

To Improve Schools, Stop Guessing and Start Using Research

BY JOHN SIMMONS

From Catalyst Chicago

The data are clear: Unless the nation can find a better way to accelerate improvement in the quality of education and implement it in the next 10 years, we will lose our competitive edge against other nations and another generation of children will be lost. Eighty percent of Illinois high school graduates are not capable of doing the college-level work essential to getting a well-paying job. But, thanks to 40 years of research on schools and companies, we know how to change that. The challenge is to put into practice a new model using what research has revealed about what makes a high-performance school.

Putting research into practice: What a straight-forward concept. Yet for decades, education leaders have ignored the rigorous,

systemic research. Instead, they put one silver-bullet solution after another into place, based on inadequate or missing research, hoping for the best.

Transforming schools by applying research rather than guesswork is not a pipe dream. It is working in eight Chicago elementary schools in Garfield Park and Little Village.

Transformation Process

Four years ago, the eight schools were all failing so they joined together as a demonstration project in a partnership led by Barbara Eason Watkins, then Chief Education Officer of the Chicago Public Schools and Strategic Learning Initiatives.

In the first year, three of the eight schools turned around, which was defined as making at least three times the rate of progress on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) in reading, compared

John Simmons, president of Strategic Learning Initiatives, testified before Congress last May on turnaround schools. He has worked with public schools in Chicago and abroad. Condensed, with permission, from Catalyst Chicago, January 4, 2011.

with the school's experience before using the model. Three more schools turned around the next year. The last two turned around in the third year. Two of the "failed" schools qualified as the most improved school in the city in 2007 and 2008, and by 2010, all eight schools were improving at a rate almost five times faster than the average: 3.4 percentage points compared with 0.7 points citywide for K-8 schools.

To achieve these results, consider that:

- No teachers or principals were removed when the turnaround process began.

- The curriculum was not fundamentally changed, nor textbooks replaced.

- Neither the school day nor the school year was lengthened.

- There was no lottery for student admission.

- The cost was less than one-fifth of the money spent on other turnaround models used in the district, saving more than \$3 million per school over four years.

The eight schools followed a turnaround model based on 40 years of research on high-performance schools and companies. The strategy integrates the "essential supports" model of the Consortium for Chicago School Research and the Continuous Quality Improvement model adopted by organizations to reach and sustain high performance.

The result is a powerful strategy for improvement built around how well a school establishes the essential supports. Every school improvement idea must stand up to two questions: How does the idea advance one or more of the essential supports, and what body of research proves it?

This approach could move school reform from one in constant search of silver-bullet solutions to one grounded in evidence-based practice. It would be a revolutionary transformation, long overdue.

Strategies used to transform the eight schools include:

- A shared leadership among principals, administrators, and grade-level teams of teachers.

- On-site professional development and coaching for teachers and principals that emphasizes instruction and teamwork.

- Use of an eight-step instructional model that aims for mastery learning, with weekly no-stakes assessments based on the Illinois Achievement Standards.

- Engaging parents to learn the Illinois Standards and to better help their children with homework.

- School staff and parents jointly plan and apply a continuous improvement process, including a common instructional calendar.

- Building trust and collaboration among all stakeholders within and across schools to accelerate learning and sharing among staff, students, and parents to create

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a high-performing learning community.

- Solving problems that schools cannot solve by themselves using a team comprised of teachers, principals, chief area officers, and the chief education officer.

The eight-step Focused Instruction Process, a strategy drawn from the Continuous Quality Improvement model, ensures the process is continuously improved by teachers as they look at results and determine what worked and what needed improvement. The process focuses on each student, each day. Implementing this turnaround model is like baking a cake. If one essential ingredient is left out, you won't have a cake.

Lessons Learned

School staff and parents who had been told for years that they were failing discovered they had an untapped reservoir of creativity, energy, and commitment essential to achieving the results they desired. This lesson reveals a fundamental principle of individual and organizational behavior at odds with drastic turnaround models now in vogue. Deep, sustained change comes from the inside out, empowered and supported by the leaders in the organization.

Other lessons include:

- Teachers and principals should have input in the selection of their turnaround partner and the improvement process.

Empowering those closest to the problem creates ownership, which is essential for sustained, continuous improvement.

- All stakeholders must have high expectations that all children can and will learn.

- Knowledge of how to lead change is key to helping organizations transform.

- Having experienced coaches who support the leadership team's work in designing and implementing change is vital.

- A three- to four-year commitment to the process is essential, and depends on the readiness of the school and district.

- Schools should drop ancillary programs and focus on what works best.

- Focused goals and priorities, with regular check-in points are important for each grade and subject.

- Data must continuously inform decisions about instruction.

- The cycle of planning, implementing, studying results, and adjusting strategies so that improvement is continuous, must be repeated frequently.

The results from these schools demonstrate that it is possible to quickly turn around schools at a low cost, and that the results are scalable and sustainable.

Research shows why some schools succeed and others fail. It's time to stop guessing and replace hope with research. Do it from the inside out. ■

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