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FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

People, Time, Money, and Programming
Andrew Calkins, Ph.D. • June 2008

Topic: Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools

Highlights

- Principals must have the authority to address low-performing teachers and the ability to motivate and engage all staff.
- Principals need to have the power to reconfigure and extend the school day and school year.
- Authority over discretionary funds can be used to address critical needs.
- School programming must address the needs of disadvantaged students who lack important supports at home.

About the Interviewee

Andrew Calkins is Senior Vice President of the Mass Insight Education & Research Institute, Inc. (MERI), a Boston-based, independent, nonprofit group focused on using higher standards reform to improve student achievement in Massachusetts and across the nation.

MERI conducts national and statewide research, advocates for informed policymaking, and provides extensive school-improvement services in pursuit of two primary education reform goals: excellence in math and science

achievement and the successful turnaround of public schools that consistently fail more than half of the students they serve. MERI also manages the Building Blocks Initiative for Standards-Based Reform, an effort to identify effective organizational improvement practices in education and build systems to scale them up in other schools and school districts.

Mr. Calkins co-authored *The Turnaround Challenge: Why America's Best Opportunity to Dramatically Improve Student Achievement Lies in Our Worst-Performing Schools* (2007), MERI's pioneering national study of school turnaround. The Gates Foundation-funded report, the result of two years of research, is part of a much larger initiative by MERI to help states, districts, partner organizations, and foundations redesign school intervention strategies in chronically underperforming schools – and to use those strategies as models for broader reform, particularly in the nation's urban school districts. Mr. Calkins leads MERI's involvement in school turnaround design with William Guenther, the organization's president and founder.

Mr. Calkins is a graduate of Harvard College and has worked in education, educational publishing and related fields for more than 25 years. He lives in South Hamilton, MA, with his wife and three daughters, and served for six years as an elected member of the Hamilton-Wenham Regional School Committee. He is the recipient of several awards for excellence in educational publishing, including for work produced at Scholastic Inc., where he served as Editor of Electronic Learning magazine, and at the nonprofit group Recruiting New Teachers, Inc., where he served as executive director and co-authored The Careers in Teaching Handbook.

Full Transcript

My name is Andy Calkins. I am senior vice president at Mass Insight Education and Research Institute.

…the four principle resources that a school's leadership team has to spend in organizing the school's work. Those resource bases are people, time, money, and programming. The research base for all this work came out of *The Turnaround Challenge*, which was a report that our non-profit group issued last year after two years of research.

People

The first category is people. Think of people as the core asset base in any school. And as in almost any organization, there is a sort of 20-60-20 rule that applies. There are 20 percent over-performers and 20 percent under-performers and 60 percent who are somewhere in the middle. Any principal charged with putting his or her school through a turnaround process and emerging victorious at the other end has got to insist and must have enough authority over who works in the building to be able to address the problem represented by those 20 percent of under-performers.

There are a number of other steps that principals need to take to work successfully with a staff in a turnaround mode. They all involve transparency and enlistment: making sure that the goals of the

turnaround effort are clear, making sure that everyone shares in the vision for where the school is going to go, making sure that they have played a role in helping to shape that vision, and perhaps counterintuitively, making sure that the loudest voices, including those who are potential opponents, are brought inside of the change.

Time

Principals have got to have some authority over both how time is divided up during the school day and, if possible, how much time there is in the school day and in the school year. Most of the high-performing, high-poverty schools out there have figured out a way to get past the 180-day school year and to extend either the length of the school day or the school calendar or both. In a turnaround situation, a principal and a staff that have devised a clear strategy for change need to be able to organize the time that they spend together in vertical and horizontal teams specifically around the principle goals of that change process.

Money

Most schools don't have much discretionary money at all. All of those decisions are made at the district level, but the principal and the leadership team in charge of a school needs to be able to have authority over some discretionary funding. A good turnaround principal will do a survey or use some other method to find out right away what the most important issues are among the faculty, and some of those will be in the category of fairly easily addressable. And the principal needs to be able to have some kind of a budget at hand to allow him or her to be able to signal a change process by addressing those needs right away.

Programming

Schools and school reform in general have focused mostly on what we call "readiness to teach" strategies, which all have to do with the factors that shape how the adults work in the building: the standards, the curriculum, the formative assessments, the instructional strategies, the professional development. All that's really important. It has to be there, and there has been a lot of good work done in that area. But these schools, the underperforming schools, are serving largely disadvantaged, high-poverty student enrollments, and we have not by-and-large done a good job of figuring out how to serve those kinds of enrollments at any kind of scale. That's what we call "readiness to learn." So the schools that are serving those populations well have put as much emphasis on understanding what they have to do to serve those kids and meet them halfway as they have on the more traditional aspects of what schools do. They understand that what works, say, out in suburban Wellesley has to be present in the work that they are doing in downtown Boston, but if they try to do exactly the same thing with these kids who don't have the same kind of supports at home, it's just not going to work.

Any principal being charged with the responsibility of undertaking turnaround needs not to give short shrift to the challenge at hand and to be able to stand up to his or her superintendent, to fellow principals and to say, "Look, here are the things I need in order to have a crack at success here. I need more control over the

staff that I am working with in my building. I need more control over how time is used. I need more control over my budget, and I need control over the programming choices that we make at the school level." Any principal who goes into a turnaround situation without those kinds of accountabilities is giving up the ship before the ship even starts to sail.