How to make a turnaround succeed

Why does it take so long to turn around a poorly performing school or local authority? How can we speed up the process and make sure that intervention leads to real and lasting improvement?

At the University of Toronto, we’ve been looking at how long it takes to turn around an under-performing school or district. Our tentative conclusion is you can turn around a primary in about three years, a secondary in five or six years, and a district in seven or eight.

In countries where there has been strong external intervention, such as England, turnaround rates can be reduced: The latest figures for England show that schools can be taken out of special key leaders leave or when the pressure is sure that intervention leads to real and measures status in 19 to 22 months by the infrastructure is weak, unhelpful, or can turn around a primary in about three years, a secondary in five or six years, and a district in seven or eight.

In countries where there has been strong external intervention, such as England, turnaround rates can be reduced: The latest figures for England show that schools can be taken out of special measures status in 19 to 22 months by employing strong interventions.

But where schools or districts have been turned around, two serious problems are apparent. First, in spite of the tremendous effort to accomplish the turnaround, the gains can be undone when one or two key leaders leave or when the pressure is off. The progress is real but not deep.

The second problem is that improvement strategies tend to be instituted in only a small proportion of schools and cannot be replicated on a large scale.

The key reason why reform fails to become widespread and sustained is that the infrastructure is weak, unhelpful, or working at cross-purposes. By the infrastructure, I mean the next layer above whatever unit we are focusing on. In terms of successive levels, for example, a teacher cannot sustain change if he or she is working in a negative school culture. Similarly, a school can initiate and implement change, but not sustain it if it is operating in a less than helpful district.

Likewise, a district cannot keep going if it works in a state or country that is not aligning and co-coordinating policies.

The emphasis on school-based management over the past decade has led us down the garden path. Success can only happen at the school level, but it also is unlikely to happen on any scale and cannot be sustained if the infrastructure is not dramatically strengthened. The main elements of infrastructure improvement include the following:

- The development of collaborative school cultures that value teachers working in teams and in which the principal and teachers work together to focus on student performance and on what it takes instructionally and otherwise to make continuous improvements;
- New alliances between communities and schools;
- A dramatic improvement in teaching which includes the redesign of initial teacher education, first-rate induction support, standards of practice and corresponding compensation, to foster and reward teachers throughout their career;
- Recruiting, developing, nurturing, and supporting school leaders;
- Policy coordination at the district and national level so that the “big picture” actually works to achieve synergy, connectedness and coherence;
- Investing in co-coordinated assistance to support schools while establishing a system of accountability.

The interactive infrastructure outlined above builds in powerful “lateral accountability” as people cannot help being influenced, energized, and rewarded for their performance, or being noticed if they fail to contribute.

Another conclusion of our research is failing schools require external intervention to get better. The goal is that all schools become skilled at seeking and exploiting help where it is available.

I am not for a moment saying that the infrastructure will automatically improve. Complex systems have a tendency toward overload and fragmentation. Those in positions of influence at all levels must continually fight against these centrifugal forces.

A crucial question is whether the teaching profession can gain the status and attraction required to sustain reform. Right now, the profession is vulnerable as many teachers suffer from overload and low morale, and prospective teachers wonder whether the profession is worth entering. The same is true with respect to taking on leadership positions.

The framework I have outlined will bring improved support for teachers, making the profession more attractive.

We know a great deal about how individual schools can become effective, even against the odds. We don’t know how to sustain the schools, or how to get many examples under way. The key is to marry school-level development with aligned forces in local, national, and international infrastructures.