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Turning around schools: it can be done

Dr Ben Jensen



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Overview

Some of Australia's most troubled schools are turning around their performance to achieve remarkable results. Formerly marked by behaviour problems, low expectations and poor staff morale, these schools are implementing reforms that make them models for all low-performing schools. These schools are thriving not just because their leaders are often inspirational, but because they have followed the same path as turnaround schools around the world.

In 2008, students at Ellenbrook Primary School on the edge of Perth were often substantially below the national average in all areas of literacy and numeracy. Today they are equal to, and in some cases slightly above, the national average. Last year, literacy results for Year 3 students at Ravenswood Heights Primary school in Tasmania were for the first time above the state average and equal to the national average.

Secondary schools that once struggled are also transforming. In 2006 more than two-thirds of Year 7 to 11 students at Sunshine College in Melbourne's western suburbs achieved only primary school levels of literacy. By 2012, literacy and numeracy was improving at a faster rate than similar students across the nation. And in the three years to 2012, 40 per cent of Year 12 students at Holroyd High School in western Sydney took up university places. Over half of Holroyd's students have been refugees.

These and other turnaround schools improve by consistently implementing the same five steps: strong leadership that raises expectations; effective teaching with teachers learning from each

other; development and measurement of student learning; development of a positive school culture; and engagement of parents and the community.

But change is not simple. Despite many government initiatives, school turnaround is rare. Highlighting the five steps is important but not enough. For policymakers, the challenge is to trigger change in schools in each of the five steps; to change the behaviour and practices of leaders, teachers and students.

How can this be done? First, a method to commit all parties to reform low-performing schools is required. Second, school leaders and teachers' capacity for change must be built. Evaluation and accountability should monitor and provide feedback on progress in the five steps to continually reinforce change. Accountability for student outcomes is always the ultimate measure but a simple focus on test scores won't bring about the required changes in schools. The Empowered Management Program in Shanghai provides a good example of how policy can be designed to change practices in low-performing schools. A contract commits all parties to the process. Leadership and teaching skills are developed by learning from high-performing peers. Evaluation and accountability mechanisms continually measure and reinforce change in the school.

A focus on continually changing behaviours in schools and classroom is a marked change from many Australian education policies. But done well, it will make a huge dent in inequality and enrich the lives of the students who need it most.

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1. Schools that are falling behind in Australia

Turning around low-performing schools can have a huge impact on young people's lives. Stories of failing schools can make the problem seem insurmountable, but it is not. Policy makers can directly target those schools that are lowest performing to bring about substantial change.

Defining the size of the problem in Australia depends on how you define a 'low-performing' school. What level of performance is too low? What level of inequity is too much? These questions are complex and this report does not seek to develop strict measurement criteria for school turnaround policies.

Instead, we use a simple approach that can be applied to quickly and easily identify schools in which student learning is unacceptably low. One-hundred and fifty six secondary schools are two years (or more) behind the national average on reading and numeracy in the Year 9 National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests. Further, the two-year gap has persisted for over five years.¹

In other words, for each of the past five years, Year 9 students in these schools are achieving at an average Year 7 level.

The 156 secondary schools comprise only 6 per cent of secondary schools across the country, a relatively small proportion of schools in Australia. This is a small enough number

for policy to intensively and effectively target a narrow group of schools for turnaround.

Box 1: What does school turnaround mean?

The concept of school turnaround is simple: a low-performing school, often in a low socio-economic area, is turned into a high-performing school over a period of time. Prior to turnaround, these schools have usually experienced persistent symptoms of school ineffectiveness, including poor school culture and attendance and staff problems. Without specific, intensive strategies, the school is unlikely to change.

While the idea is straightforward, there is little agreement on which schools should be targeted for intervention, or on what constitutes a turnaround school. There is extensive literature on measuring performance but little agreement on which measures should be used to classify 'low' or 'turnaround' performance.

This report does not seek to add to the measurement literature on turnaround schools. Policy makers will use their own categorisations as a way to target turnaround policies to specific schools. Other factors, such as cost, determine the exact number of schools that are effectively chosen for improvement. Targeting too many schools is usually a mistake, as it can spread resources too thinly and make the program ineffective.

¹ This method is simple and allows schools to be transparently identified using NAPLAN data. It should not be confused with a comprehensive analysis of a school's performance and strengths and weaknesses.

1.1 Where are low-performing schools based?

Table 1 shows that the 156 schools are spread across all States and Territories apart from the Australian Capital Territory.

