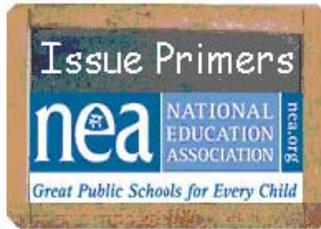


Issue Primer - School Restructuring, Reconstitution and Turnaround



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Denise McKeon, NEA Research June, 2009

Issue Primers brief NEA and affiliates about key research points on current education issues.

Overview

One of the ideas percolating in the policy arena currently is the idea of school restructuring, specifically the kind of restructuring known as reconstitution or school turnaround (these two terms tend to be used synonymously). School restructuring, however, comes in a variety of shapes and sizes and is now fueled generally by schools failing to meet the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Arne Duncan, the new Secretary of Education has talked of restructuring (meaning reconstituting) up to 1000 schools a year over the next five years – the lowest performing 1% of schools in the country per year.

For Duncan this has generally meant an approach that includes changing the adults in a school. This is the process he used in Chicago when he was a local superintendent (although he only had three schools to deal with initially and eventually designated twelve schools as “turnaround” schools. However, this is out of more than 600 schools in Chicago). What Duncan is proposing nationally is something on a far bigger scale.

As this policy imperative emerges at the national level, it becomes increasingly important to understand the tenets of school restructuring – and to answer some basic questions about

restructuring that will help inform the Association's response to restructuring proposals. In this Issue Primer we lay out the research and policy implications of wide-scale restructuring and what it might mean for both the NEA and the nation's schools.

What Is School Restructuring?

Although restructuring is generally thought of as the last stage of school improvement under the No Child Left Behind Act, restructuring generally seeks to dramatically reform or shut down schools that have failed to make adequate yearly progress. However, many kinds of school improvement pre-date NCLB and several types and levels of restructuring interventions have been tried in education settings (Murphy & Meyers, 2008). Some of the common approaches to school reform include:

- School Improvement Planning
- Expert Assistance
- Provision of Choice
- Provision of Supplemental Services
- Adoption of a Proven Reform Model
- Reconstitution/Turnaround

What is School Reconstitution?

Reconstitution is the term generally used for the school restructuring approach that features the removal of incumbent administrators and teachers (or large percentages of them) and their replacement with educators who presumably are more capable of improving school performance. Reconstitution is also known as "turnaround," referring to a dramatic improvement in performance created by various changes within an organization, (Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement [CCSRI], 2005). In public schools, a successful turnaround produces a "dramatic increase in student achievement in a limited amount of time," (CSRI, 2005, p. 5). School reconstitution has its roots in state and mayoral "takeovers" which began as early as the 1980s. In fact, since 1988, 20 states have taken over at least 55 local school districts (Ziebarth, 2002). The research base examining mayoral and state takeovers is growing slowly and includes some quantitative studies assessing the effectiveness of city and state takeovers as a school reform strategy (Wong & Shen, 2003).

How much does it cost to reconstitute a school?

Recently the New York Times quoted “experts” as estimating the cost of overhauling a failing school at \$3 million to \$6 million (Dillon, 2009). However, other researchers have pointed to various types of resources (including and beyond money) needed to sustain a school –namely, financial capital (fiscal allocations), human capital (e.g., the experience and credentials of school staff), social capital (the extent to which staff forms a community to achieve school goals), cultural capital (the degree to which there is congruence between the racial/ethnic makeup of the school staff to the population served by the school) and informational resources (such as professional development opportunities), Rice and Croninger, 2005. All of these are costs to be considered in figuring out the true cost of school reconstitution.

What Lessons Have We Learned From Various Types of Restructuring?

Murphy and Meyers’ (2008) review of the literature on school turnarounds reveals the following key points:

1. Of the various turnaround initiatives (including school reconstitution), no one intervention appears to be significantly more successful than others. Such interventions are difficult to sustain, especially stronger ones that seem to be more difficult to manage and are more costly.
2. Since turnaround interventions do not always succeed, mixing and matching to develop a comprehensive approach seems promising.
3. Successful turnaround schools almost always have good, if not exceptional principals.
4. Capacity building is an important component of turnaround – this means that cooperation and human development are needed to move forward.
5. Teachers must believe in the turnaround intervention being implemented and must be seen as partners and facilitators in the process. When teachers do not buy in, failing schools do not improve.
6. Turnaround initiatives must engage parents and the community.
7. Failing schools need ample fiscal resources to turn around. The resources need to last long enough to completely implement turnaround strategies.
8. School self-assessment is a key ingredient in turning around low-performing schools.

