

DOINGWHATWORKS



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

How Principals Can Help

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Topic: Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools

Practice: Focus on Instruction

Highlights

- Testing frequently and analyzing the results helps identify students who are struggling.
- Develop teams within grade levels for teachers to discuss issues related to students and across grade levels for teachers to ensure that curriculum is aligned and students are progressing from one grade to the next.
- Teachers should get involved in making certain that all teachers at the same grade level, working with the same group of students, are covering the same curriculum.
- Encourage teachers to examine how they grade homework, how they distribute assignments to students, and how they manage their classroom to gain insight into where change might be necessary.

About the Interviewee

After teaching high school social studies and serving as a secondary school administrator, Dan Duke embarked on a career in higher education. For over three decades he has taught courses on educational leadership, organizational

change, and school reform as well as conducting research on various aspects of public schools. After serving on the faculties of Lewis and Clark College and Stanford University, he came to the University of Virginia as Chair of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies. Duke founded and directed the Thomas Jefferson Center for Educational Design and helped establish the Darden-Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education (PLE), a unique enterprise involving the Curry School of Education and the Darden Graduate School of Business Administration. He serves as Research Director for the PLE. A prolific writer, Duke has authored or co-authored 27 books and several hundred scholarly articles, monographs, chapters, and reports. His most recent books include *The Challenges Of Educational Change* (2004), *Education Empire: The Evolution Of An Excellent Suburban School System* (2005), *Teachers' Guide To School Turnarounds* (2007), and *The Little School System That Could: Transforming A City School District* (2008). A highly regarded consultant, Duke has worked with over 150 school systems, state agencies, foundations, and governments across the United States and abroad. He has served as President of the University Council for Educational Administration and was chosen as Professor of the Year at the Curry School of Education.

Full Transcript

My name is Dan Duke, I am professor of Educational Leadership at the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, and I am Research Director for the Darden-Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education.

We have been involved in training turnaround specialists to go into low-performing schools for the last five years at the Partnership for Leaders in Education. What we have been learning is that a combination of best business practices and proven educational practices seem to hold the key to turning around a low-performing school. So, the training that we pick up from the business world would include successful teaming, developing 90-day plans and making midcourse corrections rather than focusing on an entire year in the planning process. We also get involved in project management and developing data-driven decision-making. Then from the world of education, we focus on targeted interventions for struggling students, as opposed to the kind of highly general interventions where a student might be placed in an extended day program for an entire year. That doesn't seem to work as well as targeting the specific learning objectives that the student's struggling with and then providing interventions. We also encourage our turnaround specialists to implement benchmark testing so that teachers have data on a regular basis that they can analyze and then provide assistance to students who are struggling. I guess the most important feature of turnaround specialist training is, from the education perspective, making sure that they focus on literacy because almost by definition a low-performing school is a school where students are struggling with reading and writing and communicating with each other. So, literacy has got to be job number one.

There are leadership practices that principals can implement to turnaround a school that involve leadership at different levels. We know that one individual, one principal, can't turn around a school by himself or herself. It's critical that they develop teams. But teams alone aren't a solution to the challenges of turning

around a school because there are teams in low performing schools, and unfortunately those teams often serve the function of defending each other, making excuses why students can't learn. So it's not just having teams, but a school needs an infrastructure of teams—we call them both horizontal and vertical teams—so that teachers at the same grade level meet together and talk about the issues related to their students, but also teachers across grade levels meet together to make sure that the curriculum is aligned and that students are moving in a steady progression from one grade level to the next.

Activities that teacher leaders can be involved in that can facilitate the turnaround process include getting involved in aligning the curriculum, making certain that all teachers at the same grade level, working with the same group of students, are covering the same curriculum. Then troubleshooting how that process works, fine-tuning—constant fine-tuning is needed, and teachers are in the best position to do fine-tuning of the curriculum and of instruction.

Getting the support of your faculty to turn around a low-performing school could be the greatest challenge that any turnaround specialist faces. For better or worse, organizations like schools don't change unless people change. And the older we get, the harder it is for us to change; we have gotten set in our ways. So, some of the ways that a turnaround specialist can facilitate change is to encourage teachers to examine their routines. All teachers have probably hundreds of routines or else they wouldn't be effective, but over the years the routines which once were effective may lose their effectiveness, and teachers don't necessarily realize that fact. So, examining how teachers grade homework, how they distribute assignments to students, how they manage their classroom can yield some insights into where change might be necessary. Also, helping teachers change perspective is extremely important. We have worked with principals who have teachers shadow a student for a day so they can try to understand what the classroom is like from the student's perspective. Such an experience can be awareness building and can contribute to change from teachers who otherwise might have resisted change.