Table 1: Secondary schools where Year 9 average is two years below the national average over 5 years, 2008-12

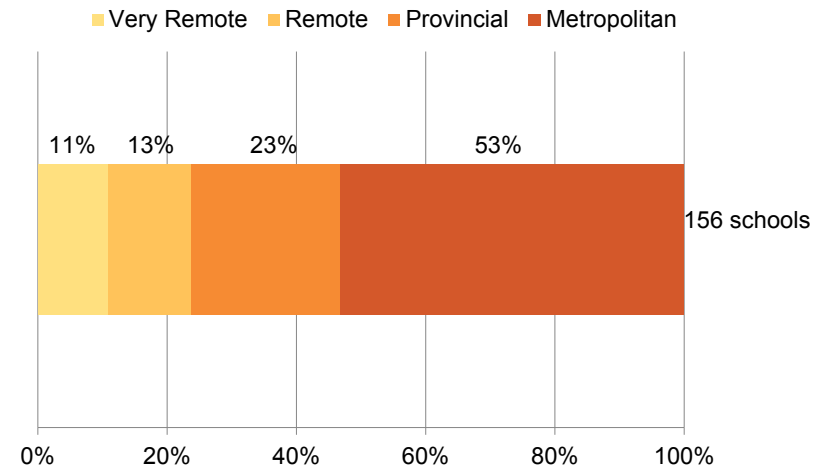
	Reading	Numeracy	Reading & numeracy
VIC	15	11	7
NSW	65	54	43
QLD	65	48	44
SA	15	22	14
WA	36	33	28
NT	14	17	12
ACT	0	0	0
TAS	10	10	8
AUS	220	195	156

Note: results estimate the number of schools whose average student NAPLAN results are two years below the average Australian student for that year level. Five years of data are analysed from 2008 to 2012.

Source: Grattan Institute analysis of NAPLAN data 2008-12

The commonly held view that low-performing schools are only found in indigenous or remote communities is incorrect. Almost two-thirds of these schools have student populations with fewer than 30 per cent indigenous students. Figure 1 shows that 53 per cent of the 156 schools are in metropolitan areas. Nearly a quarter are in provincial areas. Less than a quarter of these schools are in remote or very remote areas.

Figure 1: Location of secondary schools, Year 9 average two years below national average in both reading and numeracy, 2008-12



Source: Grattan Institute analysis of NAPLAN data 2008-12

Box 2: Various measures of performance

Section 1 analysis is based on absolute measures of school performance. This is one of three broad categories that use standardised test measures, outlined below.

Raw or absolute scores: the absolute score on a standardised test that is not altered to control for any background factors.

Gain scores: Simplistic gain scores measure the difference between the raw scores of a student, class or school, when tested at time A then at time B.

Value-added: the OECD has defined value-added as the contribution of a school to students' progress. The contribution excludes other factors that contribute to students' progress.² It compares the progress each student makes relative to all other students with the same initial level of achievement, while controlling for socio-economic factors.

Each of the above depicts student test scores in different ways and each has their advantages and weaknesses depending on their intended use. Comprehensive measures of school performance should extend beyond measures of test scores.

²OECD (2008)

2. How to turn around a school: five common steps

School turnaround is hard. Relatively few schools lift their performance in a significant and sustained way, despite many efforts and forms of government support. It is often said that success relies on a few charismatic principals or teachers who are in short supply. This is wrong. What works is consistent across schools. Again and again, schools follow the same steps to bring about change.

The five common steps to school turnaround are:

- 1. Strong leadership that raises expectations.** This is widely considered the vital ingredient.³ School principals lead behavioural and organisational change that breaks away from the status quo.⁴ Leaders set new expectations for teaching and learning, then model changes to bring everyone on board.⁵
- 2. Effective teaching with teachers learning from each other.** Turnaround schools implement teaching practices that dramatically improve learning. Professional collaboration, such as teacher observation or team teaching, helps teachers to develop new or improved approaches and reinforces change through peer feedback.⁶ Working together gives

people greater ownership of the dramatic changes occurring in the school.⁷

- 3. Development and measurement of effective learning.** Data-driven analysis and evaluation often underpin school turnaround, and are critical to monitoring the impact of policy.⁸ Data help to explain teaching challenges, and identify learning needs and areas of strength and weakness across the school. Data use often marks a vital change in these schools.⁹
- 4. Development of a positive school culture.** Turnaround schools create an orderly and disciplined environment. Significant change usually comes early in the turnaround process and seeks to create new norms of behaviour in schools and classrooms.¹⁰ School culture usually needs to improve before other changes can occur.¹¹
- 5. Engagement of parents and the community.** Parents and communities reinforce changes in students' behaviours and study habits. Schools can harness this impact by involving parents and community members in the change process.¹² Positive role models from the community also help to lift

³ Leithwood (2010); Herman, *et al.* (2008)

⁴ Herman, *et al.* (2008); Kowal, *et al.* (2009); Papa and English (2011); Leithwood (2010); Fullan (2006); Zbar, *et al.* (2008); Orr, *et al.* (2005); Harris, *et al.* (2006)

⁵ Duke (2006); Zbar, *et al.* (2008)

⁶ Social Ventures Australia (2011); Hattie (2009)

⁷ OECD (2009)

⁸ Barber and Mourshed (2007)

⁹ Zbar, *et al.* (2008)

¹⁰ Herman, *et al.* (2008)

¹¹ Zbar, *et al.* (2008)

¹² Social Ventures Australia (2013); Corallo and McDonald (2002); Picucci, *et al.* (2002)

student expectations. Community and welfare groups can be vital in addressing serious family problems that affect learning at school.

