

How to Turn Around Low-Performing Schools

Daniel L. Duke
Curry School of Education &
Partnership for Leaders in Education
University of Virginia

Four Crucial Understandings

School turnaround specialists need to understand

1. How low-performing schools got that way
2. The kind of leadership needed to turn them around
3. The role of the school district in the turnaround process
4. The change process



Jared Diamond's Four Invitations to Disaster

1. Failure to anticipate a problem
2. Failure to recognize a problem once it surfaces
3. Failure to try and solve a problem once it is recognized
4. Failure to solve a problem, despite trying to solve it



Diagnosing Decline: *Operational Causes*

- Lost focus
- Alignment problems
- Inadequate monitoring of progress
- Increased class size
- More rules and harsher punishments
- Undifferentiated assistance
- Over-reliance on untrained helpers
- Ineffective and un-targeted staff development
- Hasty hiring
- Lack of leadership at all levels

(D. L. Duke, 2008)

What Needs to be Changed in Order to Turn Around a Low-Performing School?

The 5 most frequent changes identified by principals were:

- Change the school's reading program
- Remove or re-assign selected personnel
- Improve instruction
- Provide more timely data on student progress
- Reduce discipline problems



What Needs to be Changed in Order to Turn Around a Low-Performing School?

The 5 most frequent changes identified by teachers were:

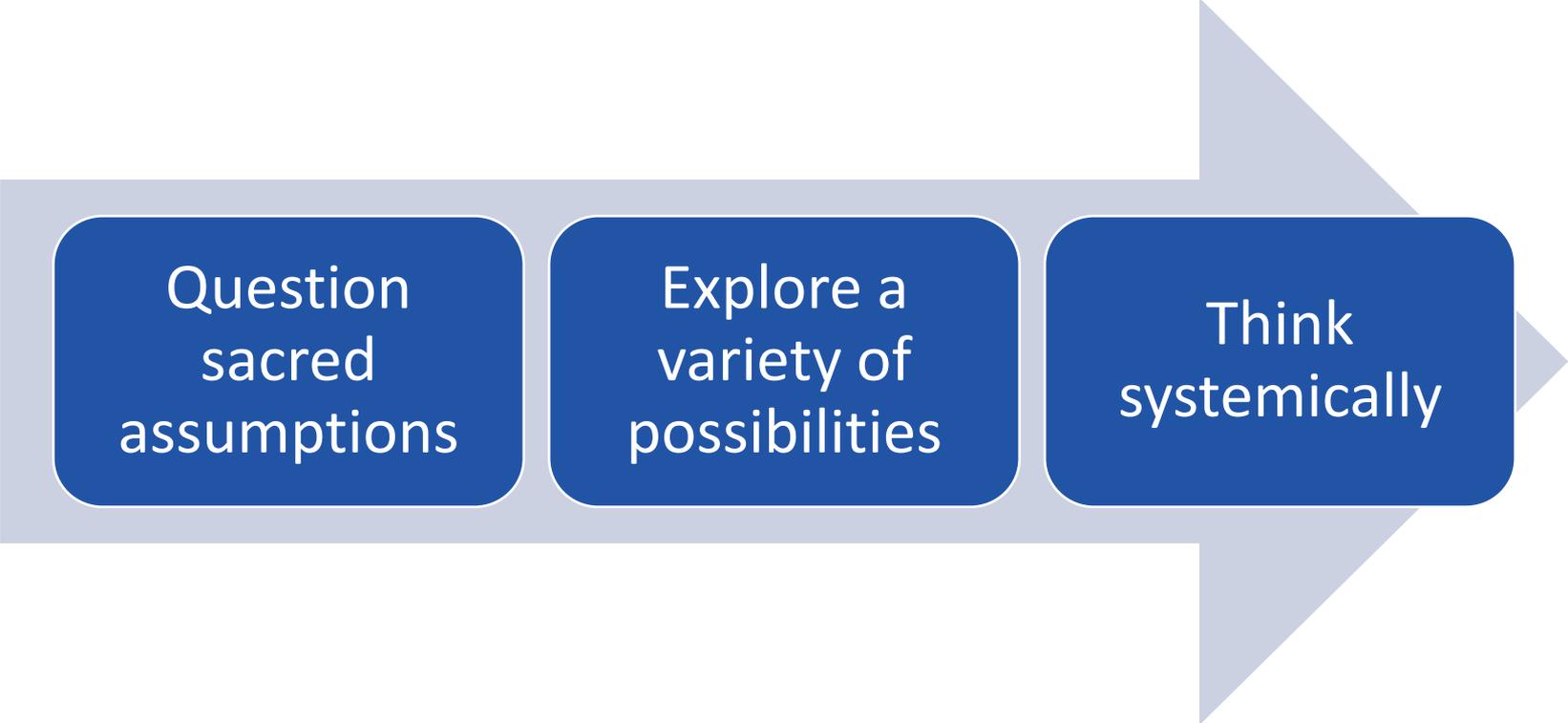
- Increase parent involvement
- Provide more support from the school district
- Implement better interventions to assist low achieving students
- Create more community partnerships
- Develop a new approach to school discipline