Clearly there are no easy answers when it comes to school turnaround. What we do know is that it’s not fast, it’s not certain and it’s not simple. This is a complex set of activities which requires skillful leadership and political finesse.

How Effective is School Reconstitution?

Although advocates assume that reconstitution can be used to turn around “troubled schools,” the limited research available suggests that things don’t always work that way. In fact, a recent study conducted by the Center for Education Policy and Leadership (CEPAL) at the University of Maryland led the researchers to “caution against the widespread use of reconstitution as a reform

strategy, " (CEPAL, 2003). The researchers highlight the fact that “the more scarce the resources in a district, the more likely that reconstitution will make matters worse. If a district is struggling to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers before reconstitution, it will find recruitment and retention even more difficult after reconstitution. These problems are further exacerbated when districts reconstitute multiple schools simultaneously, (CEPAL, 2003).”

Murphy and Meyers (2008) concur in their assessment of school reconstitution. Their review of the literature shows that studies of reconstitution *specifically* are few and offer “no conclusive effects.” However, the studies offer some lessons about reconstituting schools:

- The reconstitution process is an enormously complex and difficult process of school reform – perhaps more difficult than initially was thought.
- The variation in reconstitution approaches makes it difficult to compare them, and it makes simple replication of a particular reconstitution approach inadvisable.
- The outcomes in terms of student achievement are quite varied. Reconstitution does not guarantee student learning.
- Reconstitution often comes with unintended consequences: political conflict, lowered teacher morale, and a flood of inexperienced teachers into reconstituted schools.

Just How Many Schools Are There in Need of Reconstitution?

A recent study by the Center on Education Policy (2009) shows that more than 3500 schools were in the planning or implementation phase of restructuring in school year 2007-8. In the ten states with the highest number of restructuring schools we see the following numbers:

State	Estimated Number of Title I Schools in Planning or Implementation Phase of Restructuring
CA	1,013
FL	462
IL	333
NY	256
PA	142
MA	135
NJ	101
OH	97
SC	86
NM	84
TOTAL	2,709

How hard is it to turn around a failing school? What are some of the obstacles to success?

Generally, turnarounds are not for the faint of heart – whether turning around a school or a corporation. Hess (2008) says that even in the private sector common turnaround strategies in companies are successful only one-third of the time. This sentiment is echoed by Kramer (2008) who says that “turnarounds in the public education space are far harder than any turnaround I’ve ever seen in the for-profit space.”

Finn (2009) offers the following observations about the core problems associated with turning schools around:

State and local officials have had plenty of opportunity to close, reopen, and otherwise turn around their failing schools, and they have a lot more levers, starting with direct authority over budgets, personnel, etc. That they've done so little of it attests to five core problems:

First, most teachers enjoy lifetime tenure under state law and seniority under local employment contracts. If Ms. Witherspoon loses her job at the Jefferson School due to its reconstitution, the district must find her another one, perhaps at the Madison School, and if she doesn't like it there she has innumerable ways--and union help--to fuss. (In many cities, principals also have tenure.) Note that GM's auto workers once enjoyed a similar employment guarantee--via the UAW's company-financed "jobs bank"--but gave [this up as a condition of the federal bail-out](#).

Second, parents and kids ordinarily love their schools--and their teachers--no matter what the test scores show, and will fight hard to preserve them pretty much unchanged. Just ask Michelle Rhee (or anyone who has ever tried to shut a school for whatever reason.)

Third, those kids do need to be educated somewhere. If a school is actually closed, even temporarily, they must be accommodated in another one, which brings to bear all manner of rules, court orders, transportation challenges, crowding issues, etc.

Fourth, turning around an individual school is a bit like curing athlete's foot on a single toe. If the surrounding system isn't also fixed--perverse incentives, dysfunctional culture, ill-chosen curriculum, bad personnel practices, etc.--the familiar fungus and itch will soon reappear on the healed digit.

Fifth, the agent-of-change is ordinarily the very same school system that let the school fail in the first place. Rarely does it possess the capacity to rectify its own mistakes.