Achieving change

The common thread between the five steps is behavioural, and often cultural, change. That means school leaders are embarking on a time-consuming and difficult challenge.

In some schools, about three to five years is generally needed before student performance improves in a sustained way.¹³ The pace of change will differ across schools. But in all schools, the impact on individual students can be almost immediate. For example, a safer school environment can have a large and instant effect on individual students, even if it takes longer to see improvements in student performance across the entire school.

The timing and order of reforms is important. To shift the status quo it is often necessary to acknowledge that there is a crisis. Tinkering with school improvement initiatives is unlikely to be enough to overcome persistent low performance (see Box 3).¹⁴ Many turnaround schools begin the process by improving school culture, reducing bullying and creating a clean and healthy learning environment. Effective learning and teaching can then be developed. This builds pride in the school and creates momentum for change. A number of early wins can be important help to break down resistance and low expectations.¹⁵ This could include, for

example, creating extra time in the timetable for school priorities, establishing new professional learning groups, or introducing a uniform change.

Box 3: Turnaround and school improvement

The steps for school turnaround mirror the steps for many school improvement plans.¹⁶ But the context differs in low-performing schools in low socio-economic areas. This can affect the speed and intensity of the steps required. The low starting point of these schools means drastic efforts are needed to break away from the traditional way of doing things.

Certain pre-conditions also need to be in place first before broader school improvement efforts can take effect, for example an orderly school environment.¹⁷ At the same time, turnaround strategies must also ensure sustained improvement. Too often, improvement is short-lived with many schools returning to past poor practices once extra support stops or school leaders move on.

¹³ Fleischman and Heppen (2009); Aladjem, *et al.* (2010)

¹⁴ Duke (2012); Calkins, *et al.* (2007)

¹⁵ West, *et al.* (2005); Herman, *et al.* (2008)

¹⁶ Caldwell and Spinks (2013)

¹⁷ Zbar, *et al.* (2008)

3. Schools on the road to success

This section describes the progress made by four schools - two primary and two secondary - working to turn around their performance. These examples show how change *is* possible, using the common five steps discussed in Section 2.

Ellenbrook Primary School

Location: Ellenbrook, WA, 27 km north-east of Perth.

School type: Primary school with 513 students

Student profile:

- Index of Community Socio-Economic Advantage (ICSEA):¹⁸ 967 (bottom 35 per cent in Australia)
- 18 per cent of students have a language background other than English
- High proportion of students with additional learning needs
- Substantial number of students in public housing

Performance

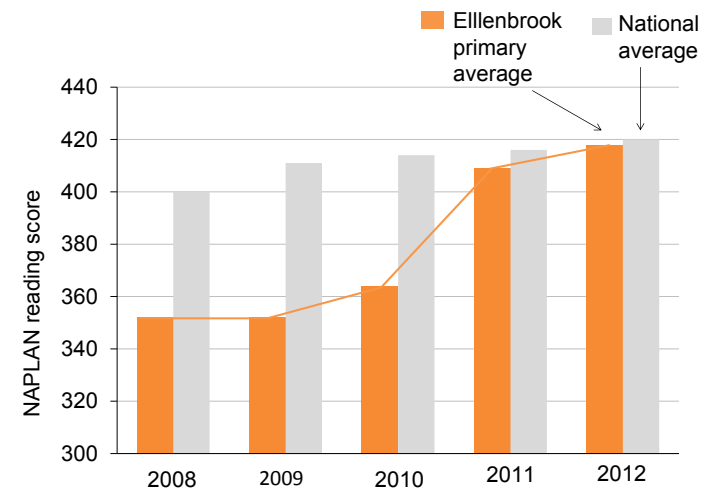
- In 2008, student results were below, often substantially, the NAPLAN national average in all areas of literacy and numeracy. By 2012, the situation had changed dramatically.

¹⁸ ICSEA shows of the levels of educational advantage that students at each school bring to learning. A school's ICSEA value reflects parents' occupations and levels of education, the proportion of Indigenous students and whether the school is in a metropolitan, regional or remote area, among other factors. The average ICSEA value for Australia is 1000. Source: ACARA (2013)

Student results are now equivalent to, and in some cases slightly above, the national average (see Figure 2).¹⁹

- In numeracy, students are progressing at a much faster rate at Ellenbrook than other schools across the country.²⁰

Figure 2: Year 3 average reading scores, 2008-12



Source: Grattan Institute analysis of NAPLAN 2008-12, My School website

¹⁹ This applies in all areas of literacy and numeracy results except Year 5 reading.