Differentiating the Need for Leadership

		Direction (Focus)	
		High	Low
Commitment	High	1	2
	Low	3	4

What Do Designers Do?



Question
sacred
assumptions

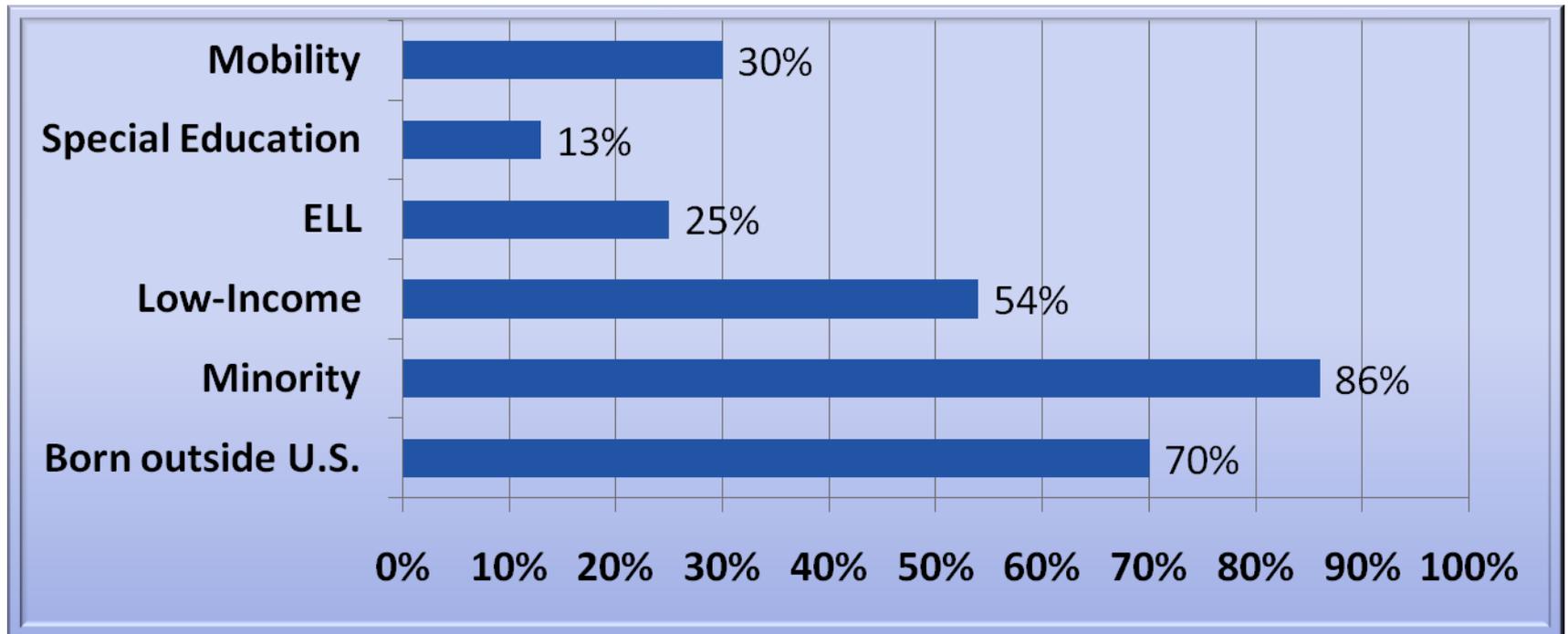
Explore a
variety of
possibilities

Think
systemically

Stuart High School

Fairfax County, Virginia

- Enrollment: **1500**
- Average SAT score in 1997: **951** (lowest in FCPS)
- # of SOL tests passed by at least 70% of students: **1 out of 11**
- Daily attendance: **89%**



The Transforming of Stuart High School

- Re-designing the high school into 3 schools
- Early start to school year and expanded calendar
- Class time doubled in Algebra I and English
- Ninth grade targeted for smaller classes
- Students getting a D or F required to attend twice-a-week after-school tutorials
- Late buses provided for students in after-school tutorials
- Elementary reading specialists hired to help low readers
- Juniors and seniors encouraged to take at least one AP or IB course

Center for Applied Technology and Career Exploration

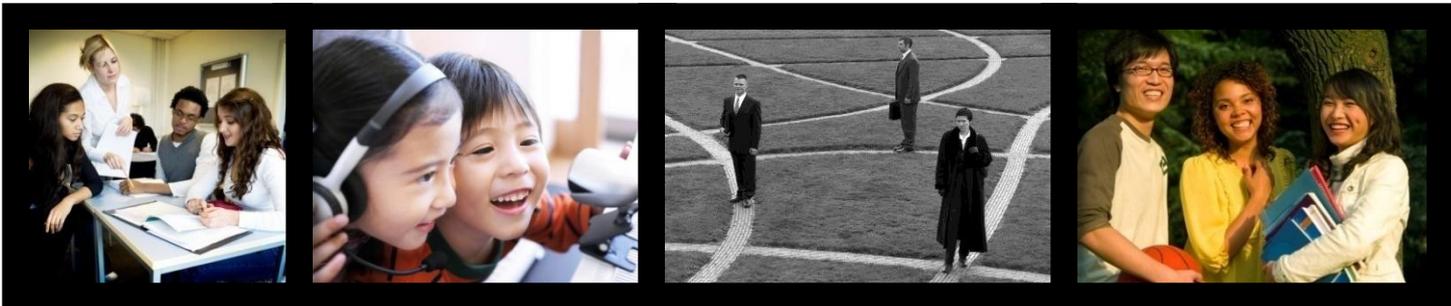
- Rocky Mount, Virginia (1996)
- Mission:
 - Raise student awareness of career opportunities.
 - Engage students in active learning.
 - Reduce county dropout rate.
- Origins:
 - Need for a new middle school.
 - Limited appropriation for new construction.
 - Community-based planning process.



<http://gereau.frco.k12.va.us/>

Center for Applied Technology and Career Exploration

- Develop oral, written, and auditory communication skills
- Clarify a career path plan
- Develop a work ethic that includes responsibility, initiative and dependability
- Solve problems effectively in diverse collaborative groups
- Apply problem-solving skills using appropriate technology
- Develop research skills using appropriate technology
- Develop strategies to adapt to change



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Key Design Features

- CATCE must not look like a school or feel like a school
- No bells, classrooms, or courses
- No cafeteria, gymnasium, or playing fields
- All 8th graders in county spend one semester at CATCE
- Students select three 6-week “career modules”
- Students spend all day in a career module

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Modules

- Arts
- Finance
- Legal Science
- Media Design
- Manufacturing
- Engineering / Architectural Design
- Environmental / Natural Resources
- Health / Human Services / Medicine



What CATCE Does / Does Not Have

Does Have

- Electronic library
- Workstations
- Commons
- YMCA next door
- Conference center
- Storage in workstations
- One computer for every 2 students



