

CHAPTER 7

U-TURN REQUIRED

How Virginia's First School Turnaround Specialists are Meeting the Challenges of Improving Low-Performing Schools

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the work of five specialists in the initial cohort of the Virginia School Turnaround Specialist Program (VSTSP), a collaborative effort between the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education and Darden Graduate School of Business Administration, to provide executive leadership training for principals to turnaround low performing schools. The chapter describes the training program, the methodology used to track the progress of the five specialists, the challenges specialists faced, their efforts over two years to address these challenges, and their assessment of the extent to which the challenges had been eliminated. Student achievement data at the end of the first and second years of the program also are presented.

In an effort to respond to recent accountability initiatives, including the federal No Child Left Behind Act, various states have launched programs

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intended to produce rapid improvements in low-performing schools. While some of these programs entail increased choice for parents and provisions for school takeovers by private providers, others focus squarely on school leadership. The latter include pairing principals of low-performing schools with veteran administrators and dispatching assistance teams to help principals develop improvement plans. One of Virginia's intervention efforts involves the recruitment, training, and ongoing support of school turnaround specialists. The brainchild of former Governor Mark Warner, school turnaround specialists are principals who are given three years to turn around a low-performing school. Warner's experience in the private sector familiarized him with turnaround specialists who were hired for the express purpose of taking the steps necessary to save companies in decline. He believed that a training program incorporating business principles and advanced work on educational interventions could produce a cadre of specialists prepared to dramatically boost achievement in struggling schools. To fulfill his expectations, school turnaround specialists (specialists, for short) must see that their schools achieve Adequate Yearly Progress under No Child Left Behind, meet state accreditation requirements, or reduce failure rates in reading or mathematics by at least ten percent (the so-called "safe harbor" provision).

This chapter examines the work of five specialists in the initial cohort of the Virginia School Turnaround Specialist Program (VSTSP). The chapter opens with a brief description of the training program designed to prepare specialists. The next section discusses the methodology used to track the progress of the five specialists. Subsequent sections describe the challenges that the specialists believed had to be overcome in order to achieve school turnaround, their efforts over two years to address these challenges, and their assessment of the extent to which the challenges had been eliminated. Student achievement data at the end of the first and second years of the program also are presented. The chapter concludes with some lessons learned from the VSTSP and implications for the initial preparation of principals.

A UNIQUE COLLABORATION

In the spring of 2004, the Virginia Department of Education issued a call for proposals to develop a training program for specialists. The winning proposal was submitted jointly by the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education and Darden Graduate School of Business Administration. The two units had worked together previously under a grant from the Philip Morris Corporation to provide executive leadership training to teams of educators and community members from Virginia school districts. The

collaborative venture had worked well, thereby paving the way for further initiatives. The training model for the VSTSP involved eleven key elements, including a blended curriculum, case-study-based instruction, situated practice, blended faculty, a system for tracking progress, support teams, peer coaches, networking, a customized research component, credentialing, and incentives.

Blended Curriculum

The knowledge base for the VSTSP combines concepts and skills from the worlds of business and education. Since program participants already possess credentials as school administrators, they have been exposed to considerable basic training in educational administration. They also have on-the-job experience as school administrators. The VSTSP curriculum, therefore, is organized around advanced topics of particular relevance to individuals expected to lead organizational change. Among these advanced topics are the following:

- Mission and operations alignment
- Vertical and horizontal teaming
- Effective communication with stakeholders
- Tacit knowledge and the cultivation of faculty expertise
- Performance diagnostics and organizational troubleshooting
- Effective instructional intervention
- Data-driven decision making
- Mobilization of community resources
- Continuous assessment and quality control

These advanced topics each subsume various leadership skills with which successful turnaround specialists must be familiar. The curriculum is delivered by faculty from the education and business schools and provides opportunities for participants to develop expertise in target-setting, data collection and analysis, presenting data to various audiences, conducting effective team and faculty meetings, communicating with multiple constituencies, planning and conducting staff development, and monitoring program improvements.

Case-Study-Based Instruction

Much of the instruction in the VSTSP is based on carefully selected case studies that illustrate particular advanced topics. Some of the cases come from

the Darden School's existing collection of business cases. Other cases, in both paper-based and video-based formats, have been developed to capture the special challenges faced by principals in actual school turnaround situations. Participants read the cases and discuss them in learning teams prior to meeting in class with program faculty members. The cases are designed as open-ended exercises to provoke discussion, stimulate reflection, and elicit professional judgment. By analyzing cases with fellow participants, turnaround specialists come to understand how their assessments of challenging organizational circumstances compare with those of their peers and professors.

Situated Practice

Throughout the initial summer and follow-up training sessions, turnaround specialists are expected to use actual data from their schools and communities as they refine their leadership skills. Whether they present a profile of their school, troubleshoot the reasons for its low performance, or consider what data to share in their first faculty meeting, the training activities are anchored in their specific situations. As a result, much of the training leads directly to products and processes that turnaround specialists can put to immediate use.

Blended Faculty

Training for the turnaround specialists is provided by a team of experts representing business scholars, education researchers, incumbent turnaround specialists, and top-level education leaders. Among the faculty are a business professor who studies private sector turnarounds, an education professor who studies how to deal with marginal teachers in need of supervision and assistance, a turnaround specialist beginning her second year, and the former superintendent of a large school system who faced the need to improve performance in multiple schools. Exposing participants to such a diverse collection of experts is designed to familiarize them with various perspectives by which they can "make sense" of the turnaround process. In a number of instances, program faculty members from various backgrounds work in tandem, providing immediate examples of the compatibility of different perspectives.

System for Tracking Progress

Staff members in low-performing schools are not always clear about the school's status relative to academic goals. To make matters worse, the goals

themselves may be vague or not widely known. To prevent these problems from interfering with the efforts of program participants, each is trained to develop and implement a monitoring and data management system called “the balanced scorecard.” Originally intended as a tool for business leaders, the balanced scorecard has been adapted to school-based settings. VSTSP participants are trained in how to identify targets that must be met in order to raise performance and how to gather data on a regular basis so that all involved know where they are in terms of each target. Much of the data gathering is based on the use of benchmark testing throughout the school year. The balanced scorecard is designed to serve as the turnaround specialist’s fundamental management tool for tracking progress and troubleshooting.

Support Teams

The VSTSP recognizes that no individual, however competent, can turn around a low-performing school alone. Crucial to sustainable change at the school-level is district support of the principal’s efforts. Consequently, the program requires that each participating school system create a School District Support Team to provide the assistance necessary at the central office to enable turnaround specialists to deal effectively with resources, personnel, policy, and public relations issues. A key member of each School District Support Team is the superintendent. The first days of summer training for turnaround specialists involve the participation of the School District Support Team. This participation is especially important when turnaround specialists come from outside the school system and have little understanding of the local context in which they will be working.

