

TURNING AROUND SCHOOLS: A REVIEW OF WHAT WORKS FROM THE RESEARCH AND REALITY

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ABSTRACT

Researchers nationwide have been trying to answer the question of what it takes to turn a school around for more than a decade as the accountability demands placed on schools and districts have increased.

The purpose of this research is to review the literature regarding the empirical research on school improvement practices and to identify the practices that have been most effective in improving schools within Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS).

The findings from the literature review reveal no “magic bullet” or single approach to turning around schools. But rather, successful strategies encompass a broad range of categories, including: governance, environmental factors, leadership factors and organizational factors.

JCPS school leaders in 10 high growth schools report that the most important factors that led to their school success fell into the categories of data/achievement and relationships/culture.

The common barriers that were reported by school leaders as obstacles that they overcame in their turnaround efforts were lack of parent involvement, negative school climate and school organizational issues.

Further exploration is needed to examine whether less successful schools that fully implement the school improvement strategies found in the research literature still succumb to the obstacles that have been overcome in the more successful schools.

BACKGROUND

In Jefferson County, 71 of the 82 Title I schools failed to make adequate yearly progress during the 2008-2009 academic year and 25 schools were subject to sanctions under the No Child Left Behind Act.

Several of the NCLB sanctions for schools, such as corrective action or restructuring, are designed as school improvement efforts.

JCPS schools have implemented new literacy and math curriculums as their corrective action. District level coaches serve as an outside advisors to the schools' principals and leadership team as a form of alternative governance.

According to a study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education Policy and Program Studies (2007), the most common interventions across the nation involved curriculum changes (89%) or outside advisors (59%). However, many fewer schools report implementing a reduction in management authority (27%) or replacing staff (7%).

According to the U.S. Department of Education, critical elements of a reform effort include strong leadership at the school and district level, professional development, a clear break with past practices, and high expectations and collective responsibility for student learning.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHOD

Research points to four categories of factors that influence the success or failure of a school turnaround: governance, environmental factors, leadership factors and organizational factors (Kowal & Hassel, 2005; DiBiase, 2005).

The flexibility in leadership and staffing are key elements supported by other studies. Exceptional teachers and principals as crucial factors in the successful turnarounds of low-performing schools (Mazzeo & Berman, 2003; Mass Insight, 2007).

In sum, research studies have identified effective strategies for turning around low-performing schools and provide some insight about how to incorporate them at the state, district or school level. The strategies for school improvement encompass a broad spectrum including: school environment, organization, culture, leadership, and community.

Research Questions

The goal of this report is to explore the connections between the body of literature on effective strategies for turning around low-performing schools and the schools within the Jefferson County Public School district that have exhibited similar patterns of improvement in the area of academic achievement.

A second objective is to examine the impact of some of the interventions initiated under NCLB and state sanctions, namely the coaching and HSE model, on school improvement.

The research questions include:

- What strategies do schools perceive as the most important in turning around their performance?
- What are the common strategies that schools are using in their school improvement efforts?
- Do role groups differ in their attributions for what led to improvement at their school?
- What are the top barriers that schools overcame to improve their schools?
- Are their differences in stakeholder's perceptions of school operations and culture in schools that have shown dramatic gains in student performance when compared to the district?
- What is the impact of external expertise (i.e. HSEs and district coaches) on school's academic performance?

METHODS

Ten schools (5 elementary, 3 middle and 2 high schools) were selected that had demonstrated marked improvement over the last three years on the state accountability testing system in reading and math.

A survey instrument was developed with consideration of the empirically-supported strategies found in the research review (a) legal/policy, (b) school environment/organization, (c) data/achievement, (d) relationships/culture, (e) leadership, and (f) community.

Principals and school leadership teams (counselors, resource teachers, and teachers) were encouraged to complete the survey.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the survey results. The results were also disaggregated by the demographic factors included in the survey. In addition, dependent sample t-tests were used to analyze the impact of coaches and HSEs on school performance results.

