

Compassionate Intervention: Helping Failing Schools to Turn Around

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Turning failing schools around is a political imperative. With children's education at stake, and no second chances, there are strong moral reasons to sort things out quickly. Two years may seem a short time in terms of educational change. For a pupil in a failing school, it represents lasting damage to their progress that may never be recovered. So speed is essential, but real change is most important. Although Stoll and Myers contend that there are no quick fixes (Stoll and Myers 1998), I suggest that there are quicker ways to repair failing schools than we have previously found comfortable. Simply talking tough isn't sufficient, however. Leave that to the politicians. By applying our knowledge of the change process, and with sufficient resources, we have supported school recovery in less than two years—and this is about 18 months too long for the sake of the children in the school. By sharing effective ways of intervening in schools, and remembering that there are no guarantees of success, we should learn from each other and maybe speed things up the process even further. Early intervention has a double impact: It prevents more serious decline and it speeds up recovery.

Perhaps it is the urgency of repairing such schools and preventing further damage to students' learning that makes compassionate intervention sound inappropriate for a failing school. I understand that, but our experience in working with underperforming schools indicates that compassionate intervention works faster, lasts longer and costs less in both financial and emotional terms than other types of intervention. If that sounds surprising, then read on.

Working with failing schools carries high risks. If this kind of work excites you, a word of caution. Knights in shining armor and iron maidens should not apply. Anyone who thinks they can turn a school around from outside is daft, deluded and dangerous. Intervention is essential, but it should be thoughtful and compassionate. The only heroes and heroines that emerge from a turnaround school are the staff and students within.

In this chapter I present the view that:

- There is a powerful moral imperative to improve failing schools
- Failing schools can only be fixed from within
- Intervention will accelerate recovery
- No guaranteed intervention strategy will work in all schools
- Compassionate intervention is efficient and repairs collateral damage
- Compassionate intervention creates better conditions for sustained improvement

Attention was drawn to school failure by a three-year project on “Combating Failure at School” carried out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) between 1994 and 1997. Interest in the United Kingdom was already widespread following the identification of failing schools by a national inspection process launched in 1993. By the end of 2000 about 1,200 schools required “special measures”—the euphemism used in England to describe failing schools. This represented approximately 3 per cent of primary schools, 3 per cent of secondary schools, 8 per cent of special schools and 6 per cent of pupil referral units. (Cribb 2001, p65).

Faced with the problem of identified failing schools, Connor Spreng suggests that government has three possible options:

- Tolerate failing schools
- Change the system of public education
- Devise a strategy of interventions

(Spreng 2005)

In 2001 the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) rejected the first of these options in the United States by legislating prescribed interventions in response to school failure. Action has not been confined to the U.S. Despite the widespread concern and action around the world, research is limited and little is known about what kinds of interventions are most likely to work (Ziebarth 2002, Brady 2003, Spreng 2005). And it may be that the chaos inherent in failing schools means that an intervention strategy that is successful

in one school has no effect in another. At least, that is true of my experience working with failing schools in London, England.

Definition

All schools may be better than they are, of course, but clearly that does not make them failures. So, what is a failing school? Let us admit that researchers may never agree on a single definition of failing schools (Connelly 1999). Nonetheless, practitioners will get on with the repairs that they perceive as necessary. I use the outcomes of schooling to form a definition of a failing school. If schools are about learning and teaching, then outcomes of these processes will be pupils' progress in learning. The most reliable indicators for this are the performance of the school's pupils in external tests or examinations, judged against:

- The prior attainment of those pupils
- Performance of schools with a similar intake of pupils

In England, we have a national database that tracks the progress of all pupils in national tests at ages 7, 11, 14 and 16. It adds socio-economic information, based on the postal code of their home address, as well as the schools they attend. We provide schools with detailed and contextualized analyses of their pupils' progress to inform the school's self-evaluation.

A failing school is one in which pupils make very little progress in relation to their prior attainment; consequently, the value-added analyses of the school's test scores are very low when compared with similar schools.

This definition may be extended to include some process indicators. In 1997, for example, the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) published a report about the first 200 schools identified as failing in England and Wales. Their conclusion is not particularly revealing, but it does widen the definition.

There is no doubt that the three most consistent factors found in weak schools are the underachievement of pupils, unsatisfactory or poor teaching and ineffective leadership. (OFSTED 1997, p4)

This description puts the burden of failure on leadership and teachers in the failing school. While this is often true, it is not always a helpful analysis; it is a spotlight that ignores the shadows around it. Let's explore those shadows a little.