Peer Coaches

A further source of support comes in the form of a peer coach for each turnaround specialist. Peer coaches are chosen based on their experience of turning around low-performing schools. Once the initial summer trainings have been completed, the peer coach becomes the VSTSP’s primary point of contact with the turnaround specialist. Through site visits, phone contacts, and e-mails, the peer coach helps the turnaround specialist maintain focus on targets, assists in thinking about difficult situations, and offers moral support. Peer coaches do not report to district superintendents; thus they can serve as confidants and sounding boards for the turnaround specialist.¹

Networking

Yet another source of support for turnaround specialists is fellow participants in the VSTSP. One purpose of the summer training sessions is to enable the participants to get to know each other and their particular school situations. The second summer session is scheduled so that mem-

bers of consecutive cohorts also have an opportunity to meet and share experiences. To further facilitate communication, the VSTSP has created an online portal that provides a quick and easy electronic link between all turnaround specialists, thereby enabling individual principals to consult each other during the school year.

Customized Research Component

An important component of the VSTSP is the Research Team. Consisting of faculty members and graduate research assistants, the Research Team conducts field-based investigations of the turnaround process in the program's schools. In addition, the Research Team responds to requests by turnaround specialists for any local studies that promise to enhance the school improvement process. The work of the Research Team is used to fine-tune various aspects of the training of turnaround specialists as well as inform a national audience of program progress and the challenges faced in raising performance in low-achieving schools.

Credentialing

The success of the VSTSP depends on its ability to attract high quality educational leaders. It cannot be assumed that such individuals necessarily are willing to risk their reputations by tackling a low-performing school. To encourage talented applicants, the VSTSP offers a turnaround specialist credential to individuals who successfully complete the program and achieve their turnaround targets. Those who earn the credential, like their counterparts in business, can be regarded as an elite group of educational leaders with very special skill sets.

Incentives

The last element of the VSTSP involves an incentive to enhance the recruitment and performance of turnaround specialists. A bonus, provided by the state and awarded by the VSTSP and school district, can be earned by turnaround specialists who achieve designated improvement targets. Additional funds also are awarded to the school based on student enrollment for the purchase of necessary materials and services to facilitate instructional improvements.

In July 2006, the VSTSP became the School Turnaround Specialist Program (STSP) and expanded from its Virginia base to include participants

from other states. The five specialists discussed in this chapter, however, were all participants in the initial Virginia-based cohort.

METHODOLOGY

The overall research design used here is a multicase study described by Robert Stake as a “design for closely examining several cases linked together” (2006, p. v). A multicase study in this instance allowed for an exploration of the unique situation of each of five participants in a common program, the VSTSP. The researchers collected data on five principals to create case studies of participants in the first (2004) cohort of the VSTSP. Each of the five specialists had served in his/her originally assigned school for two years and each represented a different school district.

Ten specialists were chosen for the first cohort of the VSTSP, but five were not included in the cases for several reasons. One specialist was re-assigned to a central office position after the first year. In the other four instances, insufficient data were collected over the two-year period to constitute complete cases. Two of these individuals opted to leave the VSTSP at the end of their second year.

In a multicase study, some research questions span the set of cases while others are specific to each individual case (Stake, 2006). At the outset of their participation in the VSTSP, the five specialists were asked to identify the conditions in their schools that they believed inhibited student achievement and school improvement. Researchers subsequently interviewed the specialists on various occasions over the next two years to determine: a) what efforts were being made to address these context-specific conditions, and b) whether additional conditions had been encountered. Interviews were conducted during field visits, phone conversations, and e-mails. The five principals also returned to the university training facility on four occasions. Each time, they provided updates on their progress. Upon completion of their first year in the VSTSP, each specialist co-authored a case study with a university researcher. The case studies described what they had done and currently were doing to turn around their schools (Duke et al., 2005).

At the end of each school year (2004–2005, 2005–2006), state testing results for the five schools were gathered along with the schools’ accreditation and Adequate Yearly Progress status. These data offer a basis for judging the success of each specialist’s efforts to raise student achievement.

Throughout the two-year period of data collection and upon completion of data collection, cross-case analyses were conducted. The researchers considered the commonalities across the five cases while simultaneously noting the unique circumstances and contexts. Cross-case analysis increases

knowledge of the enterprise, the VSTSP, through examination of a range of situations (Stake, 2006).

Sizing up the Challenge

This section introduces each of the five specialists, their schools, and the conditions they believed had to be addressed in order to effect a turnaround. Pseudonyms have been used to ensure the anonymity of the specialists and the schools.

Gilda Grove

Gardenwood Elementary was Gilda Grove's first principalship after a lengthy career in elementary teaching. Gardenwood was relatively small—200 students—and three out of four students were eligible for free or reduced price lunch. Eighty percent of the students were African-American. Gardenwood also was the site for several special education programs that drew students from across the school system.

When Grove reflected on what problems needed to be addressed in order to turn around Gardenwood, there was no question about the first order of business. Only 44% of fifth graders had passed the most recent state tests in reading, a figure that was 31 percentage points below the required pass rate. In mathematics, the pass rate was 47%. Both figures represented sharp drops from the previous year.

Grove identified a variety of factors that she believed contributed to Gardenwood's low test results. For one thing, the faculty lacked focus and priorities. Time and energy were not allocated in ways that suggested certain subjects needed more attention than others. No specific goals for school improvement existed. One reason for the lack of focus concerned the absence of regularly collected data on student progress. In some cases, teachers did not even know how their students had performed on state tests! Students were expected to master the state's Standards of Learning, but the curriculum at Gardenwood had not been aligned to the standards, nor were students periodically tested on the standards to determine how they were doing. To make matters worse, Grove's initial classroom observations revealed a variety of instructional weaknesses on the part of some teachers. She was especially concerned about her special education teachers, neither of whom possessed appropriate credentials.

Grove's predecessor had failed to develop the kind of structural arrangements that would facilitate teachers gathering on a regular basis to discuss curriculum alignment and student progress. As a result, there were few signs of collaboration and teamwork among teachers. The school schedule resembled a typical elementary schedule, centered on self-contained

classes and occasional “pull-outs” for Title I instruction. Time was not set aside for teacher planning and collaboration. The school culture reflected teacher isolation, excuse-making, and defensiveness. Teachers were aware that Gardenwood was the subject of negative feelings in the community, and they blamed parents for not playing a more active role in their children’s education. Parents who had the option chose to move their children to other schools.

Wanda Walker

Before Wanda Walker became principal of Wentworth Elementary, she had led two other struggling elementary schools. In the process, she learned the value of teamwork and aiming high. Still, she had never confronted the challenges presented by Wentworth. First of all, with 600 students, it was much larger than her previous schools. Second, her previous schools had once been successful and then, in recent years, had declined. Wentworth had never been successful. The school had never been accredited or achieved Adequate Yearly Progress. Walker, in other words, could not invoke the school’s illustrious past as a means of rallying support for extensive improvements.

Like Gardenwood, Wentworth had a track record of low test scores in reading and mathematics. Unlike Gardenwood, however, the school also had a large number of discipline problems. Teachers frequently referred students to the office for inattention, disruption, tardiness, fighting, and disrespect for authority.