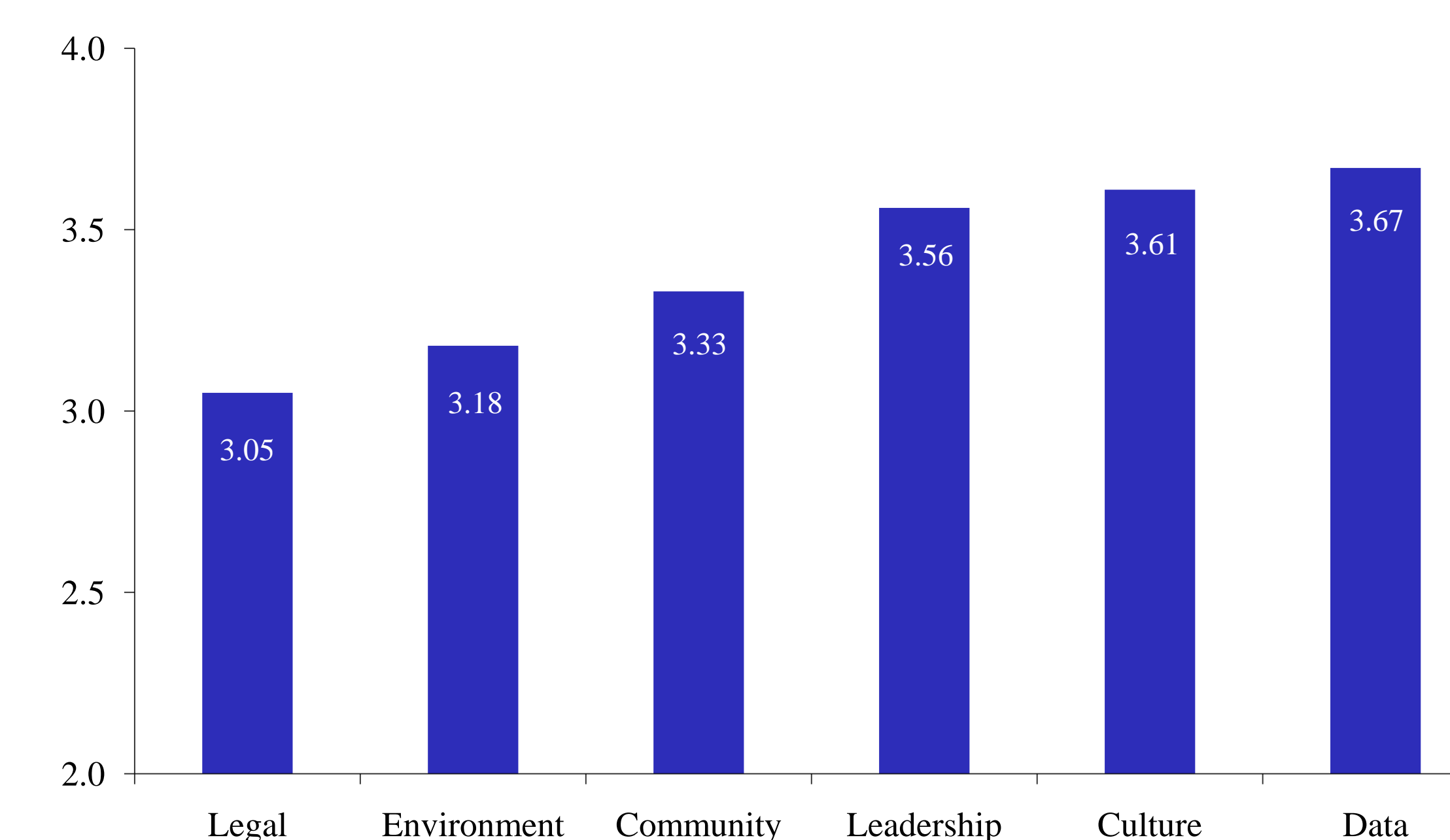
RESULTS

Overall, school leaders' ratings of importance of various characteristics associated with school improvement efforts correspond with the empirical findings from the research literature.

In general, school leaders attributed the most importance to the use of data, while placing the least importance for legal and policy characteristics. This finding is not necessarily surprising given that school leaders are more likely to see a more direct impact on school reform efforts through the regular analysis and use of student performance data than by implementing legal policies.

While there were not substantial differences in the findings when the ratings were disaggregated by demographic characteristics, there was a trend for the more experienced leaders to recognize the importance of various factors as having an influence, particularly with community partnerships.

Figure 1: Ratings of Importance by Category



The factors that school leaders listed as the most important factors include:

- Alignment of curriculum, instruction and assessment
- Staff accountability and enthusiasm for student achievement
- Leadership's flexibility and inventiveness
- Leaders staying in touch with the classroom and building
- Students feeling safe and secure
- Students' relationships with staff
- Teacher's knowledge base in content and instruction

The analysis of open-ended responses from school leaders as to the top three most effective strategies fall into the category of data/achievement (44%) and relationships and culture (25%). In particular, the most common strategies included building a professional teaching culture with job embedded professional development opportunities and the regular collection and analysis of school and student performance data that inform instruction and interventions.

Barriers Toward School Improvement

The most common barriers reported were lack of parent involvement, negative school climate and school organizational issues. However, parent involvement was not listed as one of the most important factors for leveraging change in the school. The findings indicate that if schools can explore ways in which to foster parent involvement, larger changes in school improvement may result.

Schools have much control over the two barriers (climate and organization) listed and it offers a clue as to the impediments that should be focused on by some schools that have not been as successful.

RESULTS

Table 4: Barriers Toward School Improvement Efforts

Category	Frequency
Parent involvement	21
Teacher buy-in, expectations, general culture	18
Organization (scheduling, time, differentiation, class size)	10
Home environment	9
Review of data	8
Lack of student skills	6
Student attitudes and behaviors	5
Funding and resources	5
Staff turnover or experience of staff	3
Relationships between student, teacher and parent	3
Curriculum alignment	2

Effectiveness of JCPS Interventions

In sum, the coaching and HSE program appears to show improvement in schools' accountability scores from the prior school year. However, the degree of improvement varies across level and school years and doesn't appear to show consistently meaningful differences when compared to schools that did not receive assistance.

The body of research that has been conducted over the last few years has yielded a number of strategies that have proven successful for JCPS schools in their improvement efforts, particularly around building a positive culture among staff where they are accountable and enthusiastic leaders in the regular collection and analysis of school and student performance data that informs instruction and interventions.

Further exploration is needed to examine whether schools that haven't been as successful are fully implementing the school improvement strategies found in the research literature and still succumb to the obstacles that have been overcome in the more successful schools.

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