

# Part One

## **THE DYNAMIC CONTEXT IN WHICH TURNAROUND LEADERS WORK**

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# 1

## REASONS FOR SCHOOL FAILURE

You have to understand the context we work in. This is an area of high social deprivation where daily existence is difficult enough. Simply getting to the school gate is an achievement for many of our students. Poverty is not an excuse for underachievement, but it is a powerful influence.

*Secondary school principal*

The reasons for school failure are almost as complex as are the reasons we are unable to turn around underperforming schools in vast numbers. These reasons are multifaceted and interrelated, compounding and exacerbating the problem of school failure. Whether in Canada, England, the United States, or any other part of the Western world, there are common factors that make turnaround difficult and render some schools, in certain contexts, less able to raise the performance of their students. Many approaches aimed at improving underachieving schools have served to further disadvantage them, largely by failing to take adequate account of their context and by locating the blame for failure squarely within the school. But reasons for school failure are rarely one-dimensional or singular. Consequently, the polarized debate of “school’s fault” versus “society’s fault” for failure does not take us very far. Attributing blame detracts from solving the problem.

As always, the truth lies somewhere in between. In some cases, schools are at the heart of the problem. Poor teaching is condoned, weak leadership is tolerated, and the dominant view is, “What can you do with these kids?” driven by low expectations. On the other side of the coin, it is undeniable that the relationship

between poverty and underachievement is powerful. The consequences of growing up poor affect millions of young people worldwide (Berliner, 2006). Poverty remains a global, social, and economic issue, and the educational reform agenda in many countries reflects a renewed interest in addressing the relationship between poverty and underachievement. The gap in achievement between children from low-income families and their more affluent peers persists, and in the majority of cases, it actually increases throughout schooling. Although social disadvantage is not an excuse for poor achievement in academic terms, it certainly is a powerful explanatory factor. It remains the case that many failing schools are located in high-poverty contexts.

A substantial corpus of international research into the relationship between poverty and education demonstrates that while the general attainment levels of poor children have improved over time, the gap between the majority of children from low-income families and their more affluent peers has widened (Knapp, 2001; Thomson & Harris, 2004). Children attending high-poverty schools are not likely to achieve as well as their peers in more favorable school contexts. The net effect of poverty on educational achievement is stark. Educational outcomes in deprived areas are worse than those in nondeprived areas, whether they are measured in terms of qualification, attendance, exclusions, or retention rates. Inner-city areas, in particular, are associated with low educational outcomes. Socioeconomic status or family background typically explains more than half the variation between schools in pupil achievement, and low family income in childhood years makes a significant difference to subsequent educational outcomes. Chudgar and Luschei (2009) provide new support for this well-known finding in their recent analysis of international achievement tests across twenty-five countries.

Part of the reason for the decline in social mobility in many countries is the strong bond between low levels of family income and subsequent educational attainment. Underachievement and

levels of deprivation continue to be strongly and powerfully linked. Furthermore, poverty continues to be a chief explanatory factor for the persistent low levels of attainment for certain groups of young people.

Many recent policies aimed at tackling underperforming schools have failed to acknowledge the full extent of the socioeconomic challenges facing many of them. Governments continue to impose standardized models of school intervention and improvement on failing schools in spite of evidence suggesting that this is counterproductive to schools located in the most vulnerable communities (Harris, James, Harris, & Gunraj, 2006). High-stakes testing and tight accountability measures may achieve some instant improvement in student performance, but these improvements often vanish quickly. Most of the strategies that accompany the “no excuses” or “zero tolerance” rhetoric of accountability, whether in the United States or the United Kingdom, for example, can actually harm the very schools they are seeking to improve. Improvement strategies for turning around such schools often are too little, too late, work on only part of the problem, and unwittingly establish conditions that actually guarantee unsustainable student performance, as Mintrop and Trujillo (2004) point out in their nine-state U.S. study.

