

# Providing Assistance to Schools That Need It

William D. Schafer  
University of Maryland

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Hill (2001) has described models for measuring school success and Gong (2001) has related the measures to expectations about school progress. But once a school is identified as needing assistance, there is no clear consensus about what actions are most likely to improve the school. That is the topic of this paper.

Throughout, I will assume that a school has been identified and has been under threat (or promise) of action. Here we will discuss interventions for schools that have not improved sufficiently through identification alone.

We will review elements of models that have been used in the past. In order to generate them, several citations were reviewed; these appear at the end of the paper. The elements will be organized according to their targets.

Probably the best-known and oldest intervention was accomplished in New Jersey, where an entire district was taken over by the state. Several observations from a paper that reviewed that experience will be discussed.

Finally, certain elements of an approach that seems likely to succeed will be reviewed.

## Literature Reviewed

To gather the references cited at the end of this paper, I did a computer literature search, picked up conference papers at the Large-Scale Assessment Conference, and asked virtually everyone I ran into who I thought might have something of value. The result is what you have.

This seems to be a particularly difficult literature to bring together. Much of it is fugitive (unpublished because few outlets are available). I am sure many readers will be aware of citations that I should have included, but I was not able to find them.

## **School Elements**

These are elements of plans that have been applied to entire schools. They range approximately from the least intrusive to the most.

- Provide access to data
- Provide self-evaluation tools
- Provide content standards
- Provide instructional frameworks
- Use rubrics to assess school climate elements
- Provide an external school review
- Provide extra resources
- Collaborative development of school improvement plan
- Assign a “distinguished educator” to the school
- Curriculum overhaul
- Longer school day and year
- Threat of withdrawal of funds
- Remove school from control of the district

Some of these are normally done in some states but are unusual in others, such as providing data access and several of the next few elements. Then we see some cases where resources are expended but they are under control of the school.

The “distinguished educator” concept is appealing. But where do they come from? Do we identify them, and if so, how? Do we train them, and if so, how do we do that? And what do we do with them afterwards, when their experience has made them very different individuals, both in what they know and can do themselves, and in how others perceive them?

Finally, the school may lose funding, or more realistically be taken over by the state. In some cases, that is done with a district instead of just a school within a district.

## **Teacher Elements**

Some activities are directed toward the teachers. In these examples, we see elements ranging from routine in-service training through extra staff to changing the way teachers make decisions.

- Teacher in-services
- Train school staff in school improvement activities
- Collaborative (common) planning time for instructors
- Extra staff, especially to reduce class sizes
- Teacher consensus-based decision making (variation done in presence of an independent group of “reflectors”)
- Evaluation and focused intervention
- Replacing faculty, voluntarily or involuntarily

In a variation on teacher consensus, teachers conduct decision-making sessions before an independent group that comments on what the teachers do and how they are doing it.

### **Student Elements**

The student elements include:

- Tracking student progress regularly
- Tutoring in especially weak areas
- Student self assessment
- Focus on career development and achieving needed skills
- Expanded access to preschool
- Fostering Adult-Student relationships (personalization for each student)
- Including academic and career development goals and frequent focus on conversations about student work

When the focus is students, we might see passive tracking of student progress, or perhaps a more aggressive approach of tutoring, hopefully based on areas of need.

Student self-assessment is an especially interesting option. But it is necessary to develop useable rubrics and to train both teachers and students in their use.

An emphasis on careers and developing the skills needed for success in the world of work is thought to increase student motivation. Business groups generally favor this use of this approach.

More expensive is expanded access to preschool. This is clearly a solution with a long-term focus, but is the sort of generic, environment-changing effort that is probably needed. I am particularly supportive of this approach, as well as the next.

Which brings us to adult-student relationships in which every student has an adult he or she frequently talks with. The relationship includes career development as well as academic progress. The adult keeps tabs on the student's day-to-day work in a supportive relationship.

### **Parent and Community Elements**

Parents and the community in general can be mobilized to foster school reform.

- Allow parents to relocate students Academic focus to leisure activities
- Increasing parental involvement
- Build culture that supports and rewards academic achievement
- Reduce crime
- Improve housing and health

Certainly the easiest thing that can be done is to allow students in failing schools to move to other schools, perhaps public, perhaps private. This is a market-based solution and may result in an improved school environment. But you will soon get a flavor in my thinking that suggests the problem of failing schools goes beyond the schools, themselves.

