, removing a principal, could theoretically be counterproductive. While the determination of whether this drawback outweighs the benefits of leadership replacement is much more complicated, this is critical context for the second half of this paper, when it develops policy recommendations based on these theoretical learnings.

The next section examines the specific mechanics behind principal-stakeholder relations, as this is another important role of the principal, alongside the instructional core.³⁷

What Can't Be Rushed: Principal-Stakeholder Relations

In addition to incorporating the importance of longevity, turnaround policy should also factor in the importance of a principal as the repository of a community's trust in the school. Beyond leading their school's instructional core, a principal is also a figurehead, meaning the principal sets the tone for relationship-building between teachers, staff, students, parents, and community members

³⁷ Bêteille, Kalogrides, and Loeb, "Stepping Stones."

and often mediates conflicts. Trust built between the leader and stakeholders, including teachers, students, and parents, is important. More crucially, a principal's stakeholder trust measured through teacher, staff, student, and parent surveys, has been shown to be associated with overall student achievement, for the downstream effects trust has on the other main components of a student's life at school and at home, from teachers to parents to community members.³⁸ In that light, a rich body of literature suggests that, indeed, a significant benefit of principal longevity is the ability to form deep relationships and bonds of trust across a school community.^{39, 40}

Jane MODOONO's *The Trust Factor*⁴¹ offers a helpful framework in understanding the specific components of trustworthy principals, qualities developed over an extended period of time that would be important to consider in the context of turnaround. The first component is collaboration: When principals leverage the credibility and experience of their teaching staff, they at once display that they trust their staff to learn from one another, and they draw on peer-to-peer professional development, a proven technique in improving teaching quality and academic achievements for students. Principals have the crucial ability to foster mutual learning between teachers, theoretically raising instructional practices for all students and blurring the line between stronger and weaker educators.⁴²

³⁸ Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider, *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2002).

³⁹ Wayne K. Hoy and And Others, "Faculty Trust in Colleagues: Linking the Principal with School Effectiveness," *Journal of Research and Development in Education* 26, no. 1 (1992): 38–45.

⁴⁰ Dimitri Van Maele, Patrick B. Forsyth, and Mieke Van Houtte, eds., *Trust and School Life: The Role of Trust for Learning, Teaching, Leading, and Bridging* (Springer Netherlands, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-8014-8>.

⁴¹ "The Trust Factor - Educational Leadership," accessed November 11, 2019, <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/may17/vol74/num08/The-Trust-Factor.aspx>.

⁴² Marvin Willerman and And Others, *Teachers Helping Teachers: Peer Observation and Assistance* (Praeger, Greenwood Press, Inc, 1991).

The second component from MODOONO'S framework is "coming together as a community," which involves earning trust over a period of "at least three years," the duration it takes to become an "institutionalized" part of a community as viewed by passive bystanders. More specifically, MODOONO writes that principals most effectively earn trust by respecting, to a degree, institutional knowledge that already exists in a school. Respecting a school's legacy, positive or negative, is part of building a shared foundation upon which to move forward. For example, entering a school as a new leader with an agenda crafted entirely outside of the school context would be viewed as more threatening to existing stakeholders than implementing smaller, incremental changes to the status quo over a longer period of time.

This notion invokes a powerful lesson to be recalled in our discussion of school turnaround: Even a revolutionary school leader is helped by signaling acknowledgement of past practice, even if they do so in the spirit of change.

MODOONO also cites the "smaller" acts that meaningfully build stakeholder trust as well: Asking a teacher, for example, how their family is doing. She emphasizes that "how a leader responds and how a community supports the individual speaks volumes about the organization and the trust that people feel." The third component of the framework is honesty: being open and honest about a principal's leadership agenda, even if it goes against the organizational grain of a school. In addition, honesty means being willing for a principal to ask for help from teachers or assistant principals — demonstrating this skill is meaningful for the rest of a staff. The fourth component is creating fora for stakeholder discussion, as an important indicator of trust is the willingness of staff to be transparent about their concerns. Finally, the fifth component is maintaining a focus on what

matters in a school: student learning. Principals implicitly build trust by making their mission about students, not themselves.⁴³

Broadly, MODOONO's framework suggests that the most trustworthy principals strike a balance between coming to a building with a deliberate agenda and plugging into pre-existing institutional norms, constantly negotiating between enacting their own vision and building upon the trust of the school that was shaped prior to their arrival. In the context of the data that show how short most principal tenures are, especially in struggling schools, MODOONO's findings reinforce how important demonstrating respect to a school's intrinsic characteristics is.