So where does this take us? To the recognition that achieving sustainable school turnaround requires an in-depth understanding of the factors that powerfully combine to create school failure in the first place. Some of these factors are external to the school, as we have pointed out, and sometimes beyond their control. In their recent synthesis of evidence about external factors contributing to school failure, Murphy and Meyers (2008) highlight urban school settings, minority student populations, the low socioeconomic status of students, and lack of readiness for school (lack of prerequisite knowledge) on the part of many students in many failing schools. Other factors are internal to the school and can be influenced, changed, and

realigned more directly. For example, the most common internal factors Murphy and Meyers identified in their review of primarily U.S. research are different dimensions of poor teacher quality, such as poor classroom instruction, inadequate teacher knowledge and skills, limited teacher experience, teachers assigned to subjects for which they are not trained, high teacher turnover, and low teacher morale. This review also identifies ineffective leadership and inadequate resources as common causes of school failure.

This chapter describes the most fundamental causes of school failure in the schools in which our research was conducted. Of course, these are among the larger causes others have identified as well.

### **Fundamental Causes of School Failure**

We subscribe to the view that “deadwood didn’t kill itself” (Fink & Brayman, 2006)—that is, school failure is not self-inflicted. Instead, our evidence suggests that it can be traced to five powerful interlocking factors.

#### ***1. Poverty and diversity create challenges for individual student learning that many schools are ill equipped to address.***

It should come as no surprise that a disproportionate number of failing schools are located in contexts of high poverty. We have already started to outline the powerful link between poverty and underachievement, but the contextual factors that affect underperformance are worth further scrutiny. Within the category of “failing” schools, those located in high-poverty or challenging contexts are disproportionately represented. The extent of their overrepresentation means that the labels of “schools in challenging circumstances” or “in high poverty” are often taken as a proxy for underachievement. However, this is

both inaccurate and misleading. Although a large proportion of schools in challenging circumstances and high-poverty contexts do underperform, not all do.

A small proportion, but a significant number, of schools in challenging contexts add considerable value to the academic achievements and life chances of young people (Harris et al., 2006). These schools are able to overcome the negative influences of social disadvantage through a variety of strategies, approaches, and interventions, all centrally and persistently aimed at improving teaching and learning (Harris, 2009). It is certainly possible to improve schools in the most disadvantaged contexts, but it is hard and relentless work, as Jacobson, Johnson, Ylimaki, and Giles (2005) make clear in their study of a small number of successfully turned-around schools in Buffalo, New York.

For every school in challenging circumstances that succeeds against the odds, many more find it difficult to get to the starting line of improvement (Maden, 2001). These schools face multiple problems. They are most likely to have higher-than-average numbers of pupils with low literacy levels on entry. They are also likely to have a higher proportion of refugee children or students who have been excluded from other schools because of the challenges they present and the lack of resources in the school to meet them. Incidents of violence, crime, and drugs also tend to be more prevalent in communities where poverty and disadvantage are endemic. These powerful interlocking variables make the daily business of educating young people demanding and often dangerous for teachers.

The “school improvement” literature has often been criticized for ignoring the powerful socioeconomic influences that affect schools and for offering naive and sometimes simplistic solutions to complex social problems (Thrupp, 2001). Consequently, more recently researchers within the school improvement field have concentrated their attention on developing contextually specific approaches to improvement.

***2. The negative effects of poverty and diversity on student learning are greatly magnified in schools with homogeneous populations.***

Thrupp's (2001) work has shown that the social composition of students—or the social mix—has a big influence on student achievement. Children from families with low or average socioeconomic status (SES) tend to have better educational outcomes if they attend a school whose students come from families with high average SES. But if these students attend a school where the SES mix is predominantly low, they are unlikely to make as much progress. In short, the social composition and the context of the school make significant differences to students' subsequent performance, over and above the effects associated with the child's individual family background. This effect is what Willms (2003) calls the hypothesis of double jeopardy: if children from low-SES families are in low-SES schools, they are doubly disadvantaged by their socioeconomic status and the socioeconomic status of their peers.