The further elements in this list are pointed toward more fundamental change. All are an attempt either to improve the connections between what a student is doing in school and out of school, or to avoid distractions in the environment, be they social or physical.

### **General Elements**

These elements are not directed at any particular source, but have been noted in the literature.

- Plan the intervention, including collecting baseline data
- At least a 10-year duration

The intervention should be planned before implemented. The planning will include goals, both intermediate and ultimate. Baseline data should be developed for variables that will be monitored during and after the implementation. When variables

have not been identified, and perhaps in all cases, collection of representative work samples prior to the intervention may allow assessment of baselines to be done later, when it is clearer what should be assessed.

The intervention needs at least a 10-year opportunity to be fully implemented and to realize the gains that are anticipated. That also may allow initial gains an opportunity to decay.

### Recommendations from the New Jersey Experience

The Jersey City Public Schools was the first district to be taken over and operated by a state. That happened in 1989.

Seven years later, Eloise Forster presented a paper that drew lessons from that experience. Several seem useful to describe here. They fall into two categories: policy and planning & Management.

#### **Policy Recommendations**

These recommendations have to do with policy.

- Have an accountability and monitoring system
- Include locals to define rich array of indicators
- Define child-focused problem(s) as opposed to management-focused.
- Clarify all individuals' roles and responsibilities
- State should pay for the intervention.
- Establish budgetary expectations of all parties and reasonable timelines
- Minimize negative publicity by emphasizing assisting the unit to build on the positive.

Among policy recommendations are the need to involve locals in defining a rich array of indicators that will be included in an accountability and monitoring system.

The problem should be defined in terms of student learning and not how the school functions. Otherwise, there is no built-in payoff.

Everyone should know who is responsible for doing what, who will pay for it, and when. And the who should be the state.

Finally, this can be a threatening experience for schools, especially with respect to those in the community who interact with the school. Some way to provide positive “spin” in public statements would be beneficial.

## **Planning & Management Recommendations**

Other recommendations have to do with planning and management.

- The team should include all needed areas of expertise
- Technical assistance should be available from the state
- Legal advice must be available as needed
- Include key constituencies to identify solutions
- Gather baseline and re-assessment data using a separate team.
- Develop and publicize a progress tracking and reporting system
- Communicate accurately to the public

Several areas of expertise should be available to the team. The team should include administrative, business, personnel, public information, legal, curriculum development, and instructional expertise. All these should be represented somehow on the team.

The state should make technical expertise available as needed. Legal advice may be an ongoing problem. It should be available as the need arises.

Once the problem is identified, important constituencies should be included in finding solutions. For example, administrators, teachers, parents, students, community members, district personnel, etc. all have viewpoints that may be helpful and should not be ignored.

A tracking and reporting system that includes baseline and thereafter, periodic data collections should be developed and implemented using an independent team. Its credibility will be enhanced by separation between the evaluation and implementation units.

Finally, all communications to the public should be screened for accuracy. Misinformation does a disservice no matter what the source.

## **Total Quality Management Data Sources**

Data collection is important for maintaining the focus of the implementation. This is a feature of what is known as a Total Quality Management project. But what variables should be measured?

The Council of Chief State School Officers has a 1996 publication titled *Standards for School Leaders*. They are criteria for effective school leadership that represent measurable administrative goals for a school. Although not intended for this purpose, I thought its elements particularly well suited for sparking the thinking of a

school-improvement team in this area. So I included them here in Appendix A as a list to review if you are thinking of measuring school outcome variables.

## **Recommended Approach**

We will now turn to my own recommendations. I will assume that we are talking about a school that has been identified on the basis of low student test scores, and for several years the event of identification alone has not been successful. Further, the state, or perhaps the district, has become convinced that intervention is needed.

I am not talking here of a school that has relatively high scores, but not as high as its peers. Such schools certainly exist and can be identified. However, the school I have in mind has low achievement in comparison with all other schools, not just a peer group, and has not been able to improve it.

I will go through the elements in this approach separately.