²⁰ Comparing students with the same initial level of attainment at different schools across Australia.

Steps for turnaround

1. Strong leadership that raises expectations

The school principal, Dr MacNeill, has high expectations of his students and the teaching that enables them to perform at their best. He has a pragmatic approach to strategy; his vision is uncompromising but he adapts to changing circumstance. He quickly established his leadership of the school with a clear vision that helped to win people over.

But the principal insists on the vital role of his leadership team. He says two highly effective deputy principals have led change in the school. “Too often we elevate the status of the school principal to the detriment of establishing effective leadership teams,” he says. “The quickest way to kill change is to put a single effective leader in a toxic culture.” A strong leadership team is always required for successful turnaround.

The leadership team has introduced a considerable number of changes but always followed two rules: each change must improve student learning *and* make teachers’ job easier. Change is always difficult so it has been crucial to support and develop staff through this process.

2. Effective teaching with teachers learning from each other

Ellenbrook has introduced explicit instruction methods (a highly structured teaching approach) alongside a greater focus on literacy and numeracy. These methods have been implemented in a way that allows teachers to learn new skills on the job. Leaders among the teaching staff have volunteered to try new explicit techniques, been given time to view them in other schools, and

then to gradually introduce them in their classrooms. Staff make presentations detailing the changes they have made and success is celebrated. Other teachers are then invited to help develop the new teaching practices. Timetabling now provides more time for teachers to learn and work together to continually develop and reinforce improved practices.

Box 4: Curriculum change at Ellenbrook primary school

Dr MacNeill improved the curriculum and introduced higher learning expectations early in his tenure of school principal. In 2010, his students were substantially behind some eastern states in mathematics (as measured by NAPLAN). He compared the textbooks from their provider with what the company provided in NSW and found Year 3 textbooks he had been given were equivalent to Year 2 textbooks being provided in NSW. By 2012 Australian standards were in place and this problem was gradually overcome. With an improved curriculum and new teaching techniques, the school’s maths students are now learning at a faster rate than the rest of the country.

3. Development and measurement of effective learning

Leadership teams put explicit emphasis on the learning progress of every student, while being careful not to flood teachers with endless data and graphs. The school runs Australian Council for Education Research Progressive Achievement Tests in March and November to calculate the progress of each child and class. This provides the basis of teacher’s performance management meetings at the end of each year which focus on how each student’s learning could have improved over the year. The

emphasis is always on improving instruction commensurate with each stage of a student's learning.

The school's many students with additional learning needs are all on individualised learning plans, with high expectations of progress. Almost a third of all students are now on special individualised learning plans.

4. Development of a positive school culture

The reform agenda has stressed the need for a change in the school's culture. As with many turnaround schools, change began with a series of small steps that grew following visible success stories in the school. New norms of classroom behaviour have been enforced. Disruptive students are removed from class within 10 minutes to ensure that teachers can execute their lesson plans effectively and the learning of other students is not affected. The school says it is strong on learning, and tough on bad behaviour.

5. Engagement of parents and the community

Every morning Dr MacNeill and one of his deputy principals stand at the school gate to greet students and their parents, and to talk about their children's progress. Ellenbrook is committed to engaging parents and the community in a professional relationship.

For students with specific problems, staff may visit the home and provide help when the connection between school and home is weak. The school is also very strong in protecting staff from inappropriate parental behaviour.

Over time, parental engagement has played a critical role in achieving change. Parents have reinforced the change process and highlighted the improvement the school is making. Parents regularly tell teachers that their children are advancing more quickly than children they know at other schools; through positive reinforcement, success breeds success.

Ravenswood Heights Primary School

Location: Ravenswood, four kilometres from the centre of Launceston, Tasmania.

School type: Primary school with 292 students

Student profile:

- Index of Community Socio-Economic Advantage: 891 (bottom 10 per cent in Australia)
- 13 per cent are indigenous students
- 32 per cent of students are public housing residents
- A high proportion of students have additional learning needs

Performance

- The school's reform efforts over the past four years are now starting to be seen in student results. In 2013, Year 3 NAPLAN numeracy scores were -for the first time - above the Tasmanian average and equal to the Australian average score.
- The school is adding real value to student learning. In 2012, student results rose much faster between Year 3 and Year 5 compared to other students with the same initial low scores in Year 3.

Steps for turnaround

1. Strong leadership that raises expectations

Ravenswood Heights has moved from a school that was beset by behavioural problems to one that focuses on improving student learning. The focus on learning was set by a new principal in

2009, and strengthened by the current school leader, Britany Roestenburg.

In setting new directions, the first priority was to lift the expectations of students, teachers and parents. School leaders brought teachers together to examine case studies of turnaround schools and discuss what could be done at Ravenswood Heights. This process developed a common vision for change and has encouraged staff to focus on high expectations.