The benefits of attending a high-SES school include, on average, higher expectations of school staff and parents, positive peer interaction, and higher parental engagement in learning. Schools where the SES composition of pupils is mainly low often lack the norms, expectations, and values associated with high academic achievement and success. The relative absence of social capital that is in abundance in more affluent schools (Driscoll & Kerchner, 1999) makes it much more difficult for schools in disadvantaged circumstances to convince young people of the merits or benefits of education and achievement. Many young people at schools in high-poverty contexts come from homes where there are several generations of unemployment and schools are viewed as a problem rather than a solution. These schools are not just in inner cities. They can also be found in rural settings and the other communities where unemployment, crime, and drugs are a way of life for young people and their families.

In England, a study that focused on schools in former coal-field areas that had demonstrated improvement over a five-year period identified shifts in local employment patterns as one of the main factors that influenced improved school performance (Harris, Muijs, Chapman, Stoll, & Russ, 2003). Where new employment opportunities became available in the area, particularly white-collar opportunities, the influx of children from families who were relocating to take these opportunities made a difference to school performance. Essentially the development of a more heterogeneous mix of students in terms of background, aspiration, attitude, and ability increased the chances that schools would significantly improve the performance of students who would otherwise be much less likely to succeed.

Especially in England and the United States, neoliberal policies emphasizing the benefits of competition and choice are also responsible for rendering many schools in high-poverty contexts less equipped to improve. The combination of market individualism and control through constant and comparative assessment has relegated certain schools to the lower echelons of performance indefinitely. As Apple (1996) has explained, more affluent parents often have more flexible hours and can visit multiple schools to assess whether they are suitable for their children. They have cars—often more than one—and can afford driving their children across town to attend a “better school.” As well, these parents can provide the hidden opportunities and experiences such as camps and after-school programs (dance, music, computer classes, and so on) that give their children an ease or a style that seems natural and acts as a set of cultural resources. Conversely, parents and families in poor and disadvantaged communities are less able to work the system, leaving more and more students in high-poverty areas grouped together in the same school, thus creating the kind of social mix that has been shown to significantly reduce a school’s ability to improve its performance. These same negative consequences of greater competition and choice, so popular with right-leaning

policymakers, were the primary outcomes of early efforts to create a quasi-market system of education in New Zealand as well (Lauder & Hughes, 1999).

***3. Underperforming schools often lack the capacities needed to sustain initial gains made with considerable external assistance.***

Schools go through cycles of change and development, a little like businesses do. The idea of year-on-year improvement, with schools continuing ever upward on the trajectory of performance is illusory, as our analysis of Ontario data in the Introduction illustrated. All schools, even the most successful ones, experience periodic dips or downturns in performance to varying degrees. This is sometimes related to shifts in student composition, sometimes because of changes in the external environment and sometimes due to issues like staff turnover. The central point is that schools are in constant flux, but for schools that are underperforming, this flux is much bigger and the net falls and rises are more accentuated because of their starting point.

Gray's (2004) research demonstrated that schools in England in the category of special measures (the most serious category, requiring external intervention) can and do improve performance through intensive intervention, and subsequently, a significant number leave this category. However, Gray's research showed that in a relatively short space of time, many of these schools when reinspected were placed back into special measures. The improvements had been temporary; the increases in student performance had not been sustained. This cycle can be best summarized as crisis, intervention, improvement, destabilization, and crisis. All underperforming schools reach a crisis point when failure is visible above the waterline. At this point, some intervention occurs, usually externally imposed and defined. With the injection of additional resources, expertise, and help, these schools float slowly upward. At this point, the intervention is

deemed to be successful, and the added support, resources, and help fall away.

For a while, like a novice swimmer, schools make progress unaided, and their direction of travel looks secure. But without the internal capacity or proficiency to continue unaided, it is only a matter of time before many of these school starts to sink once again. Often some unexpected event will destabilize or undermine progress, and all too quickly, the school is thrown back into crisis mode, and the whole cycle simply starts again. The cycle of decline from crisis to crisis may take several years, during which time many schools are unnoticed by those concerned about turnaround; but inevitably and predictably, most of these schools resurface in need of help once again.