### **1. School improvement team includes key school, district, state, and community members.**

To be successful, the school improvement team should contain important people from several perspectives. From the school perspective, key administrators, teachers, persons who play support roles, and students, readily come to mind.

The district should provide educational, financial, and legal support. The state should provide additional educational and financial support, but should also be expected to provide expertise in research, assessment, and evaluation.

The evaluation function should not be separated into another team since the Total Quality Management approach I will advocate is best implemented when all participants first trust the validity of the data and second believe that the data are gathered on variables that are ends in themselves. That is, a belief that the right data are being collected and that they are trustworthy as measures of success.

As you will see, I believe community members will be part of the solution. Important constituencies such as private and public agencies should be included on the team, not only to get them motivated for success, but also because their understandings will help shape the community response in more effective directions.

### **2. Focus on barriers to learning for individual students.**

I conjecture that most of the barriers will lie outside the school. I feel the teachers and administrators are facing a task that is virtually superhuman. The job that needs doing is round-the-clock but the time students spend in schools is very limited.

For many if not most students, solutions will lie where the barriers are. Here are some examples of barriers that are outside the school.

### **More basic needs than education; i.e., health and safety**

For many students, getting enough to eat, keeping free of danger, and just surviving is a challenge. How can they focus on education? As we know, there is a hierarchy of needs and basic needs must be satisfied before persons can turn to other pursuits.

Somehow, the school improvement team must find ways to satisfy these basic needs. Parenthetically, one might ask why this is the school's responsibility. Well, actually it isn't, directly. But indirectly, no other agency is as motivated to address these underlying causes of poor achievement. And the school has a strong resource to help motivate other agencies: the work is being done for the young, which traditionally is a motivator for action on the part of a community.

Clearly the community members on the team will be needed to mount an effective response to these problems. Nevertheless, the school should take the lead in directing their efforts, in maintaining commitment, and in administering the program since they are most directly affected by its success or lack thereof.

### **Societal press against learning; i.e., lack of rewards and perhaps even negative outcomes for academic achievements and presence of rewards for non-academic achievements**

In some subcultures, which may be a part of failing school environments, peer group acceptance can be more dependent on non-academic accomplishments than on academic ones, and academic success may actually lead to exclusion.

I am reminded of a study in which my colleagues and I analyzed data from a young adult literacy national database. We looked at amount of reading as the predictor and academic ability as the criterion. We found a curvilinear relationship for black males such that high ability was associated with both high and low amounts of reading. One interpretation that was suggested was that a significant number of these students were masking their substantial academic accomplishments by not engaging in intellectual activities outside the school.

Changing the nature of a society will be difficult and only long-term solutions seem likely to succeed. For example, getting the very young into learning activities (such as head start) and then maintaining an intellectually wholesome out-of-school environment for students of all ages seems likely to succeed. Again, the community will clearly be part of the solution.

### **Inappropriate role models; e.g., marginal parents, successful criminals**

As students wonder what they will become, most will look close to home for examples. We had better make sure they see positive ones. Missing or abusive parents, drug users or worse, dealers, and people who clearly have money but no legal means of obtaining it will not be the sort of individual we want our students to look up to. So we must provide them with alternatives.

I would like school improvement teams to consider a system of community mentors. For example, community agencies such as the police, fire and rescue workers, public health personnel, and just plain business persons could be asked to form one-on-one relationships with students. They could be asked to provide day-to-day contacts in a supportive relationship in which educational as well as other activities of students are discussed. Along with providing positive role models, these relationships would show students that they are valuable, that someone cares, and that there is someone they can go to for help with their problems.

**Impoverished visions of the future; i.e., perceptions of limited career opportunities and associated lack of belief that education will enhance life success**

For some students, having a goal may be sufficient motivation. For others, it will not be enough, but then again it can't hurt.

What is needed is to show students that their futures will be better if they take care of their academic growth opportunities now. While career development should be part of the regular school guidance and counseling program, a system of mentors can also play a role. A part of each mentor's efforts should be oriented toward career exploration. Just by being there, the mentor illustrates success in an occupation and the pros and cons of that career in comparison with others can be a regular part of mentors' discussions with students.