Regardless of specific angles to stakeholders and trust, the work takes time and commitment; it cannot be rushed. The next section builds on this idea by examining specifically the methods in change management and organizational design implemented by principals that prove most effective in a school, to show how the temporal factor exists in the context of principal replacement and rapid change.

Deliberate Moves: Change Management and Organizational Design in Schools

When a principal is tasked with making rapid changes, research has shown that giving teachers a certain level of autonomy and providing them with strong mentorship are the two practices that organizationally support school turnaround efforts. A rich body of literature suggests that alongside stakeholder trust are specific mechanisms by which principals can effectively lead

⁴³ "The Trust Factor - Educational Leadership."

schools through periods of rapid change, providing important background in ultimately considering how turnaround principals can be most effective.

Building on MODOONO'S findings by detailing specific ways that principals can grant ownership to teachers over their work, Camille Rutherford, a professor of education who evaluates the implications of effective leadership, identifies the following components as critically important for schools undergoing intense change, such as a turnaround effort:

1. Empower teachers to become instructional leaders. Formalizing multiple "lead teacher" and "senior teacher" roles, for example, creates "leadership redundancies" that contribute to organizational effectiveness.
2. Continue principal-level professional development. Teachers are more likely to trust and grant credibility to leaders who continue to learn themselves and demonstrate expertise over the instructional core.
3. Place teachers on a Leadership Team that votes in organizational decisions alongside the principal. Granting ownership to teachers increases buy-in across all stakeholder groups.⁴⁴

Rutherford's three components are built on her four years of ethnographic observation at an elementary school in New Jersey that underwent turnaround, transforming from a district public school to a building run by an outside charter management organization — a case study not dissimilar from the types of structural transformations that occur in non-charter turnaround

⁴⁴ Camille Rutherford, "Teacher Leadership and Organizational Structure," *Journal of Educational Change* 7, no. 1 (March 1, 2006): 59–76, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-006-0013-4>.

schools. During her observations, Rutherford noticed two important features of the school as it underwent intense change.

First, given structural disruption, stakeholders — teachers who are rehired by the new school, parents, other staff — are more likely to buy-in to the new school’s mission and culture if they are granted authentic ownership over their work. For example, she noticed that teachers seemed happier when they felt that they themselves could make decisions about their own classrooms, rather than the principal or some other outside force.

Second, she found that when the principal intentionally distributed responsibilities to multiple, redundant teacher-leaders, all teachers felt they could identify mentor figures to improve their own craft. In terms of this paper’s aims, Rutherford’s findings are helpful in developing a core set of best practices that turnaround principals ought to follow. Given that most turnaround scenarios are similarly transformational to staff behavior and school culture, the principle of distributing leadership to build competency and trust holds the potential to compensate for the loss of institutional knowledge that replacing an incumbent principal can represent.

Spillane et al. build on Rutherford’s findings that distributing leadership is an effective way of managing rapid change by using a “distributed perspective on leading practice.” They argue that “while individual leaders and their attributes do matter in constructing leadership practice, they

are not all that matters.” Rather, the situation surrounding a leader’s actions, like material artifacts, language, and tools are an important element of leadership as a practice.⁴⁵

In terms of turnaround principals, the literature’s lessons are clear: In order to be successful, not only must a turnaround principal grapple with the challenge of building stakeholder relations, often from scratch, but they must also deliberately make organizational design choices that contribute best to overall school effectiveness. This is, without question, a challenging — nearly overwhelming — set of responsibilities to which IS 123’s new principal attested during my visit. Part of this paper’s aim is to make specific what approaches turnaround principals should take in order to encourage a successful first few years post-turnaround, grounding insurmountable projects in particular practices that improve the work of turnaround.