A project that was undertaken with the eight worst performing schools in England illustrates this cycle very nicely. Each of the schools was in extremely challenging circumstances, and all were significantly underperforming. The percentage of students achieving success in external qualifications at sixteen (these are the exams given at age sixteen) was below 10 percent in some of these schools. These examinations at sixteen allow school performance to be compared.

The project, commissioned by England's Department for Education, aimed to raise performance in these eight schools by building professional learning communities within the schools, between the schools, and across the schools and their wider communities (Harris et al., 2006). Student behavior, emotional literacy, and effective pedagogy were the focus of primary attention in the project. Each school was given extra resources, extra teachers, and a range of external supports. After the first year, results in all schools started to creep up, and by the time the project finished in the third year, all schools were well in line with national norms. The project was held up as a great success and the schools rightfully celebrated.

Yet this success was short-lived and improvement was fragile. Within a year, some schools slipped backward quite dramatically,

although others kept on course. In less than two years, all but one school had reverted to previous performance, and two faced reconstitution or closure under new government policy. This cycle is by no means unique to the schools in this project, and Chapter Nine in particular, describes and illustrates promising strategies for sustaining improvements once they have been made.

Cyclical decline is not only confined to the education world. It is also a feature of the corporate environment. In *How the Mighty Fall*, Jim Collins (2009) explores the reason for business failure (as do Murphy & Meyer, 2008) and presents a five-stage model of decline:

1. Hubris born of success
2. Undisciplined pursuit of more
3. Denial of risk and peril
4. Grasping for salvation
5. Capitulation to irrelevance or death

Collins's basic argument is that every institution is vulnerable no matter how great, and no law of nature suggests that those who are at the top will remain there. Any organization can fall, and most eventually do. One need look no further than today's newspaper for examples. The point is that decline is a common part of a cycle of change, but successful businesses and successful schools acknowledge and actively avoid this phase—or stave off the decline—before the downward spiral begins. They do this in two ways: by constantly evaluating their position and using data to confirm their evaluation and by acting quickly and appropriately at the first signs of danger.

It is not the case that successful schools or businesses do not hit periods of crisis or destabilization or threat; they do, but the critical difference is how they respond to the threat. Successful businesses and schools actively look for any indications of decline in the organization and are constantly seeking improvement.

Even in successful businesses and schools, bad results or falling share prices can come as a shock as complacency sets in. Collins (2009) makes the point that organizational decline is largely self-inflicted and that decline is often generated through complacency, overreaching, and neglecting the core business. Businesses in the process of meltdown are also often in denial and can be resistant to the idea that anything could be wrong. By the time this realization hits, it is too late. No matter how much they grasp for straws and salvation, the outcome is the same.

The model Collins (2009) proposes in response is powerful, but in terms of school decline or failure, our evidence surfaces some important differences. Failing schools, first of all, know they are underperforming. The data with which they are regularly confronted show this, and it has become the job of all manner of people to constantly remind them of it. They live and breathe their failure. There is no hubris of success; in fact, the opposite tends to be true. Second, failing schools tend to be reluctant to pursue more. They tend to be ground down by the challenges of their day-to-day survival and are chiefly preoccupied with doing what they do much better rather than extending their reach. Third, failing schools are rarely in denial about their performance, but they can be in denial about whether such performance is acceptable, as well as the reasons for such (under)performance. There is a tendency, perhaps justified in some cases, for failing schools to externalize the reasons for their failure and attribute it to such causes as “too many tests, the overpressured curriculum, and too much administration.” Attributions such as these prevent some underperforming schools from grappling with the fundamental causes of their underperformance, such as poor classroom instruction. These schools are in denial about the causes of failure and, like businesses, can ignore them.

A fourth difference between failing businesses and schools is that many underperforming schools have “saviors” and solutions imposed on them whether they like them or not; indeed, there

is little evidence of schools such as these actively seeking external intervention. And finally, businesses that fail or atrophy into insignificance die outright, hurting only their employees and shareholders. Schools, however, may be reconstituted or, at the very extreme, closed. But unlike businesses, the markets served by such schools are not transient, and the net effect of their failure hits more than the bottom line.