The hoped-for result is raising of horizons and understanding of the role of academics in occupational success.

**3. Site visits to schools that do well with similar challenges**

One way our school was selected was because it is well below others in achievement and has not grown. But other schools in similar situations exist that show greater success, perhaps impressively so. With an entire state consisting of similar data to select from, the best of these schools can be used as models of success. A visit will do much more than a written description to help a school improvement team adapt proven methods in their local situations.

**4. Data-oriented school improvement process that uses a Total Quality Management (TQM) orientation.**

I am strongly behind the Total Quality Management approach. One of the features about TQM that is particularly appealing is the effort to measure every important variable. The idea is that the data are indeed the measure of success.

This does two things. First, it associates success with its assessment. The assessment is operational; it is concrete. Lack of success is then either a question of invalidity or a failure of the remedy. Since invalidity can easily be addressed, the focus of effort quickly becomes the remedy, which is the right focus.

Second, it allows the school improvement team to ignore outcomes that are not part of the data system. Of course, someone might convince the team that other outcomes should be included, but then they need to be measures and become part of the TQM data. Otherwise, they can be and should be ignored.

#### **5. Collection of data of four types:**

- process implementation
- participant reactions
- intermediate outcomes
- eventual success

Four standard sorts of program evaluation data should be collected.

First, was the program implemented? That is, did anything happen?

Second, what are the reactions of the participants? Do they feel things have improved? All constituencies should be included.

Jumping to last, we measure accomplishments with bottom-line results. So eventual success, including on the state assessments, should be part of the evaluation.

And third, we should see outcomes that occur prior to the ultimate ones. These include enablers such as attitudinal variables, and mediators such as homework completed and unit exams.

#### **6. Triangulation of data**

It is easy to mis-assess, particularly when assessments are being developed for immediate and idiosyncratic purposes. A way to enhance validity is to expand the data sources for assessments. For example, student achievement can be measured with exams and with teacher reports. Both provide valid information, but neither is perfectly valid or reliable. The use of both improves the measurement of the trait.

This is called “triangulation,” the collection of multiple variables that are measures of the same constructs. The data may be either quantitative, or qualitative, or

both. The more important the construct, the stronger is the recommendation to triangulate.

**7. Open standardized assessments in an accountability model that allows tracking of progress.**

Assessments should be both open and standardized. That is, the data in summary form should be freely available. And standardization enhances the interpretation that change is meaningful. Without these, tracking of progress will not be very credible.

**8. Continuous school review of findings and recommendations with opportunity to challenge.**

The school, which is the most “interested party,” after all, should be allowed the opportunity to review the data at all times and to challenge any conclusions reached. But if all other elements are successful, the school will likely be more inclined to concentrate its efforts on solutions rather than minimizing problems.

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## Appendix A

### Elements to Consider for Total Quality Management Data Sources

These are criteria for effective school leadership that seem to represent measurable administrative goals for a school. They are adapted from the CCSSO's 1996 publication, *Standards for School Leaders*.

#### **Implementing A Shared Vision of Learning**

- the vision and mission of the school are effectively communicated to staff, parents, students, and community members
- the vision and mission are communicated through the use of symbols, ceremonies, stories, and similar activities
- the core beliefs of the school vision are modeled for all stakeholders
- the vision is developed with and among stakeholders
- the contributions of school community members to the realization of the vision are recognized and celebrated
- progress toward the vision and mission is communicated to all stakeholders
- the school community is involved in school improvement efforts
- the vision shapes the educational programs, plans, and actions
- an implementation plan is developed in which objectives and strategies to achieve the vision and goals are clearly articulated
- assessment data related to student learning are used to develop the school vision and goals
- relevant demographic data pertaining to students and their families are used in developing the school mission and goals
- barriers to achieving the vision are identified, clarified, and addressed
- needed resources are sought and obtained to support the implementation of the school mission and goals
- existing resources are used in support of the school vision and goals
- the vision, mission, and implementation plans are regularly monitored, evaluated, and revised

#### **Fostering Student Learning and Staff Professional Growth**

- all individuals are treated with fairness, dignity, and respect
- professional development promotes a focus on student learning consistent with the school vision and goals
- students and staff feel valued and important
- the responsibilities and contributions of each individual are acknowledged
- barriers to student learning are identified, clarified, and addressed
- diversity is considered in developing learning experiences

