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# Now the 'non-sexy work' of reform: Turning around high-poverty schools

Last month, D.C. Schools Chancellor Kaya Henderson referred to the next stage of school reform as “hard, non-sexy work.” Stage one — improving teacher quality — may have been a fight, but it was conceptually simple, tied elegantly to unequivocal research on teacher effect. Now comes patient systems-building — curriculum writing, common core standards, professional development — and the challenge of school transformation, or “turnaround.”

Turning around chronically low-performing, high-poverty schools is the grittiest task that educators face. Many efforts fail — even with excellent teachers and additional resources — leading some commentators to favor instead the highly disruptive strategy of school closure and restart. There are hopeful signs, however, in an emergent turnaround formula, one with the side benefit of moving past the “Is it the teachers or is it poverty?” debate. Excellent teachers and compensatory inputs are both essential to turnaround, but they, too, fail without a wholesale redesign of schools aimed at removing or addressing poverty-related barriers to learning.

Released last week, the District’s school-specific scores illustrate the persistent link between poverty and academic failure. With the notable exception of the high-performing charters, high-poverty schools are struggling. Why does disadvantage impede learning, even with the leveling effects of free and reduced-price lunches, social workers, or after-school

care?

Poverty’s effects on children are subtle and pernicious, and they are best explained by a mental health frame in addition to the lens of resource deprivation. Disadvantaged children can suffer the urban equivalent of unremitting stress, or trauma. As a result, they may act out or lack self-discipline. These challenges blunt students’ will and ability to achieve academically. And in schools with concentrated poverty, these problems easily overwhelm school capacity.

Most schools cope by separating challenging children from the classroom; referrals to social workers, special-education placements and suspensions are the core tools used to get by. Some educators also respond by lessening demands on students, a response that is intended to be compassionate but that ultimately harms those most in need of breakthrough academic success. Policymakers also seem frozen, sometimes stating that external poverty must be “fixed” before schools can be transformed.

But a growing cadre of practitioners is proving this frame wrong. These educators are combining excellent teaching with direct attacks on poverty as it presents *inside* schools, taking advantage of a school building’s concentrated setting for delivery of services and accountability for results. The core of their strategy is highly capable adults, mobilized and trained to deliver a whole-school culture of health, safety and learning, a culture so robust that it addresses, overpowers and stays ahead of the

drag exerted by disadvantage. It’s a model that seeks to heal the school — not “refer out” the problems.

One leader of this new way of thinking is child psychiatrist Pamela Cantor, founder of Turnaround for Children, a New York-based organization with a record of success in 60 high-poverty public schools. The Turnaround intervention begins by “stabilizing the building,” bringing immediate health and mental health services, at sufficient scale, to the neediest students. Says Cantor, who worked on trauma relief for children in the postwar Balkans, “There’s a critical sequence to responding to deep disadvantage in children and getting them and their school back on a healthy developmental track.”

After initial stabilization, Cantor’s team builds schoolwide systems and academic culture, focusing on adult skills and training. The doctor in her puts it this way: “You have to understand the real scope of need in a school in order to diagnose and dose correctly. A healthy school becomes just like a healthy immune system — it prevents risk and nurtures resilience in kids.” Turnaround’s intervention is a three-year partnership. During that time, as a partner school gains essential capacities, the Turnaround team gradually withdraws, leaving a healthy school — systems, competencies and a trained staff in place.

This month, Turnaround becomes a D.C. Public Schools partner at the Wheatley Education Campus (Ward 5) and Miner Elementary (Ward 6) and will contin-

ue at Chavez’s Parkside charter (Ward 7), a participant in last year’s pilot. (Turnaround’s D.C. work is funded by a local philanthropic consortium that includes my organization.) Turnaround joins multiple efforts in the D.C. Public Schools — among them, the Johns Hopkins-based “Diplomas Now” intervention and the Full Service School model — all aimed at creating systemic responses to school-based poverty.

Will these efforts succeed? One hopeful analogy comes from a new book, “Flourish,” by psychologist Marty Seligman. Seligman has been working with the U.S. Army to “inoculate” soldiers against post-traumatic stress disorder. His results show that increased resilience to wartime trauma can be taught, just like algebra. With mental health training and increased expression of traits such as self-control, everyone can become more “trauma-resilient,” stronger in the face of adversity. The Army is all over these results, and the potential for high-poverty schools, as Seligman enthusiastically acknowledges, is immense.

Cantor and Seligman have not met, but their resonance is clear, their shared lesson profound: With leadership and intentionality, even seemingly hopeless places — war zones or chronically failing schools — can be turned into places that produce healthy, resilient people who are ready to learn, grow and achieve.

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