***4. Identifying schools as “failing” is highly contingent on a surprisingly large number of circumstances.***

Whether a school is identified as underperforming is partly an issue of definition and is contingent on a number of things. It is, first of all, contingent on the policy context. For all politicians, failing schools represent the worst problem and the best solution. They are the worst problem because they represent the inability of policy to influence practice. No matter what intervention, program, or treatment policymakers think up, a group of schools remains immune and continues to underperform no matter what government is in power or what interventions are applied. They represent the best solution because any government that transforms their performance is guaranteed popular support.

Many voters have little choice other than to send their children to underperforming schools and are therefore quick to lay the blame for serial school underperformance on the government of the day. Improving these schools to the level of the best schools would make voters and politicians very happy; hence, whatever government is in power, improving this group of underperforming schools will remain a priority.

Second, the definition of underperformance is contingent on the criteria and benchmarks set for judging adequate performance. For example, in England, at one point all schools in which less than 25 percent of students achieved success in public examinations at age sixteen were considered failing. The 25 percent threshold, an arbitrary line in the sand, categorized

schools with 24 percent as failing and those with 26 percent as not failing. In 2008, this threshold was increased to 30 percent. Overnight more than four hundred schools that had not been considered as failing were catapulted into the “failing” category. Indeed a number of schools that had been commended for their performance one week were being vilified the next as failing. In short, the definition of a failing school is relative. There is no absolute measure.

Third, underperformance is contingent on who assesses underperformance. For example, a district supervisor visiting a school may know its community, background, and history very well. The judgment he or she subsequently makes on the progress secured by the school will be heavily influenced by this knowledge and by the quality of social relationships with staff at the school, particularly the principal. He or she may conclude that the distance traveled by the school has been significant and label the school as improving. Another member of district staff less familiar with the school and looking only at annual performance data may conclude that the school is underperforming. But it is the same school. Especially when judgments about success or failure are based only on achieving a fixed target, the chances of mislabeling a high-performing school serving a group of students who have traditionally struggled at school a failure are high.

The important point here is that the notion of underperformance is relative and contestable. It is for many schools a label that is applied, removed, and reapplied as policies change and political imperatives alter. Underperformance is contingent on definition and the criteria on which this definition is applied. Politicians may want to set ambitious, tough targets and underline these as expected minimum performance, but in so doing, they create many more “failing” schools.

##### ***5. Weak leadership is a major cause of school decline.***

Stories of successful turnaround in high-poverty contexts are not in short supply (Murphy & Meyers, 2008). Although every

example is unique in some respects, all stories highlight the centrality of a small number of factors or conditions that make improvement less or more possible. The external conditions we have already explored: these are contextual, compositional, cyclical, and contingent. But what about the internal conditions—those factors or elements over which the school has more direct control and influence? One of our recent studies carried out in England (Day et al., 2009) begins to describe the conditions found in more successful schools. But this study, as well as Duke's (2010) U.S. evidence, also shows that such internal conditions (trust, collaboration, innovation, and a relentless focus on teaching and learning) are not randomly allocated or aligned; they are purposefully created and orchestrated by school leaders.

The literature on effective turnarounds points again and again to the importance of effective leadership. This evidence shows that talented leadership is one of the strongest explanations for the success of schools performing beyond expectations in high-poverty settings (Harris & Chapman, 2002a). High-poverty schools can achieve high academic performance, but this is unlikely without effective leadership.

The nature of leadership practices in successful school turnaround schools is a central theme in this book, so a detailed exploration of the exact nature of these practices is left to later chapters. Suffice it to say that compelling evidence now shows that leaders in successful schools actively set directions, develop people, and engage in organizational redesign. They create the organizational conditions that allow improvement to be sustainable. They also match their leadership approach to the needs or phase of the organization, and they are able to develop and adjust their leadership practices to align with the growth state of the organization (Day et al., 2009).

