

# Planning for School Restructuring: Keeping Stakeholders in the Process

*“We understand that, in some cases, traditionally low-performing schools need to be transformed in order to get the results we want for all students: academic achievement that is consistently high and sustainable. NEA leaders and members work every day to make sure that students have access to a quality education, and they and other stakeholders—community members, business leaders, and parents should be included in the conversations, decision-making, and planning activities that lead to school restructuring.”*

—NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

Politicians and educators have sought to restructure low-performing schools since the 1980s when the National Commission on Excellence in Education’s seminal report, *A Nation at Risk*, pointed out weaknesses in the current education system and made recommendations for strengthening K-12 education. Some early attempts at restructuring involved the takeover of failing schools by their districts, and the takeover of some schools and districts by mayors and state education agencies. The success of these efforts was uneven, relying on the capacity of the takeover agency to develop standards and assessments, recruit and retain highly qualified staff, and provide the leadership needed to create viable schools and districts (Mackert, 2009). By the 1990s, the school reconstitution strategy, in which many of the administrators, teachers, and support staff of a low-performing school would be replaced with what were presumed to be more capable staff, led to high human costs and organizational inefficiencies (King & Malen, 2010). In San Francisco, reconstituted schools

continued to be low-performing; and in Chicago, replacement teachers were found to be no more effective than the teachers they replaced (Trujillo & Renee, 2012).

In the 2000s, No Child Left Behind required that schools not making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for five consecutive years were required to engage in one of several restructuring models. These models have been restated by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) as part of its School Improvement Grant (SIG) program. Options for schools include the following:

- Turnaround model – replace principal and 50 percent of staff, provide professional development (PD), and other strategies
- Restart model – reopen as a charter, or under management from an education management organization (EMO) or charter management organization (CMO)
- School closure – reassign students to other schools

- Transformation model – replace principal, implement PD, evaluate staff with performance measures (School Improvement Grants, Fed.Reg.)

The transformation option is the one most commonly chosen by schools because it involves minimal staff replacements and allows considerable freedom to choose reform strategies that are based on the specific needs of the students. Although Secretary of Education Arne Duncan originally intended this model—the least aggressive option—to be a last resort for schools, pressure from states resulted in a loosening of regulations to permit its extensive use (Ujifusa, 2010).

### Why Educators and Parents Need to be Involved

Decision-making authority on which of the four school restructuring models to use resides with the district with limited stakeholder involvement, while most of the smaller decisions that will determine the success of the reform—like changes in schedule, curriculum, teaching approach, and monitoring of student progress—occur at the school level. With the assistance of district leaders, school teams comprised of teachers, education support professionals, and administrators in partnership with family and community stakeholders are the decision makers that select the changes, implement them, and adjust them based on evaluation feedback. Administrators who make unilateral decisions will cut themselves off from the teachers, education support professionals, and stakeholders whose efforts and support determine whether the changes will be positive. In successful school turnarounds, stakeholders become part of the change rather than watching it from a distance. Their buy-in is often secured through communicating honestly about the school's performance in the past and sharing a clear vision of the improvements to come (Learning Point Associates, 2010).

Students at schools that received SIG are overwhelmingly from minority and economically challenged

groups. Trujillo and Brown (2012) cite the importance of “public” (i.e. stakeholders) input in the school restructuring process. “It is extremely important to engage those most impacted by turnaround: families, community members, and teachers in targeted schools, usually in racially and socio-economically segregated areas. These groups are our biggest assets in improving education. They can help plan and implement turnaround strategies that are tailored to each school and community and they have roots in the community to ensure a reform lasts overtime.”

### How the Planning Process Can Engage All Stakeholders

In an analysis of how school turnaround efforts have been conducted so far, Trujillo and Renee (2012) make the following recommendations for engaging all stakeholders in the decision-making process:

- Require school and district leaders to solicit and incorporate teachers' professional expertise as well as parent, student, and community input into decisions.
- Specify the required timelines, financial and nonfinancial resources, and accountability structures for meaningful community engagement.
- Offer school, district, and state leaders training on authentic community engagement and models of best engagement practices at the federal, state, and district levels.
- At the school level, develop a representative oversight body that can solicit teachers' professional judgments and the community's ideas, concerns, and shared values and vision about what they want their schools to look like.
- Use parent surveys and hold multiple, accessible meetings (i.e., meetings held at times and locations that parents can attend and that provide free childcare and simultaneous translations) for community input.

- At the district level, establish a SIG advisory committee for stakeholders from multiple school sites to share experience and wisdom on school turnaround.

### **Belmont High School in Dayton and Local Affiliate B: Collaborative Planning Successes**

Collaboration on school restructuring is worth the trouble and ultimately benefits students. At Belmont High School in Dayton, Ohio, a local union leader and a staff of dedicated teachers collaborated with school leaders to create a safer school with a strong curriculum. After working together to establish school discipline, teachers focused on the lack of text books for special education students. Collaboration between the principal and teachers has produced a new curriculum for the school, and student achievement has increased substantially. Local Dayton Education Association President David Romick meets with the district superintendent weekly to keep up to date on all the issues surrounding education reform. His relationship with the principal of Belmont High remains collaborative, and they cooperate to keep the work of school improvement from becoming too overwhelming for teachers (Buffenbarger, 2012).

### **Engaging Families and Communities**

At West Seattle Elementary School, parents—mostly Latino immigrants—were not used to participating in school activities. But the bilingual instructional assistant issues personal invitations to parents to engage in school activities. Education support professionals (ESPs) are more likely to live in the communities in which they work and have a unique viewpoint that will supply needed and vital information to school reform planning.

### **Policy Recommendations**

- Federal and state policies and guidelines should support the engagement of stakeholders in planning for schools that receive federal funding for restructuring.

- Although much research exists showing the effects of teachers on student learning, little is known about the impact of the many other people who ensure that students encounter safe and supportive learning environments throughout the school day. Many ESPs interact directly with students, and all ESPs have a role to play in creating a school learning community. As a result, we recommend that researchers broaden their scope beyond teachers and principals to include the many other adults who work to foster student success.
- States and districts that prepare plans and applications for school restructuring should create a planning team that includes union leaders, teachers, education support professionals, parents, and members of the local business and research communities. Planners should communicate openly with all stakeholders as plans develop, and leverage their assistance to get the word out to individual stakeholders through their networks. Once the group reaches consensus on the plans, applications and/or plans must not be unilaterally changed prior to or after submission.
- District and school policies should support continuously engaging the planning committee as plans are implemented—especially when “course corrections” are contemplated or become necessary.

Selecting the appropriate type of school restructuring model is a critical decision that demands input from stakeholders with a front row view of what is going on in the school and with useful knowledge of what is needed to create the right environment to achieve academic success. Union members, employed as staff in almost every position in public schools, have knowledge that is crucial to any discussion about positive school transformation through restructuring or any other means of reform.

## REFERENCES

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