Walker attributed these and related problems to a variety of organizational shortcomings. Like Gardenwood, Wentworth lacked specific targets for improvement, a curriculum aligned to state standards and the content of state tests, and an infrastructure that facilitated team planning and diagnosis of student learning problems. The school system had devised a local benchmark test for tracking student progress, but its content validity was questionable and it had not been implemented effectively because of technical problems with computer software. Students often were unclear about what material they had to master in order to pass state tests at the third and fifth grades. Walker attributed some of the problem to ineffective instruction. When students experienced difficulties, there were few effective interventions available to assist them. One reason was the absence of a daily schedule that permitted students needing help to receive it in a timely manner without missing regular class work. Another issue involved personnel assignments. Walker was concerned that instructional assistants completed their work day an hour before the end of school. As a result, they were unavailable to help students in the late afternoon, when remediation was undertaken. Walker also found that special education students at Wentworth were at a disadvantage because their instruction was provided primarily in

self-contained special education classes. The lack of adequate instructional materials posed yet another problem affecting teachers' ability to provide struggling students with assistance.

Walker's assessment of the problems that had to be overcome in order to effect a turnaround at Wentworth also included concerns about the appearance of the school and its surroundings. The inside of Wentworth was dirty and cluttered, while the area around the school had become a hang-out for older adolescents. The community was highly critical of the school, but Walker's predecessor had been unable to generate much support from parents and other community members for school improvements both in terms of appearance and the more fundamental problems.

Ranelle Roberts

When Ranelle Roberts took over as principal, Ralston Elementary School enrolled 480 students, 96% of whom were eligible for free or reduced price lunch. Most of the students came from public housing, and the neighborhood surrounding Ralston was considered dangerous. Despite its circumstances, Ralston had achieved state accreditation, but because of low reading scores by third graders, the school failed to meet Adequate Yearly Progress. Roberts worried that the weak performance of this cohort foreshadowed more problems in the future.

Besides improving the reading performance of third graders, Roberts realized she would need to reduce the high number of discipline problems at Ralston. In order to do so, she surmised that parental involvement had to be increased. At the time she took over, getting parents to come to school to discuss their children's behavior and academic progress presented a challenge. Roberts also wanted parents to play a greater role in their children's education at home. She doubted that many parents spent much time with their children reading stories or working on assignments.

In assessing other problems that needed to be addressed, Roberts identified the absence of special education students in regular classrooms. Low scores by special education students had contributed to Ralston's failure to make AYP. Instructional interventions in the form of pull-out programs were available at the school when Roberts arrived, but they did not seem to be very effective and they were not coordinated with the regular curriculum. She suspected that changes would be needed in the types of assistance being provided. She believed that some of her teachers lacked sufficient training in reading to be able to give students the kind of intensive help they needed. Teachers were committed to working with the students but they needed support.

Carla Clemons

Having achieved success at another elementary school in the district, Clemons was assigned to turn around one of its lowest performing elemen-

tary schools. She brought about a third of her old staff with her and hired another third. The final third of the staff represented teachers who had been at Cavalier Elementary School before it was consolidated with Clemons' former school. Clemons knew that reversing the downward spiral of declining student achievement would not be easy. Slightly more than half of Cavalier's third graders passed the state test in reading, while only 63% of the fifth graders passed. Scores on the state tests in mathematics also were low, though third graders fared somewhat better than fifth graders. Academic problems were compounded by the relatively high rate of student absenteeism and tardiness on any given day. Fridays were especially problematic where attendance was concerned.

As Clemons sized up the challenge facing her, she identified a variety of organizational issues that had to be addressed. The staff needed to come together as a team, but she knew this process was inhibited by districts between the three groups of teachers. Teachers who previously had worked with Clemons, for example, were accused of getting favors by those who had worked at Cavalier before she arrived. Common objectives around which faculty members could coalesce were non-existent. Individual teachers tended to "do their own thing." Reliable data on student progress were unavailable. As a consequence, there were no interventions that targeted curriculum content on which large numbers of students were struggling. Clemons' predecessor had not established a committee or team structure to facilitate faculty discussions of school improvement and ways to address low pass rates on state tests.

One of the first problems that Clemons encountered concerned the shabby appearance of the school. Trash was everywhere, and the school's interior badly needed paint. The physical condition of Cavalier reflected the sorry state of the school's culture. Teachers knew that parents and community members held the school in low regard. Despite this fact, many parents accompanied their children to the school's free breakfast program, ate breakfast, and then lingered around school, often creating a disruption. Cavalier was located in the midst of public housing, and Clemons was aware that many of these parents were distrustful of the schools.

Patrick Phillips

The fifth school was a middle school that spanned grades five through eight. When Patrick Phillips joined the VSTSP, he already was principal of Parker Middle School. No one needed to help him understand what the hurdles were. Problem number one was a pass rate on the eighth grade state reading/language arts test of 66%. Interestingly, the pass rates on other tests at both the fifth and the eighth grade exceeded 70%, which at the time was sufficient to meet state standards. Phillips believed, though, that students were capable of far better academic performance.

In Phillips' estimation, a number of factors served to hold back Parker Middle School. Too many students missed too many days of school. When they were in attendance, students frequently were inattentive or disruptive. While part of Parker's discipline problem was due to inadequate classroom management and uninspiring instruction on the part of some teachers, lack of parental support for the school's efforts to reduce misconduct also was a factor. Phillips felt that too many parents had given up trying to be a positive influence on their children's behavior.

As in the preceding cases, Phillips attributed many of Parker's problems to a variety of organizational issues. The school lacked concrete objectives related to improvements in the academic program. One area where improvement was desperately needed concerned the alignment of curriculum content to the state standards and, ultimately, to the content of state tests. Alignment problems were reflected in the fact that teachers often did not know the content on which their students were weak until the results of state tests had been received. Even after the results were received, provisions were not in place to correct deficiencies. Students moved to the next grade without mastering essential objectives. Phillips was especially worried about his special education students, whose instruction took place for the most part in self-contained classes. Few of these students had access to regular education classes.

Phillips registered concern about the lack of collaboration among teachers. Faculty members rarely met to discuss student progress or ways to improve instruction. The state of local technology was relatively primitive, so that even communicating by e-mail was difficult. Phillips knew that some of his teachers should be replaced, but he lacked control over hiring and firing. All personnel decisions were made by the central office which made it difficult to create groups of teachers who could work together as teams.