Does Not Have

- Library / Media Center
- Desks
- Cafeteria
- Gymnasium
- Auditorium
- Locker in halls

Examples of School District Alignment— Strategic Alignment



- Alignment among School Board members regarding mission and vision
- Superintendent's priorities aligned to School Board's priorities
- Principals' priorities aligned to Superintendent's priorities
- Teachers' priorities aligned to principal's priorities
- Allocation of resources aligned to priorities

Examples of School District Alignment— Operational Alignment

- District curriculum aligned to state standards
- State standards aligned to high-stakes assessments
- Teaching practice aligned to district instructional model
- Teacher evaluation instrument aligned to district instructional model
- Teacher evaluation instrument aligned to teacher job description and contract
- Professional development aligned to curriculum and instructional model
- Instructional interventions aligned to needs of struggling students

(D. L. Duke, 2008)

The Benefits of Alignment

- Reduces ambiguity and confusion
- Improves coordination across units
- Reduces wasted resources and duplication of functions
- Reduces chances people will work at cross-purposes
- Increases likelihood of mission completion



The Council of the Great City Schools' Advice for Richmond Public Schools

1. Develop a coherent vision for where the district wants to go academically
2. Set measurable goals for academic improvement
3. Establish a new accountability system for attaining academic goals
4. Standardize districtwide instructional strategies and curriculum
5. Provide uniform, districtwide professional development on the implementation and

The Council of the Great City Schools' Advice for Richmond Public Schools

6. Ensure that reforms are implemented at the classroom level
7. Use data to monitor progress and decide on instructional interventions
8. Begin reforms at the elementary level but start reforming high schools



Assumptions about the Transition Process



People have characteristic ways of ending things and beginning things.



Transitions are not the same as changes. Changes are situational. Transitions are psychological.



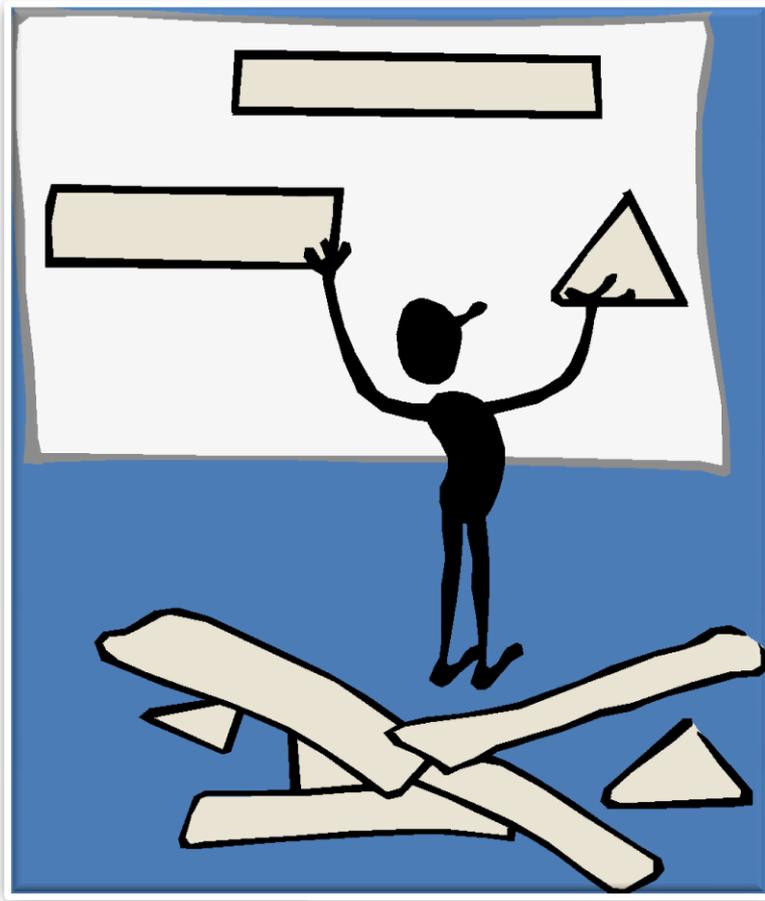
A change without transition is likely to be unsuccessful.

