STANFORD
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS
STANFORD SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

Which Fix?

By Justin Cohen

Stanford Social Innovation Review
Spring 2010

Copyright © 2010 by Leland Stanford Jr. University
All Rights Reserved

STANFORD
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS
Stanford Social Innovation Review
518 Memorial Way, Stanford, CA 94305-5015
Ph: 650-725-5399. Fax: 650-723-0516
Email: info@ssireview.com, **www.ssireview.com**

Ideas > First Person

Which Fix?

To save our schools, reformers must choose their solutions carefully BY JUSTIN COHEN

ILLUSTRATION BY EDEL RODRIGUEZ

In his recent remarks at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools Conference, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan focused on chronically underperforming schools. "They're often unsafe, underfunded, poorly run, crumbling, and challenged in so many ways that the situation can feel hopeless," he said. And they're a full 5 percent of our nation's schools—some 5,000 in total.

Education reformers offer two strategies for redeeming these schools: turnaround and fresh start. Turnaround strategies keep the same students and site, but change many of the school's core elements, such as staff, programs, partnerships, and buildings. In contrast, fresh start strategies open a new school from scratch—often with new students, staff, and programs. In most cases, fresh start schools are charter schools—that is, independent public schools that a state board of education, school district, nonprofit, or other authorizing entity creates.

Both turnaround and fresh start strategies assume that the school is the critical unit of change, so both rely heavily on school leaders. Both strategies also require a compelling vision and the ability to make it operational. And both demand substantial initial investment. Because these two strategies have much in common, many school-change organizations—EdisonLearning, Mastery Charter Schools, and Chicago Public Schools, for example—use them both.

Each strategy also has unique strengths and weaknesses, as well as advocates and critics. In the end, reformers are better off recognizing that both approaches are useful parts of the school reform toolkit. The trick is deciding when to apply which strategy.

START OVER

The fresh start approach has many advantages. Leaders and staff do not have to answer for the previous schools' bad reputations, which are notoriously difficult to change. They also do not have to live and die by prior practices: They can hire new teachers, write different staff rules, and experiment with programs. Fresh start schools can also begin with only one or two grades and then gradually incorporate the rest, which allows a new culture to establish itself organically.

One organization that specializes in fresh start schools is the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP). Since its founding in Houston in 1994, KIPP has created a network of 82 public schools, mostly middle schools, in 19 states and the District of Columbia. Most of these schools are charter schools in poor urban communities. To launch a new school, KIPP starts by enrolling just 80 students in one grade level. Over the course of four years, the school expands to include grades 5 through 8, slowly cultivating a culture that emphasizes college preparation and high academic performance. KIPP's academic programs are aggressive to the point of being controversial. In addition to drilling students on literacy and numeracy skills, KIPP also employs strict discipline policies and methods. The school day of KIPP students is 60 percent longer than that of most other public school pupils. These practices seem to be paying off: Most KIPP schools academically outperform schools with similar demographics, earning these schools a strong reputation among educators and communities.

JUSTIN COHEN is president of the School Turnaround Strategy Group at Mass Insight Education & Research Institute and a former senior advisor to Michelle Rhee, chancellor of the District of Columbia Public Schools.

Despite the strengths of KIPP and other fresh start programs, this approach has its drawbacks. First, opening new schools means closing old ones. And no matter how bad the old school, closing it is disruptive.

Though it seems counterintuitive, even the worst schools have loyal constituencies that will protest the school's termination. Meanwhile, as the new site is built, students must continue their education elsewhere, leading to overcrowding, management tensions, and attrition. Moreover, recent data from a longitudinal study by the Consortium on Chicago School Research indicates that when schools close, most displaced students end up attending other underperforming schools.

Leadership is another problem with many fresh start schools. Good start-up leaders do not necessarily make good school managers. Charter school entrepreneurs, for example, sometimes know more about real estate transactions than pedagogy. They also tend to lack experience building a community of supporters. And they must undertake the expensive and logistically complex tasks of closing one school while opening another.

Finally, fresh start programs are difficult to scale up. The high costs of start-up, coupled with the intense human capital demands of beginning an enterprise, make it hard to maintain quality while growing. Even KIPP, perhaps the most successful fresh start organization, educates only 21,000 students—a little more than 10 percent of the total number of pupils that the city of Memphis teaches.