A Moral Imperative

Complexity theory talks about “strange attractors” from which patterns emerge. With failing schools, poverty is one such strange attractor. As the first failing schools were identified in England, and the national failure rate was less than 2%, the government soon realized that there is a common link between socio-economic deprivation and failing schools. Seven per cent of schools with disadvantaged pupils were found to be failing, compared with the national “failure rate” of 1.5 – 2 per cent (DfEE and OFSTED 1995, p12). By 2005, 29 per cent of all failing schools were located in the most deprived 20 per cent of communities. (National Audit Office 2006).

One major reason school failure is a concern is that it tends to disproportionately affect economically disadvantaged children. To say that there is a strong connection between failing schools and the children most in need of good educational opportunities is in part tautology, since the performance of schools is inferred from the analysis of student achievement data. But it also points to a deeper issue that school failure raises. The concern with the equitable access to public education. (Spreng 2005 p.25)

The reality of our inner cities and housing projects that concentrate low income families in particular neighbourhoods cannot be ignored. The interplay of multiple deprivations gives some schools extraordinary challenges (Pattison & Munby, 2001).

Generations of children born in the most deprived parts of urban areas breed what Johnson describes as an “underclass” in our society.

Its members are separated from the rest of society by what appears to them to be a permanent inability to sustain themselves economically. The separation creates its own class identity and class culture, which is antagonistic to the rest of society, and to the state. State education is one of the institutions which bears the

brunt of this antagonism...Schools for the underclass...are defined by their intake. The culture of the underclass dominates these schools...the underclass youths look at least as aggressive and threatening to class mates as they do to the staff who try to contain them. (Johnson 1999 p 3-5)

In his shocking book *Failing School, Failing City*, Martin Johnson observes and analyzes the behavior of students in what he describes as schools for the underclass, with high proportions of students from deprived backgrounds. His damning conclusion for government and policy makers points a way forward that will be uncomfortable for some.

There is considerable correspondence between “underclass school” and “failing school.” Dealing with failing schools and failing teachers has become a preoccupation of governments. The employment of slogans and quick-fix initiatives gives the impression of dynamism and progress. However, it is necessary to be rigorous in analysis and honest in policy if the realities are to be addressed, I have not found much of either within the discourse on failing schools. (Johnson 1999 p 6)

Tough talk from somebody who worked for many years in tough schools. For most children born in these circumstances there are two routes to prosperity: education and crime. If the schools they attend fail to meet their needs, then everyone suffers the consequences. This is the pragmatic imperative.

The Dark Side of the Moon

But not all failing schools are located in our most deprived communities. In fact, the differences between individual failing schools are greater than their common characteristics. This is a key consideration when thinking about how best to fix them. I will return to this consideration later in the chapter.

Failing schools are not a new phenomenon. Schools and local authorities (school districts) have dealt with the same issues before (Brady 2003), but usually without rigorous systems of accountability. Michael Barber explored the controversial topic in his 1995 Greenwich lecture, “The Dark Side of the Moon: Imagining an End to Failure in Urban Education”:

The traditional response to those who raise the question of failure was to suggest that we should discuss the success of the many, not the failure of the few. This is a classic false dichotomy which the debates of the mid-1990s have begun to unmask. A serious debate about failure is, in fact, a precondition of success. “Success for All” and “Zero Tolerance of Failure” turn out to be synonymous. (Barber 1997, p.153)

One problem was that we were not discussing and sharing our experiences of dealing with school failure. The literature about turning failing schools around was pretty thin in 1993 when we first began to deal with schools publicly identified as failing in England. However, we did know that the methods used to improve effective schools were not going to have the same success in failing schools.