Comparison of Conditions in the Five Schools

Table 7.1 summarizes each principal's perceptions of the conditions that needed to be addressed in order to achieve school turnaround. Other than low reading achievement and personnel problems, no conditions characterized all five schools. Lack of focus, lack of data on student progress, lack of teamwork, ineffective interventions, and lack of parental involvement were reported for four out of the five schools. Seven conditions were reported by three of the specialists, five conditions were reported by two of the specialists, and inadequate materials was mentioned in only one case. Based on this very limited number of cases, it appears that low-performing schools are characterized by some relatively common conditions and some relatively uncommon conditions. Each of the five schools, however, was perceived to have a particular combination of conditions somewhat distinct

TABLE 7.1 Conditions Perceived by Turnaround Specialists to Adversely Affect Student Achievement

Conditions	Grove	Walker	Roberts	Clemons	Phillips
Low reading achievement	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Low math achievement	✓	✓		✓	
Attendance problems				✓	✓
Discipline problems		✓	✓		✓
Lack of focus	✓	✓		✓	✓
Unaligned curriculum	✓	✓			✓
Ineffective instruction	✓	✓			✓
Lack of data on student progress	✓	✓		✓	✓
Lack of teamwork	✓	✓		✓	✓
Inadequate infrastructure	✓	✓		✓	
Ineffective schedule	✓	✓			
Dysfunctional culture	✓			✓	
Ineffective interventions		✓	✓	✓	✓
Lack of inclusion		✓	✓		✓
Inadequate facilities		✓		✓	
Inadequate materials		✓			
Personnel problems	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Problems with technology		✓			✓
Lack of parent involvement	✓	✓	✓		✓
Negative view of school in community	✓	✓		✓	

from the other schools. The number of problematic conditions ranged from 6 (Ranelle Roberts) to 18 (Wanda Walker).

These findings reflect the results of a larger study comparing perceived conditions in low-performing schools (Duke, Tucker, Salmonowicz, & Levy, 2006). The study examined 19 Virginia elementary and middle schools, including the five in this study, and found a comparable range of conditions. The mean number of perceived problematic conditions was 12.3, a daunting number of challenges, most of which are resistant to simplistic solutions. Low reading achievement was the only condition that characterized every one of the 19 schools, suggesting that low reading achievement probably is the primary basis for declaring a school to be low-performing in the first place. Personnel problems were perceived to exist in 18 out of the 19 schools. The specific configuration of conditions was unique for each of the 19 schools. One implication of these findings is that low-performing schools, at least as seen through the eyes of specialists, frequently share some similar problems, but that no two are perceived to confront identical challenges.

AFTER TWO YEARS OF SCHOOL TURNAROUND LEADERSHIP

In June 2006, two years after the five specialists joined the VSTSP and pinpointed the conditions that they felt were holding down performance in their schools, each specialist was interviewed and asked to assess the status of his or her original conditions. Table 7.2 summarizes the results. For each condition, the specialists had a choice of four possible ratings: 1 = condition fully corrected, 2 = condition mostly corrected, 3 = condition partly corrected, and 4 = condition uncorrected.

With regard to the central concern—low reading scores—only Carla Clemons felt that the problem had been eliminated. The other four specialists indicated, however, that some progress had been made. Out of 62 conditions identified by the five STS, the most popular rating was “condition mostly corrected.” STS gave this rating to 31 conditions, or exactly half of the total number of conditions. Twenty conditions were rated as “fully

TABLE 7.2 Ratings of Perceived Conditions After Two Years of School Turnaround Program

Conditions	Grove	Walker	Roberts	Clemons	Phillips
Low reading achievement	2	3	3	1	3
Low math achievement	2	2		2	
Attendance problems				1	4
Discipline problems		2	2		3
Lack of focus	2	1		1	2
Unaligned curriculum	2	1			1
Ineffective instruction	1	2			2
Lack of data on student progress	2	1		1	4
Lack of teamwork	2	1		2	2
Inadequate infrastructure	2	2		1	
Ineffective schedule	1	1			
Dysfunctional culture	2	1		2	
Ineffective interventions		1	2	2	3
Lack of inclusion		2	2		2
Inadequate facilities		2		1	
Inadequate materials					
Personnel problems	2	1	3	2	2
Problems with technology		1			3
Lack of parent involvement	2	1	3		3
Negative view of school in community	2	1		2	

Note: 1 = Condition fully corrected; 2 = Condition mostly corrected; 3 = Condition partly corrected; 4 = Condition remains uncorrected

corrected,” nine conditions as “partly corrected,” and two conditions as “uncorrected.” Both of the uncorrected conditions, attendance problems and lack of data on student progress, were noted by Patrick Phillips. Wanda Walker, who originally had identified the largest number of conditions (18), also perceived the largest number of fully corrected conditions after two years in office (11). For every identified condition except “ineffective schedule,” at least one specialist indicated that the condition continued to require some degree of attention after two years. This finding suggests that many of the problems perceived by principals to suppress performance are difficult to eliminate entirely. Such problems simply may require continuing attention, at least in the short term. Put differently, the overarching challenge of school turnaround leadership may have more to do with problem management than problem elimination or prevention.

Dealing in the currency of perceptions does leave open the possibility of discrepancies between principals’ and others’ assessments of a situation. It could be argued that the conditions noted by the specialists are merely their perceptions and may not reflect others’ perceptions of the problems or actual conditions in the five schools. While such a possibility clearly exists, it is unwise to contend that perceived conditions are unimportant or irrelevant. The conditions that specialists perceive to be problems are, for better or worse, likely to be the ones to which they attend.

At the same time, however, there is some reason to believe that the specialists’ perceptions of changes at the school level may not necessarily correspond to the perceptions of others, such as their faculty members. In a study of the ten principals in cohort one of the VSTSP and ten principals in comparison schools that had not met Adequate Yearly Progress or been fully accredited, Tucker and Higgins (2005) found marked differences between the perceptions of principals and teachers on specific changes and global assessments of those changes. When asked about their satisfaction with “the changes that have been made this year” and the extent to which “changes made this year have helped raise student achievement,” principals consistently rated these items higher than teachers and differences were statistically significant. Principals, in other words, were more positive about the changes that had taken place than teachers. Further research on teachers’ perceptions of their schools’ problems is needed to provide a fuller understanding of conditions that inhibit student achievement. Because the principal has final authority over decision-making in most schools, however, it is the principal’s assessment that most heavily influences the path of change.

In light of the specialists’ assessment of conditions after two years of school turnaround efforts, it is interesting to examine actual student performance on state tests at the end of the 2004–2005 and the 2005–2006 school years. Table 7.3 summarizes the state accreditation status (full ac-

TABLE 7.3 Measures of Student Achievement in 2004, 2005, and 2006^a

	Grove			Walker			Roberts			Clemmons ^b			Phillips			
	04	05	06	04	05	06	04	05	06	04	05	06	04	05	06	
State Accreditation (Full or Warning) ^c	W	F	F	W	W	F	F	F	F	W	W	W	n/a	F	W	F
Made AYP ^c	N	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	N	n/a	Y	N	Y
% Proficient in Reading																
Grade 3	79	86	74	32	63	81	63	81	98	52	48	n/a				
Grade 5	43	65	78	61	65	72	76	78	87	63	74	n/a				
Grade 8													66	62	82	
% Proficient in Math																
Grade 3	69	91	85	67	80	87	73	84	90	68	72	n/a				
Grade 5	43	71	73	45	56	54	85	95	98	49	65	n/a				
Grade 8													65	71	64	

^a AYP, accreditation, and achievement data were gathered from Virginia Department of Education's "School Report Card" Web site (<http://www.pcn.k12.va.us/VDOE/src>).