In contrast, evidence about ineffective or failing schools places weak leadership at the top of the list of reasons for underperformance. Lack of vision, poor communication, inattention to teaching quality, and failure to make decisions are cited as

some of the characteristics of poor or weak leadership in failing schools. As Stoll and Myers (1998) point out, the correlation between poor leadership and ineffective organizational functioning is strong. The business literature similarly highlights how leadership can make or break a company (Collins, 2009). This is less an issue of charisma and personality and more an issue of what leaders actually do—their core practices and the conditions that they create within an organization that can guarantee its success or seal its fate.

### **A Perfect Storm with Imperfect Solutions**

Many underperforming schools are caught up in a perfect storm with imperfect solutions. Contextual, compositional, cyclical, contingent, and conditional factors all work against them at the same time. One set of influences—for example, being located in a deprived area and having largely low-income students; or having experienced a sequence of failed, externally imposed initiatives; or having weak leadership—would be bad enough, but the aggregate effect of these influences renders many schools unable to cope. While improvement is desirable, these factors in combination make it almost impossible to improve. For every failing school, the mix is different. It varies according to context, and it is this variation that renders so many solutions to the problem of failing schools faulty, naive, and imperfect. Treating all failing schools the same is the cardinal error. So many imperfect solutions discount context and ignore the perfect storm of influences, choosing instead to offer standardized undifferentiated approaches to improvement that make little, if any, difference.

Although schools in high-poverty contexts tend to share certain socioeconomic characteristics and face similar external challenges, this is where the similarity ends. As Hargreaves (2004) notes, these “schools are not all alike and the reasons for their underperformance vary greatly” (p. 30). Unlike “effective” or “improving” schools, which research shows consistently

share the same characteristics, the sheer range of complex variables affecting failing schools means that they are very different from one another. Despite sharing similar sets of socioeconomic characteristics or facing similar sets of external challenges, these schools are far from homogeneous. For example, in a study of nineteen first-year U.S. turnaround schools, Duke, Tucker, Salmonowicz, and Levy (2007) found evidence of some fifteen conditions associated with low performance, including lack of clear focus, unaligned curricula, inadequate facilities, and ineffective instructional interventions. Consequently, such schools require highly differentiated approaches to improvement that recognize the many types of failing schools (Chapman & Harris, 2004).

Work on the differentiation of schools and improvement strategies undertaken by Hopkins, Harris, and Jackson (1997) suggested that improvement approaches were needed that matched the growth state of the school. However, within the categorization Hopkins offered, failing or ineffective schools were not highly differentiated. Subsequent research has produced typologies of “failing” schools. For example, Stoll and Fink (1996) identified sinking and struggling schools within their category of ineffective schools, while Chapman and Harris (2004) talk about immobile schools in their typology of schools in difficulty. Hopkins (2007) has recently extended his work on this topic to suggest three types of “failing” schools: underperforming, low attaining, and failing. Although these categories or types of schools are acknowledged to be relatively crude, without some way of diagnosing a school’s growth state it is almost impossible to select appropriate improvement strategies that fit the developmental needs of the school.

## **Conclusion**

If we are serious about improving failing schools, we should pay more attention to the causes of their failure in the first place, as well as the factors that contribute to their continuing failure.

Because failure has many causes, successful turnaround strategies need to be suitably differentiated. Accurate diagnoses of the reasons for failure therefore are fundamental starting points for constructing potentially useful interventions. Much of this initial diagnostic work is leaders' work. Through contextually sensitive enactments of the well-documented successful leadership practices described in Chapters Four, Five, Six, Seven, and Eight, schools can engage in improvement efforts that are most appropriate to their needs and are most likely to have the biggest impact on their long term performance.

### **Key Points**

- Poverty and diversity create challenges for individual student learning that many schools are ill equipped to address.
- The negative effects of poverty and diversity on student learning are greatly magnified in schools with homogeneous populations.
- Underperforming schools often lack the capacities needed to sustain initial gains made with considerable external assistance.
- Identifying schools as "failing" is highly contingent on a surprisingly large number of circumstances.
- Weak leadership is a major cause of school decline.
- School failure is rarely caused by only one factor; it is more often a perfect storm with imperfect solutions.