Classical OD (organizational process and problem oriented approaches)...seem to depend on fairly stable environmental conditions, and a certain level of favorable attitude and initial propensity for collective problem solving. Thus this form of OD probably does not represent the most appropriate strategy for change in turbulent urban schools. (Fullan, Miles and Taylor 1980, p151)

Our understanding is weakest in relation to schools that are complete failures. In these schools, the processes of school improvement that work in other schools do not succeed. (Barber, 1997 p.133)

It takes courage and compassion to help turnaround schools—tough love, if you like. The precision and skills of a surgeon are required. A blunt approach—too often recommended by policy makers—usually makes things worse, certainly not better, further delaying improvement and causing even longer suffering for the children in the school. Typical of the tougher and blunter approach is the public naming and shaming of failing schools. In England and Wales, publication of inspection reports, since 1993, that labeled schools as failing to provide an acceptable standard of education. And in the U.S., publication of lists of schools, from 2002, that do not make adequate yearly progress. This brutal approach to school failure may win public approval for politicians. But I wonder, have they even considered the cost of their votes in terms of the damage to people in those schools—most of all those already deprived students for whom there is no

escape? They create additional barriers to change just when common sense says we need fewer.

Barriers to Change

Six years on OFSTED produced a report that identifies the main obstacles facing failing schools in England. This report is drawn from the observations of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) monitoring the progress of the first 250 failing schools that were turned around. The main barriers to change included:

- Anger about the label of "failure," which can take a long time to dissipate
- Weaknesses in the head teacher's, or acting head teacher's, management strategies
- The length of time required to stabilize staffing
- Complacency among some staff, both those new to the school and those who do not recognize they need to alter their practice
- Inconsistencies in managing pupils' behavior
- Insufficient knowledge about how to develop the curriculum
- Difficulties in changing attendance patterns
- Low expectations of pupils' ability to achieve high standards
- Lack of appropriate support from the local authority, governors, trainers and parents
- An inability to understand what monitoring and evaluation mean, in practice

(OFSTED 1999, p2)

Some of these barriers are more easily broken down than others. The most difficult changes to make, and to sustain, are improvements in the quality of pupils' work. Poor work habits, short attention spans and lack of basic skills accumulate while schools are in a declining state and take some time to reverse and show secure improvement.

David Reynolds suggests a three-dimensional barrier from a combination of: organizational, cultural and relational difficulties (Reynolds 1998 p165). Any one of these barriers would be challenging to break, but all three together present a truly formidable obstacle to change. I have analyzed the change barriers identified by HMI

and Reynolds according to: those associated with willingness to change and those linked to the capacity for change. I will return to the relationship between capacity and willingness later when I describe a strategy for intervention.

Barriers affected by willingness to change

Anger about the label 'failure'
Complacency
Attendance (by pupils)
Culture (fatalism, pessimism, hostility)
Relational patterns (cliques, fractiousness)

Barriers affected by capacity for change

Weak management skills
Unstable staffing
Pupils' behaviour
Teachers' curriculum knowledge
Low expectations (teachers and pupils)
Monitoring and evaluation
Organisational problems

Breaking Barriers

The first thing to tackle is the collateral damage caused simply by being identified as a failing school. Here is a head teacher (principal) of a school that went through the process of recovery and improvement, writing after the events:

The issue for me was, and still is, how to make those so-called 'quick fixes' stick and become embedded in good practice, for what OFSTED inspections do not take account of is what the label 'FAILED' does to teachers' morale and self-confidence...I believe that unless staff have the self-confidence and professionalism to take on board the areas for improvement, the action plan has no chance of succeeding or of having the desired long-term effect of improving teaching and learning.
(Turner 1998, p97)

The shock, depression and disillusionment associated with being identified with a failing school is recognised as widespread (National Audit Office, 2006 p.29) and the trauma, stress and declining morale are confirmed by external research (NFER, 1999). Research from inside failing schools (Nicolaidou & Ainscow, 2005) suggests that the experience of being characterised as failing can act as a barrier to the creation of more collaborative ways of working.

Unless the collateral damage of being identified as a failing school is first dealt with, chances of any recovery are remote.

In my experience working with failing schools, counselling techniques are essential for dealing with traumatised staff, who frequently experience grief caused by what they feel is public humiliation. Time is often the greatest healer for this kind of emotional upheaval, but with a failing school there is no time to wait. Compassionate intervention will help.