Although Finn's observations are colored by his particular philosophy of schooling, they serve as a reminder that this is not an easy proposition. They also serve as a reminder that some will point to the unions as the primary problem in making sweeping change at the school or district level.

What are the Specific Effects of Reconstituting on Student Achievement?

There is not much evidence about student achievement in studies of reconstitution. There are a couple of reasons for this. First, there is not much research, period. The CEP study (2008) of five states showed no "greater likelihood of a school making AYP overall or in reading or math alone." The CEP study echoes conclusions found in earlier studies of school turnaround that occurred in the 1990s. In those studies, "turnaround efforts have brought order and stability, as well as an increase in parent and community involvement. **Academic progress among turnaround schools, however, is mixed**, (CCSRI, 2005, p.7)."

Second, separating out the effects of reconstitution is exceptionally difficult because reconstitution introduces a number of changes at the same time (Mathis, 2009). Untangling influences on outcomes is complicated by the fact that staff replacements can be more or less inclusive and extensive media reports "persuasive – even when lacking or contradicted by good evidence," (Mathis, 2009).

Are There any Unintended Consequences?

Peterson (1999) points to some of the unintended consequences of reconstitution as: political conflict, lowered teacher morale and a flood of inexperienced teachers into reconstituted schools. For

example in one case of reconstitution, Borman and his team (2000) found “clear tensions between the new teachers and the pre-reconstitution veterans who were hired back.” Returning teachers often feel personally blamed when a school is reconstituted. In Chicago, the reputation of the reconstituted schools drove many students away as “the seven reconstituted schools lost 17.6% of their students between the fall of 1997 and the following spring,” (Hess, 2003, p. 308). Finally, Malen, et.al., (2002) suggest that “given the array of intense, potentially debilitating human costs associated with reconstitution, districts may not be able to secure the requisite personnel for small-scale, let alone large-scale reconstitution ventures, even under favorable market conditions.”

What is the Appeal of Reconstituting Schools In Crisis?

Mathis (2009) points to the political and emotional appeal of taking over schools in crisis. Particularly in areas where parents see school buildings in disrepair, gang culture, safety problems, inadequate resources, corruption, patronage, and excessive dropouts and low test scores, a clean sweep is very appealing. However, one of the key conclusions from the school turnaround literature is that reconstitution is a “long haul” effort. Brady (2003) suggests that it is typically two to three years before an intervention such as reconstitution might manifest itself in higher student test scores (if ever).

What are the Implications of a Wide-scale Policy of Reconstitution for the Association?

Because there is a certain popular and political appeal in the notion of a “clean sweep” where troubled schools are concerned, NEA’s position on reconstitution must be crafted on the evidence that reconstitution is not necessarily the best remedy for the children it is intended to help. There are certain flashpoints about reconstitution that fly in the face of Association policies. These flashpoints include:

- tenure
- assignment/re-assignment of staff
- seniority rights
- fair dismissal procedures
- school accountability

However, constructing a case against reconstitution based on these Association policies may appear to be obstructionist and will certainly open us up to criticism from those who see union contracts as standing in the way of any effort to reform the schools. It is possible and more desirable to argue against reconstitution, not on the basis of the contract, but on the basis of the research and the possible negative effects on students and the community at large.

The Association can further argue against reconstitution by debunking several of the biggest misconceptions associated with this approach:

1. There is a misconception that great numbers of better qualified, more experienced or more wonderful teachers are readily available to staff reconstituted schools.
2. There is also a misconception that reconstituted schools work better than those that have not been reconstituted.
3. Finally, there is a misconception that reconstituted schools will improve quickly and dramatically.

As much as anyone would like to wave a magic wand and cure the ills of schools that do not perform well, the task of turning a school around is not magic – it's a long, hard journey that requires a school to build its capacity through staff development, continuous improvement and the commitment of teachers.

Useful Resources

Annotated Research and Resources on School Turnaround

The turnaround resources listed and annotated here are a sampling of the many available to researchers, practitioners, and policymakers (including many that were used to create the turnaround framework). Many that have been included here are not exclusively focused on turnaround, but touch on related topics believed to be helpful to designers of turnaround strategy.

<http://www.massinsight.org/micontent/annotated.aspx?ref=turnaround&thm=buildingblocks>

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