Stage 1 of Transition: *Ending*

Letting go of the old ways and the old identity people had. People need help dealing with their losses.



Stage 2 of Transition: *The Neutral Zone*



Going through an in-between time when the old is gone but the new isn't fully operational. In this "neutral zone" psychological realignments are taking place.

Neutral Zone Dangers

1. Anxiety rises and motivation falls. People feel disoriented. Energy is drained away from work into coping tactics.
2. Employee absenteeism increases.
3. Old weaknesses in the organization reemerge and old resentments

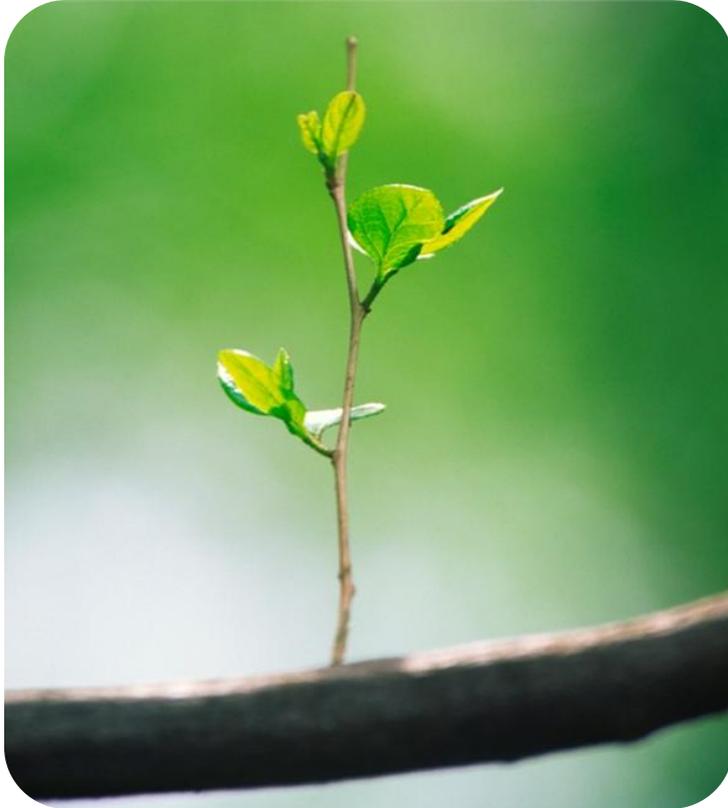


Neutral Zone Dangers (cont.)

4. People feel overloaded and priorities are confused. As uncertainty grows, confidence in the organization is lost.
5. Polarization occurs among employees. Some want to rush forward; others want to go back to the way things were.
6. The organization becomes vulnerable to outside criticism.



Stage 3 of Transition: *New Beginning*



This is when people develop the new identity, experience the new energy, and discover the new sense of purpose that makes the change begin to work.

Strategies for the New Beginning

1. Be sure people understand the purpose and the outcome being sought.
2. Paint a picture of how the desired outcome will look and feel.
3. Lay out a step-by-step plan regarding how the new outcome will be achieved.
4. Give each person a part to play in the plan. People need a tangible way to contribute.

Reasons Why People Resist Change

- Lack of awareness of the need for change
- Complacency (comfort zone) and routines
- Fear of failure / success