Compassionate Intervention

Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee describe three essential elements of leadership: compassion, hope and mindfulness that enable renewal and sustain resonant leadership. They define compassion as empathy and caring in action (Boyatzis & McKee 2005 p178). It goes beyond the common, passive understanding that links compassion with empathy and caring for others in pain, to include a willingness to act on those feelings of care and empathy. They see compassion as the emotional expression of the virtue of benevolence. I agree that compassion is a highly desirable leadership trait and, from my experience working with failing schools, I would go further to say that it is essential in turnaround strategies. For effective intervention in a failing school, you need to care enough to learn from the people in the school. Try to feel what they feel and see the world as they see it—and then do something with what you've learned from them. Here Boyatzis and McKee explain why compassion is crucial for conditions that are familiar in failing schools:

Conversely, as much as we need to show compassion in order for renewal to take place, we must also receive it. When we are in emotional turmoil and especially when we find that some of our life's foundations are crumbling, we need to know, if we are to repair this situation, that we are not alone. As we are cultivating mindfulness and beginning to feel a glimmer of hope, we also need to know that others care, that they are offering us their concern, compassion and love. We need others' positive regard, even respect, in order to hold on while we figure things out and find ourselves again. (Boyatzis & McKee 2005 p77)

These are some of the reasons why I have formed a concept of ‘compassionate intervention’ for failing schools. There are two other important reasons to support the concept, as described in practice later:

1. It is efficient because it supports more rapid improvement and costs less than other forms of intervention
2. It is more effective because it provides a better foundation for continued improvement

Compassionate intervention is essentially the application of emotional intelligence to leadership in a failing school. Richard Ackerman and Pat Maslin-Ostrowski describe how real leadership emerges in times of crisis in their book, *The Wounded Leader*. In conclusion, they note that:

One of the gifts of a keen emotional intelligence is the ability to be responsive in practice to the culture of the school so that, in addition to adapting herself to her organisation’s culture, the leader is learning to help the culture adapt in ways that allow the culture to flourish for everyone. This kind of leadership requires conscious and skillful development of a supportive environment that learns to manage and adapt to its problems collectively – that is, a culture that truly depends on the knowledge and leadership of the group. Rather than always pointing the finger somewhere else, especially and only toward the leader, the school can be remolded to reflect a culture of shared responsibility for what happens, as well as what does not happen. (Ackermann & Maslin-Ostrowski 2002 p131)

By sparking resonance with people in challenging circumstances, you stand a better chance of gaining their commitment to recovery and their willingness to change. Encouraging staff to be more willing to change takes time. For those who are willing, and may have been willing before but isolated, and those who become more willing, intervention is necessary because the school does not have sufficient capacity. However, the level of intervention is critical; it requires careful consideration and precision.

Above all else, we need to know clearly where we are heading, but remain flexible enough to get there in different ways, preferably by the shortest possible route. The improvement of any school is more an organic process than a mechanical one, and

consequently it contains an element of unpredictability. For failing schools the process is even more unpredictable, so our strategy must allow us to be nimble and agile. .

Intervention in Inverse Proportion to Success

Education policy in the United Kingdom has used the phrase “intervention in inverse proportion to success” almost as a slogan since 1997. Ronald Brady analysed and classified the variety of interventions in failing schools tried out in over 30 jurisdictions across 22 states and the federal government in the U.S. since 1989 (Brady 2003). Spreng later refined Brady’s classification, informed by interventions in New Zealand as well as the U.S.

Mild interventions

- Identification – public identification of failing schools
- Planning – requiring a school to prepare a school improvement plan
- Technical assistance – providing advice from an external consultant
- Professional development – providing training for teachers that is linked to the school improvement plan
- Parent involvement – requiring parental involvement in the school
- Tutoring – providing extra classes after school and at weekends
- Change of financing – additional funds to support the improvement plan

Moderate interventions

- Increasing instructional time – extending the school day
- Audits – inspecting the school with a professional team which publishes a report with recommendations
- School wide action plan – implementation of a comprehensive school reform plan in line with an external audit
- School choice – offering students in failing schools the option of attending another, non-failing, school
- Restriction of autonomy – reducing the principal’s authority over the budget, curriculum and other matters
- Change of principal – replacing the existing principal with a new leader

Strong interventions

- Reconstitution – replacing all (or almost all) of a school’s staff and leadership
- School takeover – handing over governance of a school to either the state or an outside provider
- School closure – closing the school outright

(Spreng 2005)

Rather than a complete list of interventions, this was meant to be a list of the most common interventions applied under the jurisdictions of different states. The list concurs with my experience working for a school district in London from 1993 until 2000 (Boyle 2001).