^b Clemmons Elementary School was closed by the state after the 2005–2006 school year. Its test scores were not released on the state Web site.

^c Accreditation and AYP status reflect state test scores from spring of a given year, but count toward the next school year.

creditation, accredited with warning, and accreditation denied), Adequate Yearly Progress status, and the percent of students passing the reading and math tests at the third, fifth and eighth grades. The 2006 data for Cavalier were unavailable.

In order to fulfill Governor Warner's expectations for specialists, each had to lead their school to full state accreditation, Adequate Yearly Progress, or "safe harbor" by the end of their third year in the program. At the end of the first year, Grove and Roberts had achieved all three targets, and Clemons had reached "safe harbor." At the end of the second year, Phillips joined Grove and Roberts in meeting all three targets. Walker had met two of the targets (not AYP). Data for 2005–2006 for Clemons were not available; her school was shut down after the 2005–2006 school year, and no test scores were released to the public. Overall, the percent of students passing the reading and math tests in third and fifth grade increased in all but two cases where there were dips of five points or less. More typical were double digit increases. In one case, the passing rate increased 49 points over a two-year period, taking one school from a low of 32% passing the third grade reading test to 81% passing, just 3 points below the Virginia average passing rate for this test.

It is worth noting that the specialists managed to raise student achievement in most cases despite the fact that the conditions perceived to cause low performance had not been completely eliminated. This finding should offer hope to those engaged in the school turnaround process. Even modest improvements in problematic conditions can make a substantial difference as reflected in improved student achievement.

Probing the "Black Box" of School Turnarounds

Knowing the conditions associated with low-performing schools, specialists' perceptions of the extent to which these conditions were addressed, and actual student performance on state tests are three elements of the VSTSP story. If the program is to be replicable, however, it also is essential to know what the specialists did to reduce or eliminate problematic conditions. In other words, it is necessary to understand what occurred in the so-called "black box" that links school inputs and outcomes (Kannapel & Clements, 2005). In order to track the specialists' efforts to address their identified conditions, periodic interviews were conducted during years one and two, reports were submitted by each specialists, and a focused interview based on the original conditions was completed at the end of year two. During the final interview, specialists were asked to identify the condition or conditions each intervention or strategy was intended to address.

Gilda Grove

In order to raise student achievement, Grove reported adopting 24 different interventions and strategies, most of them coming within the first five months of her involvement in the VSTSP (see Table 7.4). Immediately following her initial training, Grove returned to Gardenwood Elementary to meet with her faculty, assess the school’s strengths and weaknesses, and

TABLE 7.4 Interventions and Strategies Used to Address Conditions Associated with Low Performance: Gilda Grove

Intervention/Strategy	Target Condition(s)
Benchmark tests every 9 weeks in reading/math	1, 2, 8
Record system for tracking each student’s progress	1, 2, 13
Remediation plan for every student who misses items on benchmark tests	1, 2, 13
Supervision of teachers to ensure coverage of state curriculum standards	2, 7
Defined targets for school improvement	5
Use of curriculum and pacing guides supplied by school system	6
Summer work by teachers to align curriculum to state standards	6
Adjusted schedule to create common planning time for K-1, 2-3, and 4-5 teachers	6, 9, 10
Frequent drop-in observations of teachers	7
Principal reviews of e-mailed lesson plans	6, 7
Principal models instructional practices	7
Teachers receive instruction in data-driven decision making	8
Importance of teamwork stressed in teacher interviews	9
Creation of School Improvement Team	10
Teacher leaders address instructional issues at faculty meetings	7, 9, 10
Increased instruction time in reading, math, and science to meet state standards	1, 2, 11
Unqualified staff members removed	7, 9, 17
Campaign to involve parents in school programs and teacher conferences	19
Partnerships with local businesses and churches	20
All staff members involved in assessing school strengths and weaknesses	9, 10
“Writing Camp” offered several weeks before state writing tests	13
Use of incentives to encourage good attendance and academic success	1, 2
Implementation of vertical and horizontal teaming	9, 10
Remediation classes offered during intersessions	13

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| 1 = low reading | 8 = lack of data | 15 = inadequate facilities |
| 2 = low math | 9 = lack of teamwork | 16 = inadequate materials |
| 3 = absenteeism | 10 = inadequate infrastructure | 17 = personnel problems |
| 4 = discipline | 11 = ineffective schedule | 18 = technology problems |
| 5 = lack of focus | 12 = dysfunctional culture | 19 = lack of parent |
| 6 = unaligned curriculum | 13 = ineffective interventions involvement | |
| 7 = ineffective instruction | 14 = lack of inclusion | 20 = community criticism |

set specific targets for improvement. A slogan—“Doing Your Best, Wildcats Achieve Success 31/48”—captured the focus of their efforts. Thirty-one represented the percentage increase in passing scores needed to meet the state benchmark on the fifth grade reading test. Forty-eight was the number of staff members at Gardenwood. The slogan’s message was clear—everyone had a role to play in raising achievement. The job of monitoring the school turnaround process was shared between Grove and her newly formed School Improvement Team. Grove spent a large portion of every day visiting classrooms, reviewing lesson plans, checking to see that teachers were following the school system’s curriculum pacing guide, quizzing students, and modeling good instruction. Periodically the School Improvement Team met with Grove to review progress and plan new initiatives.

In order to provide data on student progress, Grove implemented a benchmark testing program aligned to the state standards in reading and math. Students took the tests every nine weeks. The results were reviewed by the School Improvement Team and teachers at each grade level. Students with deficiencies in certain curriculum content were identified, and individual assistance plans were developed. Besides individual tutoring, several large scale interventions were adopted. To provide students with focused preparation in writing, Grove and two staff members arranged “Writing Camp” to be offered several weeks before the spring writing test was administered. Gardenwood was a year round school, so intersessions were used as opportunities to engage students in targeted assistance programs. Remediation efforts were bolstered by volunteer tutors from local businesses and churches and student incentives intended to encourage good attendance and academic success.

Grove believed that teamwork was the key to turning around Gardenwood. To facilitate both vertical and horizontal teaming, she re-organized the daily schedule to provide common planning time for teachers. The new schedule also enabled Gardenwood to meet the state standards for minutes of instruction per day in reading (90) and math (60). Whenever Grove had the opportunity to replace a staff member, she made certain that her interviews focused on the importance of teamwork. When teams of teachers met, they addressed curriculum alignment, analyzed student test data, and identified content areas requiring re-teaching and remediation. To help teachers undertake these functions, Grove arranged for targeted staff development to support teachers in these efforts.