The school leadership team, not just the principal, has been vital in driving change. Extra government funding in 2008 enabled an Assistant Principal and an Advanced Skills Teacher to be employed. With several school leaders distributed across the school, high expectations were reinforced across all areas.

2. Effective teaching with teachers learning from each other

An important step was to agree on consistent teaching methods for reading and numeracy. Explicit teaching is now a focus: students should be able to articulate what progress they have made, and why they are learning certain things. School leaders ensure that new teaching approaches are implemented by visiting classrooms each week to work 'side by side' with the teacher. Leaders model new practices and assist teachers in adapting to new approaches.

Collaborative learning teams help lift teaching effectiveness. Teachers work in small, targeted grade groups. Each group, guided by a school leader, works together for two hours a week.

The first hour focuses on planning, the second on professional learning. Groups use data to analyse student progress, which then informs next steps.

3. Development and measurement of effective learning

Ravenswood Heights relies on the use of data to achieve its strategic vision for learning. Teachers use a mix of assessments, including NAPLAN, Prose Reading Observation, Behaviour and Evaluation (PROBE) and The Single Word Spelling Test. Teachers are developing explicit assessment guides to help benchmark and analyse student behaviour. They work in groups to collect evidence on what is working well, and how to improve teaching practice.

4. Development of a positive school culture

The school's culture has significantly changed. Ravenswood was considered one of the more challenging schools in the state, but new norms for learning and behaviour have been established. Student behaviour has improved with lower suspension rates and fewer forced withdrawals from class.

The *Social Emotional Learning Program* has promoted a common language among students about their behaviour. The program explicitly teaches social skills. For example, when students cannot behave in class they are encouraged to take themselves to the Assistant Principal's office without fear of reprisal. Collaborative teams, in which experienced teachers explain what works in managing behaviour, have helped to build teacher skills in this area. Programs such as a breakfast club, the Reading Room

before school every morning and 'the garden' area for quiet times have also helped to create a positive environment.

5. Engagement of parents and the community

By engaging parents, the school has become more embedded in the community. Engagement has increased through joint learning activities for both parents and students. Increased communication with parents and home visits have helped students with specific problems. Community services are integrated with the school and with the Child Family Centre, which is located on the premises. The Smith Family provides extra support in reading: each student in the Smith Family program is given a mobile phone and paired with a secondary school student who reads to them. Their students now have greater confidence in reading.

As a result, parents feel more confident and welcome at the school. Volunteering has increased, along with parental expectations. Parents are now more engaged in what students are learning and how they are progressing, where it was once enough that their child simply went to school

Sunshine College

Location: Sunshine, western suburbs of Melbourne, Victoria. The school has four school campuses in the area.

School type: Secondary with 960 students, co-ed.

Student profile:

- Index of Community Socio-Economic Advantage: 932 (bottom 20 per cent in Australia)
- 48 per cent of students have a language background other than English. More than 50 nationalities.

Performance

- For many years, students at Sunshine College struggled to achieve even basic literacy results. In 2006, more than 63 per cent of year 7 to 11 students were reading at a primary school level. Just three years later that figure had dropped to 38 per cent.²¹
- Improved student performance has been sustained over time. For the last two years students progressed at a faster rate in literacy and numeracy compared to other schools across the country.²²
- The College VCE results are now close to the state average. In 2011, the mean study score was 29 (the state average is

²¹ This was the test of Reading Comprehension data. Source, provided by Sunshine College, 2014

²² Comparing students with the same initial level of attainment in NAPLAN Year 7 assessments at different schools across Australia.

about 30). Six per cent of students obtained a study score higher than 40 (the state average was eight per cent).

- Post-school destination rates are strong. In 2011 almost 85 per cent of Year 12 students either went on to university (45 per cent) or to TAFE and vocational study (almost 40 per cent).
- Student attitude data improved between 2006 to 2009 across various areas; by 26 per cent in classroom behaviour, 14 per cent in school connectedness and 15 per cent in morale. The school is in the top 10 per cent of government secondary schools in the state for positive student attitude.²³

Steps for turnaround

1. School leadership that raises expectations

When the principal, Tim Blunt, was appointed to Sunshine eight years ago, literacy results had hit rock bottom. It made his job a daunting assignment but it also created a mandate for change. The school leadership team knew the school needed to break from the status quo.

Bold plans to develop a whole school literacy program were announced early on. All staff agreed to extra periods for literacy in the timetable, even at the expense of other subjects. VCE students also had more timetabled sessions for learning, with

²³ VAGO (2010)

fewer free periods. The school community could feel and see that higher expectations for student learning were being quickly established. Helped by a strong pastoral care program, students began to believe they could achieve great results.