FIX IT

When faced with a failed school, observers tend to say: "Nothing is working here. Let's just start over." Yet very few schools are actually completely devoid of assets. With the right interventions, many schools can be turned into healthy and productive places of learning.

More conservative than starting fresh, turning around schools has many benefits. Leaders of turnaround schools can focus almost exclusively on fixing educational problems, rather than on negotiating real estate deals, securing financing, constructing buildings, and tending to other start-up activities. And although turnaround leaders have to do some housecleaning, they can rely on employees who already know the school's children, families, and neighborhood.

Turning around schools, rather than shuttering them and starting anew, also provides some constancy in the lives of students. Many children who attend failing schools have unstable family environments, so their schools are a source of relative steadiness in their lives. Yet more often than not, closing a school means sending students to another inadequate school, as the new school operators often have very little incentive or legal ability to reenroll these students. Indeed, most charter school laws require open-enrollment lotteries.

Turnaround schools are also easier to monitor because they have a baseline against which to measure their progress. If students improve their achievement test scores 10 percent two years after turnaround, the school leaders can reasonably infer that their reforms are working. Fresh start schools, in contrast, need several more years to establish a track record and then to course-correct. Turnaround schools also keep tabs on the same students, whereas fresh start schools usually do not track the students they displaced.

One exceptionally successful turnaround example is Mastery Charter Schools in Philadelphia, which operates four schools with more than 2,000 students in grades 7-12. Although Mastery aggressively recruits new teachers and administrators, it also takes great pains to identify promising practices among existing practitioners. Data suggest that the program is making good choices on both fronts: Mastery students show marked gains on all six subjects of the Pennsylvania state assessment.

There are also significant disadvantages to turning around failing schools. Eradicating the preexisting culture takes substantial effort, from developing a new way of talking to students to following through on oft-neglected discipline codes. As one principal once told me, even if you change everything about a high school, there's still that stairwell where the juniors smoke during lunch.

Turnaround efforts must address substantial deficits in student achievement. It's hard to create a college-going environment in high schools where half of the ninth-graders read below a seventh-grade level—which is not uncommon. Failing schools also usually have decrepit physical plants, introducing another set of challenges. Finally, many districts have been unsuccessful in turning around failing schools in the past, giving the strategy a poor track record.

PICK THE RIGHT SOLUTION

Despite much ballyhoo on both sides of the school reform debate, both strategies can deliver great results for kids. As more and more municipalities attempt to deal with failing schools, they are seeing patterns in what works where and when. The fresh start strategy, for example, tends to work in areas with many talented entrepreneurs. New York City, for instance, had a pipeline of people willing to take risks on education reform. Consequently, Joel Klein, chancellor of the city's school system, aggressively opened new schools during his term in office. Graduation rates at the city's new high schools are higher than at the older schools. Because of its entrepreneurial culture, Silicon Valley is another area ripe for fresh start schools. There, groups like San Francisco-based NewSchools Venture Fund have stimulated a robust supply of new schools.

Areas with rapid population growth also may be fertile ground for fresh starts. For the past decade, Texas has been the fastest growing state. It has also been the launchpad for many new school operations, including KIPP. In these locations, the increase in public revenue from property taxes can help fund new construction and therefore offset some of the financial stress of building new schools.

Meanwhile, turnaround is an effective strategy for districts where school leaders have the political clout to make drastic, rapid change. Turning around failing schools means making hard choices about personnel, and these choices rarely happen without a fight. In Washington, D.C., for example, public school chancellor Michelle Rhee has leveraged her aggressive style and broad political support to make dramatic personnel changes in failing schools, gaining nearly double-digit achievement gains at all grade levels on the district's high stakes assessment.

Turnaround strategies also work well in areas with declining enrollment, where opening new schools is difficult to justify. Policymakers in places like Detroit and other Rust Belt cities have strong incentives to support turnaround efforts.

Too often we compare the idealized version of one policy to the practical application of another policy. Different environments and civic cultures demand different solutions, and our education leaders should make more informed decisions about how to save our most troubled schools. ■