Wanda Walker

Given the fact that Wanda Walker identified more problematic conditions (18) than her four colleagues, it is not surprising that she was responsible for the largest number of interventions and strategies (31) to address those conditions (see [Table 7.5](#)). Her first months at Wentworth

TABLE 7.5 Interventions and Strategies Used to Address Conditions Associated with Low Performance: Wanda Walker

Intervention / Strategy	Target Condition(s)
Adopted Harcourt Brace reading program and Saxon phonics program	1
Created classroom learning centers that focus on specific skills	1, 2
Adopted Saxon math program	2
Increased hands-on activities in math	2
Created a schoolwide discipline plan with input from teachers and parents	4
Home visits by teachers and administrators	4
Implementation of vertical and horizontal teams	5, 6, 9, 10
Creation of School Improvement Plan	5, 6
Use of curriculum and pacing guides	6
Implemented staff development based on best practices in instruction	7
Implementation of inclusion program for special education students	7, 14
Team planning, including lesson plans	6, 8, 9
Benchmark tests every 9 weeks in reading/math	1, 2, 8
Use of software to disaggregate test data	8
Involvement of staff in analyzing test data	9
Renovation of school facilities	15
Implementation of a troubleshooting “hot line” for staff	10
Adjusted schedule to create common planning time	11
Elimination of ineffective intervention programs	13
Remediation plan for every student who misses items on benchmark tests	1, 2, 13
Co-teaching (regular and special education teachers)	7, 14
Acquisition of new instructional materials in social studies and science	16
Addition of testing specialist to staff	8, 17, 18
Celebrations scheduled for each grade level	19
“Literacy nights” to apprise parents of state curriculum requirements	19
Presentation by principal to community groups	20
Involvement of parents in beautifying the school	19, 20
Publication of parent newsletter every 9 weeks	19
Partnership with local church for after-school program	13, 20
School-based after-school program revamped with instructional assistance provided by regular teachers from each grade level	13
Extended hours for instructional aides	17

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| 3 = absenteeism | 10 = inadequate infrastructure | 17 = personnel problems |
| 4 = discipline | 11 = ineffective schedule | 18 = technology problems |
| 5 = lack of focus | 12 = dysfunctional culture | 19 = lack of parent |
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| 7 = ineffective instruction | 14 = lack of inclusion | 20 = community criticism |

Elementary were spent developing a School Improvement Plan with specific targets for improvement, revising the daily schedule in order to create common planning times for teachers, promoting team planning and curriculum alignment, and trying to implement benchmark testing. Because of technical difficulties at the district level, the last effort required more time and energy than originally anticipated. It was not until the second year that Walker could boast that student progress on state curriculum standards was being monitored on a regular basis without major computer problems. Walker arranged for teachers to receive test data disaggregated by student groups. Teachers discussed test items missed by large percentages of students, arranged for supplementary instruction to correct deficiencies, and developed remediation plans for individual students in need of substantial help. Many of the technical problems associated with benchmark testing were corrected following the hiring of a testing coordinator.

With support from the central office, Walker changed the reading and math programs at Wentworth. This process required considerable staff development. She also saw to it that inadequate instructional materials in social studies and science were replaced. A comprehensive renovation of Wentworth's aging facilities also was initiated. Community volunteers were enlisted to help beautify the school grounds.

In order to conserve resources, Walker eliminated several remediation programs that were not succeeding. She replaced them with two after-school assistance programs for struggling students. One was taught by regular Wentworth teachers and geared toward mastering state curriculum standards. Walker received permission to extend the hours for instructional aides in order to free teachers to provide this assistance. A local church also was approached to offer another after-school program staffed by trained volunteers.

A number of changes were introduced in order to boost parent involvement and correct negative impressions of Wentworth in the community. Programs designed to inform parents about the importance of state tests and recognize student accomplishments were arranged. Walker made herself available for presentations to community groups. She also authored a parent newsletter and encouraged parents and community members to get to know the school through visits and volunteering.

Ranelle Roberts

Ranelle Roberts identified the smallest number (6) of problematic conditions, so it was not surprising that her list of interventions and strategies was the shortest (17) (see **Table 7.6**). That Ralston Elementary was perceived to be better off than the other four VSTSP schools probably is attributable to the fact that it already was involved in a special state-sponsored program aimed at raising student achievement. As a result, many of the changes re-

TABLE 7.6 Interventions and Strategies Used to Address Conditions Associated with Low Performance: Ranelle Roberts

Intervention/Strategy	Target Condition(s)
Schoolwide focus on literacy improvement	1
Early reading initiative	1
Staff development related to literacy	1
Interventions that target specific reading skills	1, 13
Creation of a Discipline Committee	4
Development of a schoolwide discipline plan	4
Incentives given for good conduct	4
Regular analysis of disciplinary data	4
Staff development related to classroom management	4
Full inclusion for special education students in grades 3, 4, and 5	14
Staff development related to inclusion	14
Creation of grade-level inclusion teams	14
Principal meets weekly with grade-level teams	14, 17
Unqualified staff members removed	17
Initiative to boost PTA membership and attendance at parent-teacher conferences	19
Grade-level parent meetings to discuss state tests	19
Scheduled family fun nights at school	19

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| 1 = low reading | 8 = lack of data | 15 = inadequate facilities |
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| 3 = absenteeism | 10 = inadequate infrastructure | 17 = personnel problems |
| 4 = discipline | 11 = ineffective schedule | 18 = technology problems |
| 5 = lack of focus | 12 = dysfunctional culture | 19 = lack of parent involvement |
| 6 = unaligned curriculum | 13 = ineffective interventions | |
| 7 = ineffective instruction | 14 = lack of inclusion | 20 = community criticism |

ported for other schools, such as benchmark testing and after-school remediation, were in place before Roberts was chosen for VSTSP training.

Roberts zeroed in on literacy, initiating a program to encourage reading for Ralston’s youngest students, providing teachers with staff development in reading strategies, and expanding interventions available to struggling readers. Because many of Ralston’s lowest reading scores were earned by special education students, Roberts also pressed for full inclusion for older special education students (grades 3, 4, and 5). Once again, staff development was necessary to pave the way for this change. In addition, Roberts created grade-level inclusion teams, consisting of regular and special education teachers, to develop lesson plans and monitor the process. Staff members who lacked the competence to undertake the literacy and inclusion initiatives were replaced.

Discipline was a perennial concern at Ralston. To address the need for better student behavior, Roberts formed a Discipline Committee and worked with the committee to develop a schoolwide discipline plan to ensure consistency across teachers and grade levels. The plan called for incentives to encourage students to obey rules. The Discipline Committee regularly reviewed data related to student conduct and made adjustments in the plan as needed. Staff development on ways to reduce behavior problems in class also was provided.

In order to increase parent involvement at Ralston, Roberts launched a PTA membership drive. Special efforts were made to increase attendance at parent-teacher conferences. The importance of state tests was stressed at a series of evening meetings for parents. Roberts also scheduled family fun nights to encourage parents to spend time at school with their children.