2. Effective teaching with teachers learning from each other

In 2006, the principal brought teachers together to create a sense of shared ownership to improve teaching and learning. Student data were critical to getting everyone on board. The newly appointed leading teacher for literacy, supported by data collated by the University of Queensland (UQ) researchers, presented the schools' poor literacy results. The depth of the problem was clear. Teachers were moved and troubled by what they saw.

Staff then spent a year intensively exploring how to improve literacy. A new evidenced-based 'reciprocal teaching' method and whole school literacy program was adopted. Teachers worked in small teams with literacy experts to develop and reinforce new skills. One Sunshine teacher said the new approach "was not mystical magic, it was just really hard common sense based on research."

Results improved quickly. Aspects of the new program were then applied to a new numeracy program, with similar success. Teachers showed full commitment to the strategy. Those who participated in the literacy expert training worked closely with other teachers on the new numeracy approach.

Much of the success is attributed to the strong culture of teachers learning from each other in the school. Teachers now observe each other's classes and reflect on better ways to teach.

3. Development and measurement of student learning

Sunshine College has built an instructional model tailored to the needs of its students. The model articulates a clear vision for teaching and learning in the school. Student data is used widely across the school to assess and improve learning behaviours. The school-wide literacy program begins with all students sitting a reading comprehension test that groups them into four levels of competencies. Teachers then tailor teaching approaches to identified competency levels. Data use also forms a key part of the teacher appraisal process.

4. Development of a positive school culture

The school has changed from one considered to be complacent about its low student results to a place where students are confident they can aim high. Over the past eight years, the school has continued to develop an on-site pastoral care program. It has the support of outside organisations to work intensively with students to give them resilience, self-esteem and optimism.

A number of visible changes in the school helped shift student and staff perceptions. The second-hand school bus was replaced with a new one, with clear Sunshine College badging. A performing arts event, 'SHINE' was cemented in the school's culture, and a new uniform including a blazer was introduced. Students began to feel the school was serious, and were proud to call it their own.

5. Engagement of parents and the community

The school's student well-being program gives at-risk students support to help them stay and thrive in school. In 2010 a Parliamentary report by the Victorian Auditor General's Office formally recognised this exceptional program.²⁴ Since the current principal arrived, new connections have been forged with various non-government organisations to support wider student needs.²⁵

As part of the turnaround process, the school has also established a new technical college on campus. The Harvester Technical College works in partnership with TAFE providers to provide pathways to trade careers. Its highly practical offerings have attracted students from outside the local area.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ This includes the Ardoch Youth Foundation, the Australian Children's Music Foundation (music education to youth at risk), and the Beacon Foundation (focuses on school retention and transitions to employment).

Holroyd High School

Location: Greystanes, south western suburbs of Sydney

School type: High School with 522 students

Student profile:

- Index of Community Socio-Economic Advantage: 915 (bottom 15 per cent in Australia)
- About 60 per cent of students were refugees or asylum seekers including students in community detention
- 83 per cent of students have a language background other than English
- A high proportion of students have additional learning needs

Performance

- The school delivers strong post-secondary education outcomes. In the three years to 2012, an average of 40 per cent of final Year 12 year students took up university offers. More than 20 per cent enrolled in TAFE and private colleges.
- The high number of recent immigrant students at Holroyd High School means it is difficult to compare growth in NAPLAN results over time. Many students (44 per cent in 2012) have been in the country for less than three years, so their progress at the school cannot easily be tracked. However, for those whose results are comparable over time, the school is adding significant value. These students improve at a faster rate than the average state student between Year 7 to Year 9 in both literacy and numeracy.

Steps for turnaround

1. Strong leadership that raises expectations

In 1995, the school principal, Dorothy Hoddinott, entered a school with a negative culture and divided staff. Some teachers opposed efforts to increase performance, claiming they were already achieving all they could given the backgrounds of the student population. These teachers also believed that as more migrants and refugees joined the school, results were bound to go down.

At this time, the school's Intensive English Centre for newly arrived students in Australia was marginalised from the school. The Centre was not given access to the full range of the school's resources, including specialist classrooms, and the school's expectations for these students were low.

Today, talking to teachers and school leaders at Holroyd it is hard to believe that low expectations and poor collegiality were ever a problem. Expectations are not only high, they are continually being raised. At the start of each year, the principal tells the final year students that there is an expectation that they surpass the results of the previous year. The result is that each year, a high proportion of the students leave to attend University, TAFE or other post-secondary education.

2. Effective teaching with teachers learning from each other

The principal has not applied a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching in the school. Instead, teachers and other school leaders

are given autonomy and responsibility for quality teaching and learning in their faculties and classes. Results are continually monitored but teachers can apply the methods they believe are most appropriate. Nevertheless, they must reflect on their practice: on what and how they teach. Structured curricula are developed with clear objectives for each lesson.