Proposal and Synthesis

The preceding literature review reveals the characteristics of a pragmatic, effective set of proposals, guided by the goal of improving the outcomes of school turnaround efforts through leadership. For the purpose of this project, the proposals engage with what must happen *in* turnaround schools. However, a broad question of recruitment, both of principals and experienced teachers who can serve in informal leadership roles in turnaround schools, remains, particularly at the district level. Future policy work should prioritize the project of developing and maintaining a strong pipeline of educators who can assume demanding positions in turnaround schools.

⁴⁵ James P. Spillane, Richard Halverson, and John B. Diamond, “Investigating School Leadership Practice: A Distributed Perspective,” *Educational Researcher* 30, no. 3 (2001): 23–28.

Based on the assumption that the principal replacement component of turnaround remains intact — in the spirit of the commonly-used federal “transformation” and “turnaround models,” — in this section I identify three overarching principles of turnaround school leadership, and provide an example policy for each principle that could realistically be implemented.

Principles for Successful Turnaround School Leadership⁴⁶

1. **Turnaround schools need proven, experienced principals.** Federal turnaround models do not enumerate what the characteristics of a qualified turnaround principal are. However, the literature this paper surveys suggests a clear definition of an “experienced” turnaround leader. First, the leader should have done past work as a teacher — ideally, at least five years — and as a leader in a similar school building, in terms of its community and demographic. Second, the leader should be especially skilled in delegating work and granting teacher ownership, practices that could be measured through stakeholder surveys. Third, the leader should be willing to adapt their past experience to the particular school context, earning buy-in by acknowledging past practices. These three characteristics should be central to any search for a suitable turnaround principal. Simultaneously, turnaround schools are often located in “hard to staff” buildings, meaning there is a lack of talented educators willing to work in such a school. This dynamic creates a unique challenge for turnaround schools, one which demands targeted attention. In this sense, LEAs must include in their turnaround plans a specific method for recruiting a replacement principal

⁴⁶ See “Appendix I: Principles for Successful Turnaround School Leadership — Handout” for a one-page graphic summary.

that has extensive, prior experience in improving struggling schools both as an educator and as a leader.

- I. *Example:* Approval of an LEA's turnaround plan *and/or* distribution of School Improvement Grants funding must be conditioned on proposals for identification of a turnaround principal who has past experience in a similar school as both a teacher and a principal. That principal must also have demonstrated the ability to make academic growth and improve stakeholder trust in a school. Specific ways this could be incorporated in a formal proposal would be identifying a search committee, constructing a rubric to be applied to applicants, and listing interview topics and questions that would be central to the search. Additionally, proposals should identify clear financial incentives that could be called upon in recruiting a suitable candidate, and, in the case that a suitable candidate cannot be found before the turnaround school opens, a central office administrator or another senior leader could take their place.
2. **Teachers and community members need to be granted discrete ownership by the principal in the turnaround process in order to generate authentic buy-in and stakeholder trust, factors in turnaround that are crucial to its success.** Turnaround schools must leverage, more so than ordinary schools, the use of “teacher leaders” to act as liaisons between the principal and teaching staff who have institutional and contextual knowledge that the principal may not have as a newcomer. Teacher leaders, as the literature suggests, are powerful tools in guiding a struggling school through rapid change. These teachers have the institutional understanding of past practices, as well as accumulated trust

in the school's community. Still, they can also be leveraged as intermediaries between the teaching staff and the turnaround leader to advance change.

- I. *Example:* Teachers and community members must sit on the selection committee for a school's turnaround principal. Teachers must nominate teacher leaders to coach the new principal in the school's context and student population and serve as a representative of their colleagues to demonstrate trust and credibility. Teacher leaders should assume a reduced teaching load to account for this extra work. Additionally, a clear framework for recruiting teacher leaders and providing them with specific scopes of work should be included in an LEA's turnaround plan. Approval of turnaround plans should be conditioned on a strong basis of teacher leadership so that the instructional core of the school strengthens with durability.