Carla Clemons

In order to address the conditions (12) holding back Cavalier Elementary School, Carla Clemons initiated 27 different interventions and strategies (see Table 7.7). She began before students arrived in September making certain that the school got a new coat of paint and the facilities were clean and attractive. Classical music played in the school's foyer, and placards notified students of academic targets for the school year. Cavalier operated a free breakfast program for students, but in years past parents had gotten used to joining their children for breakfast in the cafeteria and then lingering around school. Clemons realized that their presence constituted a disruptive influence, so she arranged for breakfast to be served in classrooms and only to students. Parents who wanted to spend time in class had to register with the office.

The next challenge for Clemons was to take her teachers, some of whom had been at Cavalier previously, some of whom had come with Clemons from her previous school, and some of whom were new hires, and blend them into a collaborative unit. She formed grade-level teams and charged them with monitoring student progress on a weekly basis. A leadership team was constituted with representatives from each of the grade-level teams along with the school administrators. The entire faculty met each week to address issues related to instructional improvement and good classroom management practices. Clemons also met regularly with new teachers to make sure that they understood the state standards and the needs of Cavalier students.

To boost test scores in reading and math, Clemons adopted new reading and math textbooks and supplementary programs. Several faculty members who resisted the changes were re-assigned or removed. Benchmark tests were administered every nine weeks in order to provide teachers with data concerning student progress. Test data were analyzed by grade-level

TABLE 7.7 Interventions and Strategies Used to Address Conditions Associated with Low Performance: Carla Clemons

Intervention/Strategy	Target Condition(s)
Benchmark tests every 9 weeks in reading/math	1, 2, 8
Adopted Harcourt Brace (K–5) and Prentice-Hall (6) reading programs	1
Uncooperative staff members removed or re-assigned	1, 17
Reading tutorial implemented	1
STAR Accelerated Reader program implemented	1
Adopted Saxon math program to supplement math instruction	2
Implemented Math-on-Wheels program	2
Initiative to reduce tardiness	3
Recognition for perfect attendance	3
Parents of chronically absent students taken to court	3
Presentations by principal to community groups	20
PTA meetings held off-campus in public housing recreation centers	19
Moved free breakfast service to classrooms in order to discourage parent loitering	12
Defined targets for school improvement	5
Initiated an after-school program to assist students in preparing for state tests	13
Various efforts to re-culture the school and stress the importance of academic success	12
Weekly planning sessions with principal and instructional facilitators	10
Weekly staff development with principal and new teachers	9
Principal reviews lesson plans	5
Implementation of grade-level teams that meet weekly to assess student progress	8, 9
Weekly faculty meetings focus on instructional improvement	9, 13
Daily drop-in observations by principal	5
Principal teaches a daily class in science or math	8
Progress reports sent to parents every 3 weeks	8
Partnership established with local businesses and civic groups	20
Use of incentives to encourage academic success	13
Campaign to clean-up school and make the learning environment more attractive	15

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| 1 = low reading | 8 = lack of data | 15 = inadequate facilities |
| 2 = low math | 9 = lack of teamwork | 16 = inadequate materials |
| 3 = absenteeism | 10 = inadequate infrastructure | 17 = personnel problems |
| 4 = discipline | 11 = ineffective schedule | 18 = technology problems |
| 5 = lack of focus | 12 = dysfunctional culture | 19 = lack of parent |
| 6 = unaligned curriculum | 13 = ineffective interventions involvement | |
| 7 = ineffective instruction | 14 = lack of inclusion | 20 = community criticism |

teams and the leadership team so that students in need of assistance could be identified and helped. Clemons reviewed lesson plans and conducted daily drop-in observations to make certain that curriculum standards actually were being covered by teachers. To help struggling students, Clemons launched a tutorial program and an after-school program. Students were actively encouraged to study hard and prepare for state tests. Parents, local businesses, and civic groups were enlisted to underwrite these efforts by serving as volunteers, tutoring students, and providing funds for student incentives.

Problems with tardiness and absenteeism were confronted directly. Parents of chronically absent students were taken to court. A recognition program was begun to encourage students to achieve perfect attendance.

In order to counter negative impressions of Cavalier Elementary in the community, Clemons spent considerable time speaking to community groups and hosting PTA meetings in the recreation centers of public housing complexes. Parents were encouraged to take a more active role in their children's education and received progress reports on their children's schoolwork every three weeks.

Patrick Phillips

Patrick Phillips initiated 15 interventions and strategies (see Table 7.8) to address the 13 conditions he originally identified at Parker Middle School. His primary focus was to improve student literacy, a goal that led to test score improvement targets for teachers and an adjustment to the daily schedule to provide students with twice as much time on reading and language arts. Phillips engaged teachers in aligning instruction to state curriculum standards. To ensure their compliance, he conducted regular classroom observations and reviewed lesson plans e-mailed from teachers.

To improve instruction and efforts to assist struggling students, benchmark tests were administered every nine weeks until students took state tests in May. Phillips relied on commercial benchmark tests in reading and math and teacher-designed tests in science and social studies. Test results on both benchmark tests and state tests were reported on a teacher-by-teacher basis instead of being aggregated by subject to promote greater accountability. All teachers participated in analyzing test results and identifying students in need of targeted assistance. An after-school program was established that provided customized help to students in the areas where they were deficient. In this way, students did not have to sit through reviews of material they already had mastered. Phillips awarded recertification credit to teachers for their work on data analysis and curriculum alignment.

TABLE 7.8 Intervention and Strategies Used to Address Conditions Associated with Low Performance: Patrick Phillips

Intervention/Strategy	Target Condition(s)
Schoolwide focus on literacy improvement	1, 5
Adjusted schedule so students can be “double blocked” in reading and language arts	1, 11
Campaign to ensure consistent discipline	4
Curriculum aligned to state tests	6
Principal conducts observations to ensure state curriculum standards are taught	6
Principal reviews e-mailed lesson plans	6, 7
Principal holds teachers accountable for re-teaching poorly understood content	7
Student achievement data is reported on a teacher by teacher basis for the first time	7
Entire faculty engaged in reviewing student achievement data	5, 9
Benchmark tests every 9 weeks in all state-tested subjects	8
After-school remediation sessions customized to particular standards missed by individual students	13
Partial implementation of inclusion program for special education students	14
Initiative to increase parent involvement in supporting school improvement	
Improvement targets on state tests set for individual teachers	5, 7
Teachers given recertification credit for working on analysis of test data and curriculum alignment	5, 7

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| 1 = low reading | 8 = lack of data | 15 = inadequate facilities |
| 2 = low math | 9 = lack of teamwork | 16 = inadequate materials |
| 3 = absenteeism | 10 = inadequate infrastructure | 17 = personnel problems |
| 4 = discipline | 11 = ineffective schedule | 18 = technology problems |
| 5 = lack of focus | 12 = dysfunctional culture | 19 = lack of parent |
| 6 = unaligned curriculum | 13 = ineffective interventions involvement | |
| 7 = ineffective instruction | 14 = lack of inclusion | 20 = community criticism |

Other changes undertaken by Phillips included a campaign to ensure consistent enforcement of school rules and implementation of partial inclusion for special education students in regular education classes. Several teachers resisted his efforts to implement full inclusion, but Phillips was unable to resolve the problem because the central office controlled all personnel actions and the superintendent would not support removing the teachers. Phillips also was unable to get the necessary support from the central office to resolve various technical problems with the school’s computer systems. The other condition on which Phillips failed to make much headway was student attendance. While he managed to boost parent involvement, many parents continued to be unwilling or unable to ensure that their children attended school on a regular basis.