Numeracy and literacy, especially teaching English as a second language, are a central focus of the school. Teaching and learning are continually reflected on and evaluated. Faculties meet once every two weeks to plan collaboratively and share subject specific expertise. Leading teachers are expected to mentor other teachers as a core part of their role. Teachers also observe each other's classes and give constructive feedback. Classroom observation is integrated within teacher appraisal and assessment processes.

3. Development and measurement of student learning

Teachers continually work on ways to improve student learning. Assessments, including NAPLAN results, are used to diagnose student progress and areas for improvement in the school.

Strong student engagement is reflected in high attendance rates and good results. Students are engaged not only in what they learn but in different aspects of the school and local community. Fundraising activities are folded into moral and civic education. This helps students, many of whom have recently arrived in Australia, better understand their society and the value of their place in it.

4. Development of a positive school culture

School culture focuses on respect and responsibility, and on developing pride in the school. While facilities are below the standard of many schools, the school is clean and when it is damaged, the damage is repaired straight away. Academic success is celebrated – often formally, with graduates donning gowns – to reinforce pride in achievement.

Developing a strong school culture also helps to address the fact that students from low socio-economic backgrounds often lack belief in their abilities. Every year the school provides about \$25,000 of assistance to students so they can attend school in appropriate uniform and have all the requisites for study. In some cases, financial help extends to housing and other basics. Last year a Year 12 student whose parents had died before he reached Australia as a refugee was living in a car. The school helped him pay his bond and first months of initial rent. A year later, the student has finished school and is enrolled in TAFE.

As students learn to be proud of themselves and of belonging to a safe, supportive and valued school, they start to believe they can live a 'normal life'. They also begin to believe they can achieve in class. The school's results bear out their new confidence.

5. Engagement of parents and the community

Parental engagement is difficult when so many families have recently arrived in the country. Many families that have fled war-torn countries and dictatorships are fearful of engaging with the school and figures of authority. The school is careful to gain the trust of families and to show that they will support and develop

their children as much as it can. In addition, many of the asylum seeker students (there are currently 93 students in the school either in community detention or on bridging visas) are unaccompanied minors, without family support.

Box 5: Supporting Holroyd students

Refugees and asylum seeker families often suffer from various kinds of trauma. The school helps connect families to the psychological and community support they need, and also provides a comprehensive student welfare support program throughout the school.

From time to time the school principal has to counsel staff who have become distressed at hearing of the traumatic experiences that many students and families have faced.

Ms Hoddinott insists that staff who become paralysed by the suffering of students cannot help them. But even she found she was affected physically during a period of high stress when leading a protracted fight against the Immigration Department, which was seeking the deportation of two Holroyd students. She successfully fought the deportation. The boys, whose parents had died and whose own lives were under threat, were finally allowed to remain in Australia. Throughout the battle, the school never lost sight of its goal to educate the boys. Both are now enrolled in university.

4. Government policies for turnaround: lessons from Shanghai

Governments across Australia and many other countries provide considerable resources to help schools turn around.²⁶ But it is a difficult policy area and success has been limited. So what can governments do to increase the number of turnaround schools?

Many policymakers will not be surprised by the five steps for school turnaround discussed in this report. Many policies already focus on them. The real challenge is to trigger change in schools: to target *behavioural and organisational change* in the five steps. This requires:

- A method to commit all parties – government, system leaders, and schools - to reform low-performing schools.
- Capacity building and evaluation and accountability mechanisms that continually develop and reinforce change in the five steps for school turnaround.

Leadership and teaching skills need to be developed in the five steps of school turnaround. Different evaluation and accountability mechanisms are also needed. Student outcomes will always be the ultimate measure of improvement but change needs to be continually reinforced and this won't happen with a simple focus

²⁶ In Australia, state and territory governments continuously monitor and support low-performing schools. The federal government dedicated significant funds to low socio-economic schools in 2008, and Gonski review reforms seek to better align school funding with student needs. For more information see Caldwell (2012). For information on international policies see US Department of Education (2009); Orland (2011).

on student test scores. Instead, policy should also evaluate the amount of change occurring in schools in each of the five steps.

Such an approach is a fundamental shift in the way many education policies are discussed and developed. As with any reform process, the devil is in the detail on how it is done. Shanghai's empowered management program (EMP) provides a good example of a policy designed to change leadership, teaching and learning behaviours and practices in low-performing schools. It is succeeding in increasing the number of successful turnaround schools in Shanghai.²⁷

Box 6: Shanghai success

Shanghai is the top-performing system in the world, according to the OECD Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). The average 15-year old math student in Shanghai performs at a level nearly three years above the average 15-year old in Australia.²⁸ Shanghai's system is more equitable as well as better performing. A student from a low socio-economic family or neighbourhood is significantly more likely to fall behind in Australian schools than his or her counterpart in Shanghai schools.²⁹

²⁷ OECD (2010b)

²⁸ OECD (2013)

²⁹ Ibid.; OECD (2010a)

4.1 The Empowered Management Program, Shanghai

Garnering commitment to reform

All parties commit to the five steps for school turnaround through a contract between the government and a high-performing school.³⁰ The high-performing school commits to turning around the low-performing school in two years, although sometimes the contract is extended to up to five years.