3. Turnaround principals must remain in their school for at least three years.

Understanding that building trust and strengthening a school's instructional core takes several years, principals must be incentivized to stay for at least that period of time. In addition, the turnaround school should not be held to aggressive growth expectations until that initial period of time has elapsed, and ordinary year-over-year growth expectations for staff could be relaxed. Once a school and community has undergone turnaround, all stakeholders deserve an extended period of stability during which the leader can build meaningful relationships with their surroundings. Importantly, most turnaround schools remain "hard-to-staff," which means that Bronx-Plan-like financial incentives should be considered for principal recruitment and retention. The role of turnaround principal is more demanding than the role of an ordinary principal, and it follows that this disparity should be reflected financially.

- I. *Example:* School Improvement Grant funding must be allocated to a financial incentive for the turnaround principal to remain in their school for at least five years. This funding should be written into the federal turnaround models. Additionally, other employment benefits, such as a pension, should be conditioned on meeting the retention requirement. Principals should be hired with this expectation made clear, outlined in their contract of employment.

To be sure, even with effective school leadership, turnaround schools still face many of the same challenges faced by the original school. One of the most pressing challenges, which this paper does not consider centrally, is recruitment. The above three principles and proposals are ambitious, as they assume access to high-quality, experienced leaders *and* educators who are capable of serving as strong teacher leaders. This may be, frankly, an unrealistic assumption. Just as many schools were hard-to-staff prior to turnaround, they likely remain so following turnaround as well. Given challenging work conditions, limited pay, and competition from non-traditional public schools, like charter schools, the project of recruiting suitable staff for a turnaround school, in the broadest sense, should not be underestimated.⁴⁷

Indeed, an entire body of literature grapples with the difficulty in recruiting quality educators to challenging school environments, placed outside the idealized conditions upon which this paper relies. In real turnaround scenarios, then, this means that there *will* need to be room for flexibility and compromise in staffing and leading a turnaround school. There will be cases in which a

⁴⁷ Barnett Berry, "Recruiting and Retaining 'Highly Qualified Teachers' for Hard-to-Staff Schools:," *NASSP Bulletin*, July 24, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1177/019263650408863802>.

turnaround leader must assume more authority over their school in the absence of strong, qualified teacher leaders. There will, too, be cases in which teachers must assume more authority over instruction in the absence of a strong turnaround principals. This balance does, and will, happen, especially in a turnaround school's first few years of existence.

Yet, the principles of effective turnaround leadership remain critical, regardless of a specific school's challenges: Experience matters. Time matters. Delegation matters.

Conclusion

At its best, smartly designed education policy has the potential to create the conditions for achievement, despite challenging circumstances. School turnaround, affecting buildings that are not meeting their mandate to provide all students with a high-quality public education, matters because its success is a gauge of how well our country can serve its most vulnerable students, like the bright, eager middle schoolers I met at IS 123 last summer. Examining the intersection of school turnaround and building leadership is a productive step toward thinking about how to most effectively transform low-performing schools to serve each child well. We ought to judge the United States based on the kind of opportunity it provides to its most vulnerable, and serious discussions of school turnaround must be viewed through that societal lens. This project contributes to these discussions, paving the way for future research on not only how best to structure and maintain great schools for all students, but specifically how to meaningfully improve America's lowest-performing schools.

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Appendix I: Principles for Successful School Turnaround Leadership — Handout

Turnaround schools need experienced principals

- Principals should have experience as a teacher *and* as an administrator in other buildings similar to the turnaround school
- **Example:** Condition LEA turnaround plan approval with a clear recruiting scheme and non-negotiable candidate qualifications

Teachers and other stakeholders need to be granted discrete ownership

- For principal to earn trust throughout school community, specific responsibilities should be delegated to teaching staff, with substantial ownership granted
- **Example:** Leverage teacher leaders to spearhead instructional initiatives

Turnaround administrators need to remain in the school for at least three years

- Given research on the time it takes to build a school's instructional core, turnaround leaders must be committed to several years
- **Example:** Incentivize principal with a bonus that increases per year that they remain in the school

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