Comparing Responses

A review of the interventions and strategies in Tables 7.4–7.8 reveals similarities and differences, which is not surprising given the range of conditions that needed to be addressed. All five specialists, for example, acted to raise student achievement in reading. The curriculum in reading was a focal point and decisions were made as to its appropriateness for the needs of students, its alignment with the Standards of Learning and state level assessments, and the availability of pacing guides to support classroom instruction. In some cases, this analysis resulted in the adoption of new reading texts and programs. Another response was increased class time dedicated to reading. While each specialist specified certain actions that constituted direct responses to perceived problems with reading, a review of each leader's total set of responses suggests that a large proportion of them were intended in some way to affect student achievement in reading and language arts. Benchmark testing, teacher analysis of test results, remediation tied to test results, staff development, inclusion of special education students, removal of unqualified teachers, and so on were all actions taken, to some extent, to address low reading achievement. The specialists clearly appreciated the *systemic* nature of reading problems and the subsequent need for *systemic* responses. It is of little value to adopt a new reading program, for example, if teachers lack the skills to implement it, the data to assess its impact, and the extra time to assist struggling students.

Each specialist stressed the importance of collaborative work on curriculum, instruction and assessment by teachers. Gilda Grove, for example, established a school improvement team where there had been none, she used faculty meetings to discuss instruction, and she created common planning time for teachers. Vertical and horizontal teams were created in multiple schools to coordinate curriculum across classrooms at the same grade level and across subjects at different grade levels. Teachers were brought together to focus on the fundamental task of teaching and learning. While some personnel were removed in every case, the collective expertise of teachers was the primary resource for improvement in these schools.

Some of the specialists' responses reveal the idiosyncratic nature of local circumstances and the specialists' own particular predilections. Carla Clemons' efforts to prevent parents from lingering at school after dropping off their children comes to mind. So, too, does Patrick Phillips' challenge to work around two uncooperative teachers because he lacked the authority to transfer them. Each specialist chose a somewhat unique set of first steps to initiate the school turnaround process. Since Gilda Grove headed a year round school, she could return from her initial VSTSP training and immediately convene her faculty to assess the conditions needing attention. Other specialists had to wait until teachers returned to school in August.

During this waiting period, several specialists focused on making improvements to the facilities and filling staff vacancies.

A number of the responses common to most or all specialists reflected their VSTSP training. The training program stressed, for example, the critical importance of benchmark testing, teacher engagement in analyzing test results, targeting of students requiring assistance, principal monitoring of efforts to assist individual students, the value of a schoolwide improvement focus and clear priorities, and ongoing staff development. Specialists also made use of their colleagues, contacting them to see how particular interventions and strategies were working and sharing ideas.

SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON SCHOOL TURNAROUND SPECIALISTS

Based on the early experiences of the VSTSP, is there value in training a cadre of school turnaround specialists? We believe there is. First of all, we have been unable to locate a single case in which teachers in a low-performing school spontaneously organized themselves and successfully raised student achievement. This negative finding suggests that administrative leadership is a key ingredient in the school turnaround process, just as it is in more stable school environments (Hoachlander, Alt, & Beltranenea, 2001; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Water, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). Second, most of the initial cohort of specialists succeeded during their first year in arresting the downward spiral of low performance and actually raising student achievement to a level where their schools met AYP and state accreditation requirements (Duke et al., 2005).

Our study of specialists offers several insights regarding the preparation of principals. When Governor Warner suggested the creation of a program to prepare turnaround specialists to go into low-performing schools and undertake whatever was needed to raise student achievement, he envisioned an executive development experience. The expectation, in other words, was to engage veteran school administrators, not novices. For individuals involved in preservice principal preparation programs, the question thus arises: Can inexperienced principals-in-training benefit from the kinds of learning experiences embedded in the VSTSP?

Our belief is that there is good reason to raise the awareness of acolytes regarding the importance of benchmark testing, teamwork, creative scheduling, and the process of organizational change. Practices and understandings that support improvements in challenging schools have potential utility in more stable schools. Such awareness building also can serve as an “anticipatory set” or advance organizer for circumstances they may face in the future. At the same time, principals-in-training lack the sense of urgen-

cy facing the VSTSP specialists and a specific context in which to ground their training. When specialists participate in the VSTSP, they weigh what they are learning in terms of specific schools with specific student populations in specific school districts and communities. They work with actual sets of test scores and consider the strengths and weaknesses of real faculty members. When they script their remarks for their first faculty meeting in August, they are not undertaking a simulation. All of which is to argue that preservice training is different from executive development and probably must remain so. Preservice programs have been criticized for a lack of contextualized learning (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005) and yet replication of the high-stakes environment faced by the specialists is not feasible or well-advised for administrative aspirants.

Another issue concerns the extent to which executive development for specialists should be based on a differentiated leadership model. Contingency theorists and situational leadership advocates suggest that we should avoid thinking of the exercise of leadership in generic terms (Northouse, 2004). Specialized training is needed, they suggest, to address the challenges of different organizational circumstances. The question arises: To what extent do all low-performing schools constitute a comparable set of circumstances? When we addressed this question elsewhere in an examination of the perceived conditions facing 19 specialists in the VSTSP, we found that 12 conditions existed in more than half of the schools (Duke, Tucker, Salmonowicz, & Levy, 2006). While no two schools were perceived to face exactly the same set of challenges, the differences did not seem great enough to justify completely individualized training programs. At the same time, however, some measure of customization within a general program for specialists seemed to be merited, given variations in school size, school level, school culture and history, central office support, personnel policies, resources, and other factors. Context dictated differential responses which were addressed to some extent by the individualized coaching provided to the specialists.

A third lesson we draw from our study of the specialists is that preservice and inservice school administrators often do not get enough training in reading and literacy. Given the ubiquity of reading and literacy problems in low-performing schools, it is essential that specialists understand what is involved in evaluating and selecting reading texts and programs, how to support teacher understanding of reading, the components of the reading process, how to interpret the results of reading proficiency tests, and the various types of interventions available for struggling readers. Delivery of a high quality reading program is fundamental to student success in schools (Coburn, 2005).

We have been heartened by the early success of the specialists and reminded, once again, that little gets accomplished in troubled schools

without inspired and capable leaders. Just as we should avoid assigning our least experienced teachers to teach students who are most at-risk, we should not make a practice of assigning new administrators to our lowest performing schools. The most challenging students and schools need our most talented educators. We look forward to learning more about the specialists training model as the program expands to include principals from outside Virginia.

NOTE

1. In recent years, the peer coaching component has been modified. Current coaches are chosen by participating school systems.

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