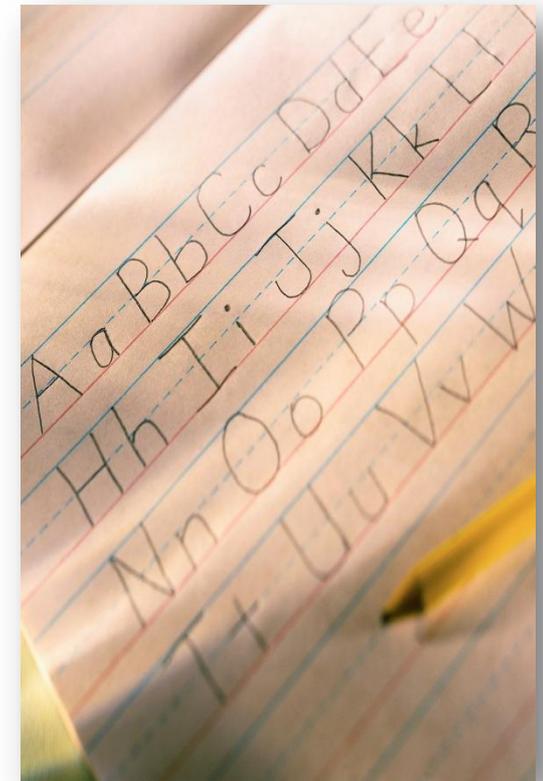


Results

- 12 of 18 schools in their first year of the *UVa School Turnaround Specialist Program* either:
 - Made AYP or
 - Achieved *at least* a 10% reduction of failure rates in reading or math
- That's a **67% rate of success!**
(combined results for Cohorts I and II)

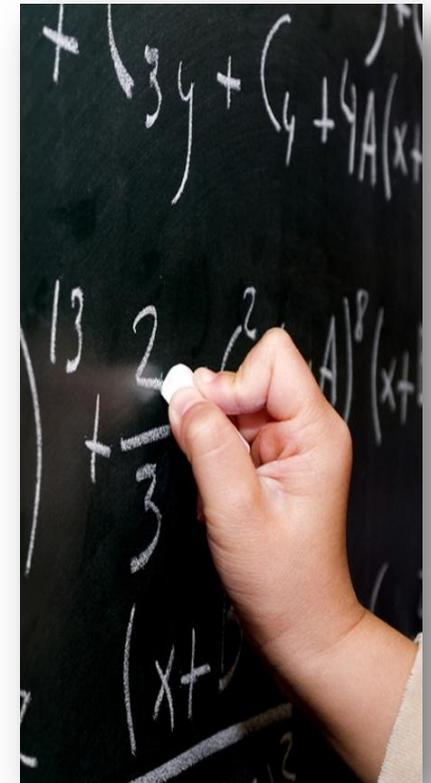
Changes in Percentage of Students Passing State Tests

English SOL Tests	10 STSP Schools	10 Comparison Schools	State Average
3 rd grade	15.5%	4.0%	6%
5 th grade	5.4%	-4.6%	0%
8 th grade	4.0%	8.0%	4%



Changes in Percentage of Students Passing State Tests

Math SOL Tests	10 STSP Schools	10 Comparison Schools	State Average
3 rd grade	11.5%	-1.6%	0%
5 th grade	12.4%	5.3%	2%
8 th grade	6.0%	1.0%	0%



Initial Actions Taken by Turnaround Specialists

- Launched schoolwide focus on literacy
- Revised daily schedule
- Charged teacher teams with responsibility for data analysis and curriculum alignment
- Initiated targeted intervention
- Initiated targeted staff development
- Laid groundwork for re-culturing school

Lessons Learned Regarding the Preparation of School Turnaround Specialists

- Initial training must involve a central office support team
- A district-based “shepherd” may be preferable to an outside coach
- 90-day plans focus energies and permit mid-course corrections
- Training several specialists from the same school system at the same time is desirable
- Rehearsing the first faculty meeting is helpful
- Specialists must never assume that people are clear about the priorities

Lessons Learned Regarding the Preparation of School Turnaround Specialists

- Specialists need to anticipate disappointment and distractions, and understand how to deal with them
- Many elements of a successful turnaround school also can be found in low-performing schools. The difference involves execution.
- Turnaround training must address how to sustain as well as how to initiate change
- Turnaround specialists appreciate case-based learning

A School Turnaround Specialist Must Be Able To



Convey a sense of urgency without seeming to panic



Promote collaboration while avoiding groupthink



Inspire trust while letting everyone know that incompetence will not be tolerated



Engage people in the task of raising test scores without seeming to care about numbers more than children