



Indicator: The district ensures that school improvement plans in rapid improvement situations include “quick wins,” early successes in improvement. (26)

Explanation: When a school has been low-achieving for years, its faculty and community often fall into an expectation that real change cannot succeed here. Gaining quick wins provides evidence that change is possible. Further, quick wins can ameliorate some nagging problems that confront school staff every day. Typical quick wins include improvement to the physical appearance and cleanliness of the school, placing staff in hallways during transitions periods to establish order, adjusting the schedule to allow for teacher team planning time, and meeting short-term goals for student attendance. Always it is important that the leader set goals that are sure to be met. The quick win plan may not necessarily be part of the larger school plan, but a short-term, targeted plan for this purpose.

Questions: How does the district advise and support principals in setting quick win objectives? What role does the school’s Leadership Team play in this process?

Change is hard. There is no sugar-coating it or giving it soft edges. Even if everyone is aware that something must change, the process itself is never easy. Change means breaking old habits. Change takes people out of their comfort zone and puts them in situations in which they are not familiar. Change shakes up the status quo. Perlman writes,

It will come as no surprise that change will be difficult and not everyone will happily climb aboard, even if the final goal is to provide the students with a better education. Involving some of the skeptics in improvement teams and keeping formal and informal lines of communication open can help reduce resistance. So can the results of the “quick wins.” (2007, p. 55)

Herman et al. (2008) confirmed the need for quick wins in a turnaround situation, citing this as one of four recommendations for sound turnaround practice. Public Impact (2007) studied cross-sector evidence on turnaround situations and found that “Common to successful turnarounds, however, is implementation of intense reforms in the first few months (Sudarsanam & Lai, 2001). Fast, focused results during the initial year are important in part to help establish credibility, create momentum for change, and break down resistance (Buchanan, 2003; Kotter, 1995; Paton & Mordaunt, 2004; Walshe et al., 2004)” (p. 8). In the world of business, faltering or failing companies do not have the luxury of long-term languishing. If a failing business does not turnaround quickly, it simply goes out of business. In education, failing schools are allowed to exist for years with no immediate repercussions. This can give a false message to schools that no real change is needed; it is okay to simply continue what you are doing even if students are not making progress.

Districts can support the implementation of quick wins by ensuring failing schools have a change agent or a turnaround principal in place. Then the district needs to give that principal flexibility and support to make the changes necessary for dramatic improvements. Leaders who plan and carry out a few quick wins in the first year communicate to the staff that 1. We are serious about change, and 2. Change is possible. This will require a change in the

culture of the school as well:

A striking element of the research on turnarounds is that successful turnaround leaders use speedy, focused results as a major level to change the organization's culture....The research indicates that in a previously failing organization, success can beget success; specifically, the early and tangible wins can serve as a catalyst for additional positive changes. (Public Impact, 2007, p. 15)

References and Resources

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