In England all schools are audited regularly by teams of external inspectors to inform the school's own improvement plan. Failing schools are identified in the process and then required to produce a comprehensive school reform plan within 40 days. The local authority [school district] is also required to develop its action plan, within 10 days of the school's own plan, to show how they will intervene and support the school. In managing the interventions in 11 failing schools, and a similar number with serious weaknesses, we used all the interventions listed by Spreng, and more. Not all interventions were used in every school, but different combinations with each school.

At first, the unpredictability of success baffled us. What worked well in one failing school had no impact in another, similar situation. This was among the lessons learned by Mintrop and Trujillo in their evaluation of intervention strategies used in seven states and two large school districts. They observed that:

- Sanctions and increasing pressures are not the fallback solution
 - No single strategy has been universally successful
 - Staging should be handled with flexibility
 - A comprehensive bundle of strategies is key
 - Relationship-building needs to complement powerful programs
 - Competence reduces conflict
 - Strong state commitment is needed to create system capacity
- (Mintrop & Trujillo 2004)

These observations reinforce our experience in England, especially the first point above. It was through the struggle of trying to make sense of our actions that we developed our understanding of compassionate intervention.

A Policy for Compassionate Intervention

Intervention in failing schools in the UK is first the responsibility of the local authority [school district], with national government watchdogs ready to pounce if things

do not work out as desired. By 1998 I was leading a local authority team in London that had five years' experience dealing with failing schools. We were able to draw on this experience to articulate a local policy to support continuous improvement in all schools in our school district, which included 12 high schools, 73 elementary schools and five special schools.

Our policy was developed from tacit knowledge gained by working simultaneously with 11 failing schools, and another dozen with serious weaknesses. It was boosted by the collective wisdom of our colleagues in other local authorities (school districts) around the country whom we invited to join us at a national conference about failing schools in 1997. Our collaboration shared insights between local authorities that were supporting failing schools. The conference highlighted what had worked, and what had not worked, to help fix 200 ailing and failing schools. The conference report "Learning from Failure," provided a framework to articulate our local policy.

The best policies [for failing schools] are those born out of experience and practice and which recognise the importance of flexibility in applying the policy within an accepted framework in order to make a response to the school's individual circumstances. (OFSTED 1998, p7)

The policy assumed that schools are responsible for their own improvement and that they have effective self-evaluation systems. When a school, or the local authority, first identifies a problem we informed the governing body (school board) and requested an action plan to tackle the issue. If there was insufficient progress with a school's action plan after six months, it was time to intervene. At that point we had to act swiftly and smoothly, but with compassion. The key questions to ask were:

- **What is the school's capacity for improvement?**
- **How willing is the school to make major changes?**

This takes us back to the classification of change barriers listed earlier. Capacity for improvement is a concept built around the school's combined qualities of self-

evaluation, leadership, learning and teaching. In failing schools this is bound to be low, unless there has been a recent change of leadership within the school. If there is any doubt, capacity for improvement is easily assessed by experienced consultants who visit the school for one or two days, watching lessons and talking with staff and pupils.

Willingness to change relates to the attitudes of staff, governors and pupils in the face of clear evidence that the school has serious weaknesses. This is more tricky to evaluate. I look for evidence of action rather than intention. But then how do you distinguish those who may have the greatest will in the world but could not act to save themselves, let alone the school? In the end it comes down to openness and mutual respect.

To gain respect, I believe you must first give it to others. Respecting other people's views and opinions is not the same as agreeing with them. Working in a failing school, you frequently have to disagree with people in an agreeable manner. Respect is not about deference. Experts going into a failing school to help staff turn the school around should never assume respect for the ideas or contributions they bring to the school. They have to earn it first. There is no inherent debt due to their previous expertise or professional status.

If you go to help a failing school, please don't expect expressions of esteem, gratitude or even willingness to cooperate. Instead, show respect for the people in the school and expect to learn from them, no matter how bleak the situation may seem at first. This is the key, not only to the start of the recovery process but also to any chance of sustained improvement beyond recovery. External prescription may give you some quick wins, however, without respect for the views, ideas and experience of those in the school and building the capacity of the school from that baseline, you will never get beyond recovery and 'over the rainbow'. I return to this point later.

Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot lays out six dimensions of respect (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2000). They are touchstones for compassionate intervention:

- Empowerment – intervention should be to enable the school to improve itself
- Healing – it is through your healing actions that you will exhibit and develop compassion

- Dialogue – learning how to ask good questions and listen to others
- Curiosity – endless inquiry, creating relationships and engaging in conversations
- Self-respect – avoiding deference and helping others to value themselves
- Attention – giving your undiluted attention by listening to what the school wants

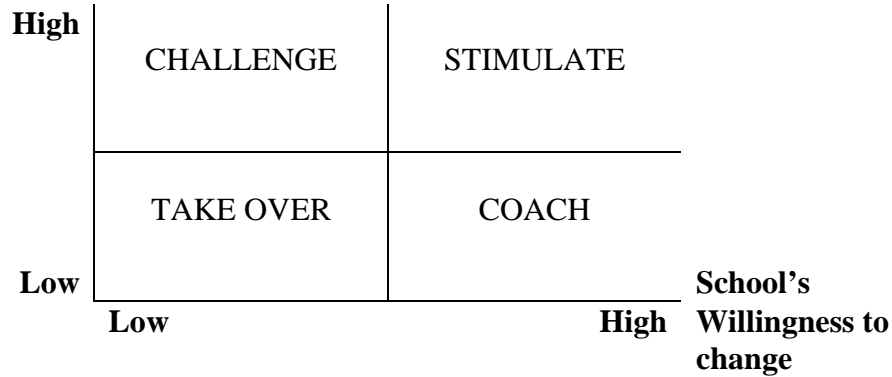
Returning to the strategy, our assessments of capacity and willingness determined our level of intervention. We didn't always get it right the first time, but the flexibility of our policy enabled us to shift between intervention levels with agility. There is a clear distinction between intervention and interference. Intervention provides:

- A working partnership that shares responsibility for the problem and ownership of the solution
- Intensive support and advice for managers, and in the classroom, linked to an action plan
- Determined action to improve or remove ineffective teachers and/or managers

Interference is perceived when the level of intervention is inappropriate to the situation in the school. This is discussed later under 'False Start'.

The different levels of external intervention in failing schools and those with serious weaknesses are illustrated in the following chart, based on the responses to the questions above. This is our interpretation of the phrase “intervention in inverse proportion to success.” If you use this strategy, consider the level of intervention carefully and then explain to the school how, and why, you will intervene. Better still, when schools understand the strategy, they are able suggest the appropriate level of intervention.

**School's
Capacity for
improvement**



Intervention strategy in schools causing serious concern

I have described how we used this strategy and the different actions associated with each quadrant elsewhere (Boyle 2001, 2004). There is some overlap between three of these four positions with Brady's and Spreng's classifications of interventions: mild (stimulate), moderate (coach) and strong (take over). Although we had a wider range of takeover options than those listed by Spreng, it is the fourth quadrant—in which schools have capacity but no willingness for change—that is most different.

Challenge

Schools that are unwilling to change despite having the capacity to do so are sometimes called 'coasting' schools; their staff members are complacent about the situation. Test scores appear reasonable because the school has a more privileged intake of pupils. But careful analysis of the progress made by students based on their prior attainment shows that the school is actually failing. Such schools present the greatest challenge of all to change. That challenge needs to be turned back onto the school itself.

An objective analysis of data should provide a starting point for discussion with the principal. However, the principal must also be listened to—and with respect. Their views and reasons for opposition need to be carefully explored, but challenged with

compassion. Support for staff in data analysis may be offered in case that is the obstacle. Targets for improving standards and the quality of education that are in line with targets set by other similar schools should be discussed. How the school might achieve those targets is up to them, but as long as there is an ongoing dialogue about their ways of working then it may be possible to develop a creative response that will allow progress.

Working with such a school requires patience and integrity. Intervention may be carried out by an independent negotiator who has earned the respect of both the school and the local authority. Trust is essential for all concerned in order to find the common ground on which to build a future that takes the school out of failure. But there have to be limits to how long failure can be tolerated. My rule of thumb would be six months, about the same length of time spent in ‘take-over’.

What if the school still won’t change after six months? Then the principal’s capability requires greater scrutiny, and appropriate procedures should be applied. As with teachers that are not up to scratch, there can be no slip-up regarding the agreed procedure. At first it may seem that the process will never end, but with compassion, determination and creativity the problems are usually sorted more quickly than expected once official procedures are instigated. If not, you will need to shift into ‘take-over’ and go from there.

Fresh Start

The uncertainties associated with failing schools require that serious consideration be given to closing the school. Anyone who has ever tried to close any school will know the kind of opposition that will be faced. It reminds me of a comment I once heard that change is like moving a graveyard: you never know how many friends the dead have until you try to move them. Closing a school is much the same.