- life long learning is encouraged and modeled
- there is a culture of high expectations for self, student, and staff performance
- technologies are used in teaching and learning
- student and staff accomplishments are recognized and celebrated
- multiple opportunities to learn are available to all students
- the school is organized and aligned for success
- curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular programs are designed, implemented, evaluated, and refined
- curriculum decisions are based on research, expertise of teachers, and the recommendations of learned societies
- the school culture and climate are assessed on a regular basis
- a variety of sources of information is used to make decisions
- student learning is assessed using a variety of techniques
- multiple sources of information regarding performance are used by staff and students
- a variety of supervisory and evaluation models is employed
- pupil personnel programs are developed to meet the needs of students and their families

### **Maintaining a Safe, Efficient, and Effective Learning Environment**

- knowledge of learning, teaching, and student development is used to inform management decisions
- operational procedures are designed and managed to maximize opportunities for successful learning
- emerging trends are recognized, studied, and applied as appropriate
- operational plans and procedures to achieve the vision and goals of the school are in place
- collective bargaining and other contractual agreements related to the school are effectively managed
- the school plant, equipment, and support systems operate safely, efficiently, and effectively
- time is managed to maximize attainment of organizational goals
- potential problems and opportunities are identified
- problems are confronted and resolved in a timely manner
- financial, human, and material resources are aligned to the goals of schools
- the school acts entrepreneurally to support continuous improvement
- organizational systems are regularly monitored and modified as needed
- stakeholders are involved in decisions affecting schools
- responsibility is shared to maximize ownership and accountability
- effective problem-framing and problem-solving skills are used
- effective conflict resolution skills are used
- effective group-process and consensus-building skills are used

- effective communication skills are used
- a safe, clean, and aesthetically pleasing school environment is created and maintained
- human resource functions support the attainment of school goals
- confidentiality and privacy of school records are maintained

### **Collaborating with Families and the Community**

- high visibility, active involvement, and communication with the larger community is a priority
- relationships with community leaders are identified and nurtured
- information about family and community concerns, expectations, and needs is used regularly
- there is outreach to different business, religious, political, and service agencies and organizations
- credence is given to individuals and groups whose values and opinions may conflict
- the school and community serve one another as resources
- available community resources are secured to help the school solve problems and achieve goals
- partnerships are established with area businesses, institutions of higher education, and community groups to strengthen programs and support school goals
- community youth family services are integrated with school programs
- community stakeholders are treated equitably
- diversity is recognized and valued
- effective media relations are developed and maintained
- a comprehensive program of community relations is established
- public resources and funds are used appropriately and wisely
- community collaboration is modeled for staff
- opportunities for staff to develop collaborative skills are provided

### **Maintaining Integrity and Fairness**

- school leaders examine personal and professional values
- school leaders demonstrate a personal and professional code of ethics
- school leaders demonstrate values, beliefs, and attitudes that inspire others to higher levels of performance
- school leaders serve as role models
- people are treated fairly, equitably, and with dignity and respect
- the rights and confidentiality of students and staff are protected
- school leaders demonstrate appreciation for and sensitivity to the diversity in the school community

- the legitimate authority of others is recognized and respected
- the prevailing values of the diverse school community are examined and considered
- members of the school community demonstrate integrity and exercise ethical behavior
- the school is open to public scrutiny
- legal and contractual obligations are fulfilled
- procedures are applied fairly, wisely, and considerately

### **Maintaining Engagement with the Community**

- the environment in which schools operate is influenced on behalf of students and their families
- communication occurs among the school community concerning trends, issues, and potential changes in the environment in which schools operate
- there is ongoing dialogue with representatives of diverse community groups
- the school community works within the framework of policies, laws, and regulations enacted by local, state, and federal authorities
- public policy is shaped to provide quality education for students
- lines of communication are developed with decision makers outside the school community

### ***Potential Data Sources***

- Observations (e.g., of teachers)
- Staff
- Students
- Student Work
- Existing Data and Documents
- Parents
- Community Institutions
- Community Members
- Literature
- School Improvement Plan
- Calendar