The contract commits the government by stipulating the resources and support it will provide. People know the contract is being executed so it politically commits the government to ensuring the turnaround succeeds.

The contract commits the schools to the five steps. The contracts often explicitly state the steps to be followed and the evaluation mechanisms that will be used to monitor them.

When the program started problems developed as the high-performing school was sent to 'fix' the low-performing school. The change process fell down in some cases. The program now focuses on building a mutually beneficial relationship between the two schools.

³⁰ The EMP identifies high- and low- performing schools using no explicit criteria. Instead, district leaders have the responsibility of 'knowing' their schools and they decide which schools need to be turned around and which schools can be the "support" in this process. Subsequently, district officials will be held accountable for their actions and rewarded for effective practices that lift school performance. For a more detailed analysis of each step of the EMP please see Jensen and Farmer (2013).

The formal contract used in the EMP is only one method to commit all parties. Commitment could be gained through other less formal mechanisms. Regardless of the mechanism used, it must be part of a broader policy that triggers the required changes in the five steps of school turnaround. A contract by itself will be ineffective.

Developing and reinforcing change in the five steps for school turnaround

The EMP is designed to change the behaviour and practices of school leaders, teachers and students in the five steps of school turnaround. Capacity building programs develop the skills required for change. Evaluation and accountability programs then continually measure and reinforce change in each of the five steps.

An empowered management team -- often including two or three senior teachers and the principal from the high-performing school -- is regularly stationed in the turnaround school. They are change leaders. Professional collaboration is emphasised: staff move between the schools, share responsibilities and engage in joint learning activities.

School turnaround in the EMP must focus on the five steps:

- 1. Strong leadership that raises expectations:** The high-performing school must develop a strategic plan that reflects the expectations and operations of a high-performing school but is also aligned to the practical situation of the turnaround school. Learning and teaching objectives must be measurable (at least to some degree) and sufficiently flexible for the

duration of the agreement. As with all successful school turnaround, staff must accept and support higher expectations for learning and teaching.

2. Effective teaching with teachers learning from each other:

The high-performing school is expected to develop teachers and leadership teams in the turnaround school. The development of effective teaching begins with a clear and detailed description of what effective teaching should be, where it is now and how to move forward. Teachers' behaviour and practices are continually observed and developed in classrooms.

3. Measurement and development of effective learning: A vital part of the contract is monitoring the assessment of student progress. But it stresses changes in learning behaviour. The habits of effective learning need to be created and reinforced, especially when particular skills need to be developed. For example, collaborative problem-solving can require different learning habits from drills for improving spelling and grammar.

4. Development of a positive school culture: A positive school culture must develop productive learning behaviours and study habits. For sustained change, these need to be reinforced by teachers, students and the school community.

5. Engagement of parents and the community: Parents and the community must be part of the change process. Social and extra-curricular activities provide avenues for teachers, students and parents to work together to improve each child's

learning. Frequent and meaningful home visits that are also an important feature of school practice in Shanghai.

Capacity building is an important part of change, but new skills and behaviours must be continually reinforced to make sure they stick. Evaluation and accountability mechanisms in the EMP continually reinforce change in behaviours and practices in the five steps. This differs from more traditional accountability arrangements, particularly in the data collected to make evaluative decisions.

To measure change, an evaluation team observes classrooms and conducts surveys and focus groups of school leaders, teachers, students and parents. Change is reinforced through extensive feedback.

Student results are always analysed but observations focus on student behaviour: study habits and behaviour in class and across the school. Classroom observations, coupled with teacher and student interviews and surveys, assess the extent that teachers' practices are changing.

School evaluations also measure the extent of professional collaboration of teachers given its importance to behavioural and organisational change. In addition, survey data is used to develop school satisfaction rates that combine parent, teacher and student satisfaction rates.

A formal evaluation takes place both at the end of the first year and at the end of the contract. As a result the agreement can be terminated or payment withheld from the high-performing school if they fail to achieve turnaround of the low-performing school. But

this is not common. More frequently, the evaluation can lead to changes to improve the functioning of the agreement and improve the performance of the school.

The EMP began with agreements between high and low-performing schools in specific districts. But with success, the program grew across the Shanghai municipality and more recently into other municipalities.

This report examines Shanghai's EMP not because everything Shanghai does is world's best practice, or will work in all systems. The program is detailed because it shows how policy can be designed to change practices and behaviours in schools.

Change will only succeed if the reform is clear and consistent. Disjointed support spread too thinly across schools is unlikely to bring about the large change required. We have tried and failed so many times with low-performing schools. A new approach provides a real chance to make a dent in inequality across our country, and give the students who need it most a chance at a rich and fulfilled life

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