Sometimes complete closure of the school is not an option because there is such a high demand for an operating school in the area. The UK government introduced ‘Fresh Start’ in 1997 to replace schools suffering long-term poor performance, where other options have failed. The school is closed and a new school is opened on the same site,

with the same students, but with a new name, different staff, ethos and curriculum. In the U.S. some states use a similar process called 'reconstitution'.

There have been 51 Fresh Start schools in the UK (23 primary, 27 secondary and one special school) since the program was launched. It has not yet been formally evaluated, but analysis of public exam performance in the 27 secondary schools suggests that, on average, they are performing better than their predecessor schools (National Audit Office 2006, p44). Unfortunately, that's not saying much, since they were so bad before. On average, Fresh Start schools have received £1.6 million each for capital works and £0.6 million extra revenue funding over years. Although the National Audit Office did not assess their cost-effectiveness, they do acknowledge that the Fresh Start program is achieving improved attainment levels for pupils at challenging schools.

False Start

Choosing an inappropriate level of intervention gives a false start to the recovery process. We learned this from painful experience, more than once. So here are the different kinds of response you might experience by using an inappropriate level of intervention. Under each heading for the most appropriate kind of intervention, I have listed typical responses to each of the less appropriate strategies.

Take-over (School is unwilling and unable to change)

- Coach – this might eventually catch on, but time and effort will be wasted if the willingness to change is not dealt with urgently. Improvement will be delayed.
- Challenge – this will work, but it wastes six months when something could be done within the school.
- Stimulate – a complete waste of time that will have no real impact as the school is not capable enough to be able to respond.

Coach (School is willing but unable to change)

- Take-over – risky as it could cause resentment and become counter-productive. If the school is willing to change, taking it over may create antagonism so that they become unwilling to co-operate.
- Challenge – because support is not being provided the school will become frustrated and disillusioned because it doesn't have the capacity to respond. It will reinforce feelings of hopelessness and despair.
- Stimulate – may produce some slow change but without intensive, school-based support the staff will not develop the skills quickly enough to make significant improvements.

Stimulate (School is willing and able to change)

- Take-over – in this situation it would be perceived as interference. Apart from being inefficient in terms of the resources available for intervention, it will demoralize and de-skill staff who can improve the school themselves.
- Coach – will probably continue to improve the school but leads to a growing dependency on external support. It will restrict the development of the internal capability of the school.
- Challenge – will probably be ignored and the school may turn elsewhere for the support it still needs. If other sources of support are not available, the fragile school may slide back and improvements will not be sustained.

Challenge (School is unwilling but able to change)

- Take-over – is unlikely to achieve anything. If the school has the capacity to improve, it will use all its ability to frustrate and even sabotage any changes you try to make by taking it over, unless you have a massive clear-out (Fresh Start). Although it may have moral justification, this remains interference.
- Coach – apart from wasting precious resources, the school will consider this approach to be patronising and their responses may reduce the morale of the change agents. The only thing this brick wall will give you is a headache.

- Stimulate – is probably the next best option in this circumstance, as long as it is accompanied by prayer. Something has got to shift in the attitude of the school before it will have any real impact.

Over the Rainbow

Judy Garland's poignant song in *The Wizard of Oz* could be an anthem for those working in failing schools: 'Birds fly over the rainbow, Why then, oh why can't I?' (Harburg 1939). The danger is to confuse recovery from failure with being over the rainbow. It definitely is not; there is still a long way to go before the school can be described as good, let alone great.

The cost of recovery in failing schools is high in both emotional and economic terms (National Audit Office 2006). By recovery, we mean they have shown themselves to be at least satisfactory. After this investment, it is important that the schools should continue to improve. In England nearly 60 per cent of failing schools were rated 'good' or better when they were inspected two years later. Only 5 per cent were assessed as unsatisfactory (National Audit Office 2006, p49). Still room for improvement, yes, but how?

How you move beyond recovery depends on how you got there. Hargreaves and Fink analyzed leadership succession around the appointment of principals in terms of whether it was planned or unplanned and whether the intention was to develop continuity or discontinuity. This creates four possibilities: planned continuity; unplanned continuity; planned discontinuity and unplanned discontinuity (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006 p62). Rather than a change of principal, what we are considering here are changes in situation. The school has made the initial change: from failure to recovery. We are now considering moving over the rainbow, from adequate to outstanding.

If your intervention strategy relied heavily on prescription, then continued improvement beyond recovery is unlikely. There is powerful evidence for this in England following the imposed national literacy and numeracy strategies. Prescription across 20,000 primary (elementary) schools saw test results for eleven year olds shoot up from 1997 to 2000 then level off for the next four years. Fullan, Hill and Crévola (2006)

describe what they call ‘the prescription trap’ as being seductive because it offers useful start-up results but is ultimately the wrong track. In order to make the next “breakthrough” (the title of their book), what we need is precision, not prescription. Therefore, if prescription was your route from failure to recovery, then you are likely to need some planned discontinuity in order to get over the rainbow. This is a perverse situation to be in, because by intervening with prescription you were initially exercising planned discontinuity. Successive discontinuity and continuous improvement are mutually exclusive in philosophy. Thirty years of research shows that planned discontinuity was good at shaking things up but not at making changes stick (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006).

Michael Fullan summarizes the situation:

When all is said and done, *Beyond Turnaround Leadership* is about getting off the road to perdition and on the road to precision. The road to precision is not one of prescription. It is a matter of being best equipped with capacities that increase the chances of being dynamically precise in the face of problems that are unpredictable in their timing and nature, largely because they arise from human motivation and interaction. (Fullan 2006)

By using compassionate intervention, as outlined in this chapter, I argue that you will not only support more rapid recovery in a school, you will nurture continued growth. Giving people respect is not about being nice—it is essential if you hope to develop their self-esteem. Compassionate intervention is not about creating good feelings to mask poor performance. It is about empowering people and restoring or developing their confidence so that they improve their school from within. If encouraging self-reliance and developing capacity for improvement was your route from failure to recovery, then you stand a better chance of flying over the rainbow.

Prevention Rather Than Cure

If the cost of fixing failing schools seems high (ECS 2002), the cost of not repairing them is even higher. Our experience suggests that time tables for recovery can be cut to less than two years through the application of a flexible and coherent strategy in

a compassionate manner. But even that length of time causes lasting damage to the education of those students who are so unfortunate as to attend the school at the time. So, as politicians in England legislate for turning failing schools around in under 12 months (DfES 2005), I wonder where it will end.

I believe that we need a culture shift, to move away from fixing problems in ever shorter periods of time, and to find ways of getting it right the first time. One of the remarkably few common features of all failing schools is isolation. These schools may have detached themselves from those around them. Possibly they couldn't keep up with the pace of continuous reform that has sometimes been justifiably imposed on schools in recent years. There are many reasons to explain why some schools slip out of the mainstream of professional development.

Here I turn to Michael Fullan for the tri-level solution as a more hopeful way forward. 'This solution represents a total system focus – a self-conscious attempt at all levels to use the best knowledge to strategize and bring about improvements and build capacity' (Fullan 2005 p210). It is not seeking alignment but rather about making connections and exerting mutual influence.

- At the school level – we have never found a failing school with an effective professional learning community; it's an oxymoron. You should begin to develop an authentic professional learning community through compassionate intervention. Without compassion you'd be more than lucky to achieve it.
- At the district level – if no school was left behind there would be no isolated schools, decreasing the likelihood of failing schools. Fullan observes that successful school districts support powerful lateral capacity building between schools. There is a collective moral purpose where principals share district-wide goals and are almost as concerned about the performance of the school down the road as they are about their own school. Collaboration is especially important for high schools.
- At the state level – the most difficult to work with because of the political context. Fullan notes the political proclivity with accountability but argues that accountability without capacity building amounts to little, if any, gain. So to

avoid failing schools, rather than deal with their consequences, policy makers should refocus resources to support capacity building as a fundamental characteristic of the system.

As long as we have failing schools, I contend that compassionate intervention, as I have described it, is a more efficient way to repair them. It is more efficient because it costs less in financial terms than “reconstitution” or “fresh start,” and it works faster to build productive professional relationships in the schools. Compassionate intervention should not add to the emotional turmoil caused through the identification of a failing school; it should begin to repair that collateral damage. Compassionate intervention creates resonance so that it actually leads to renewal—not only of the failing school but also those who are providing the compassionate intervention. By decreasing their chronic stress, they renew themselves in mind, body, heart and spirit.

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