

# HOW TO FIX A POORLY FUNCTIONING SCHOOL DISTRICT

## A NEW SUPERINTENDENT'S GUIDE

### *PROLOGUE*

Whether academically or financially distressed, repair of a school district is a long term complicated job. The nature of the problems, in a general way, might be similar in many cases. However, the solutions are most often specifically designed for that entity. In these cases, one size never fits all.

Successful transformation from a non-functioning school district to one of efficiency and effectiveness relies on a series of steps that must take a portion of time that may not be accepted by the local community or school boards. Parents, in most cases, want their children to get the best education possible in the shortest possible time. Unfortunately, turning such a large vessel around cannot happen quickly.

Are there school districts that have changed the culture and the workings in a short time? There most certainly have been. We will explore those organizations in some detail in a succeeding chapter on “quick fixes.” Most distressed school districts have a habit of hanging on to old and failing ways.

### *INTRODUCTION*

Since almost all residents of the United States have had some sort of schooling, the populace has some ideas about how important their experiences were. Without an education, the citizenry is disadvantaged to the point of not being able to hold a job or to improve themselves over their lifetimes. Most people understand that and are willing, to some degree, to support local school districts with cash contributions called taxes.

The support of school systems from the state varies wildly across the United States. It travels from 31% in South Dakota to 70% in New Mexico and Minnesota. Although Hawaii funds its schools at 87%, it is an anomaly because it has only one school district<sup>1</sup>. Interestingly enough, the federal government, which appears to have a large role in education in current times, represents only a small

part of any school district's budget. Education is a state function and the federal government is a late comer to funding programs in public schools. According to a well-known Supreme Court case, *Rodriguez v. San Antonio* (1973), the word education does not appear in the federal constitution. Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell was the deciding vote in a 5-4 decision that education was neither 'explicitly nor implicitly' found anywhere in the U.S. Constitution. It was therefore, not protected by the Constitution. Hence, no suit in equity relative to school funding can be heard in federal court.<sup>2</sup> All judicial activities could only then be accomplished within a state.

Adequate funding for school systems has been at the forefront of argumentation about how money affects outcomes for children. The *Money Doesn't Matter* folks reared their heads in the 1980's when the economy tanked and states looked for ways to diminish participation in funding education. An example of this diminution was the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. In the 1974-75 school year, the state funded their schools at 54%. In the 2013-14 year it was 30.8%.<sup>3</sup>

Where then can one look to begin a rehabilitation of a school district? That will be the subject of this monograph. There are explicit steps, in some order, that will, in most cases, lead to a transformation of a failing entity to one that succeeds for the children. There are very few of the usual educational panaceas involved in this activity. Most of what we have learned is the product of uncommon sense and a large dose of humanity. The secret to change is steeped in applied human relations, a product of the 1940's National Training Labs (NTL).

Kurt Lewin developed the program at NTL to delve into how intellect and environment act on each other to produce human behavior. His philosophy was that actual human interaction was more important than lecturing and reading. His T groups (T is for training) were a way to afford participants to learn about their own beliefs and also listen to others, sometimes antithetical beliefs, to understand interactions.<sup>4</sup>

Co-Author Arnold Hillman was part of one of these T-groups at Boston University in 1970 which was led by Kenneth Benne, one of Lewin's colleagues. By that time Lewin had passed away at an early age in 1947. Hillman returned to his position as

Human Relations Coordinator in a racially conflicted school district outside of Philadelphia. He was taught to run T-groups in the local community.

The success or failure at an attempt to change the direction of a school district is totally a human effort to modify certain behaviors. As we understand social psychology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are both positive and negative ways to do this. As with the use of *the predictive analysis* approach used by Cambridge Analytica to narrow electoral choices by using corrupt techniques, there are certain accepted and positive ways of changing an environment and therefore modifying behaviors.

## CHAPTER I- HOW DID WE GET HERE?

When the new leader of a school district is tapped for the job, he/she should acquaint themselves with the history of the school district or school. This probably should begin with the moment one applies for the job and ramp up to the first interview. Whether head hunter, school board, or human resource head doing the interview, a future leader should know what she/he is stepping into.

Yes, there are places that will not suit. There are situations where ones skills are not a good match. That is the premise on which decisions about employment lay. None of us have the overarching skills that can fix everything. As a matter of fact, when you hear or read about, “How to fix education in America,” or “How to repair our broken system of education,” shut your eyes or your computers. There is no such thing as fixing a whole system at once. It has been tried and all the panaceas have failed.

Where success has been most achieved, it has been through leadership in one school or in one school district. Those are the stories that you should read or listen to. When you hear about how a school or school district has been turned around, ask a myriad of questions about what variables folks are looking at and how these positive results have been accomplished. We can predict with certainty that it began with leadership.

Schools and we are going to use school and school district interchangeably, most often. The clear question is “How did this place get that way?” That question can be divided into a number of pieces. The first null hypothesis is that you should not come into that question with preconceived notions. Each school district has its own

history and its own story of failure. The nature of the failure begins with a look at the long term history of the community and its public education system.

What does it matter if 50 years ago a school district was doing quite well financially and academically? How does that impact what is happening today? The answer is that it does impact current problems. There has got to be a baseline if you are going to seek to improve the school district. The choice of where to begin the search is different in each school district. In some cases, a change in demographics, the economy, the nature of housing, the ups and downs of local businesses have a large impact on what has happened.

Let us suppose that the community was, at one time, a thriving coal producing area. Jobs for youngsters straight out of high school were plentiful. The salaries were above average, and the town thrived on local businesses, and people coming from large companies to stay for days at a time. The town even had to extend the runway at a local airport to accommodate executive jets.

Then the coal industry sank because of new regulations and power derived from other sources. So many of the local establishments went out of business and the town became just a lunch stop on the way to a big city. The jobs for the kids dried up, as did a whole generation of workers. Poverty started to creep into people's daily life. Welfare was now seen as a necessary part of existence. The brain drain affected the community as young people, as well as other workers, looked to other places for a living.

The schools reflected the decline in the community. As financial hardships hit the district, the schools felt it. The state may have participated in sending revenue to the district, but local taxation fell off the end of the table. Not only was raising taxes counterproductive, but percent's of collections began to shrink. In states where county governments are the distributors of local taxation, the problem is heightened.

As the outside world saw the school district deteriorating, it affected the ability to recruit quality teachers and then teachers in general. As test scores diminished, and graduation rates declined, going on to college rates reduced. All of these variables were available to those applying for jobs, including school superintendents. State

departments of education, statewide organization, the internet, colleges certifying teachers and administrators were all good sources of information.

The question then arises, do you apply for a leadership job, such as a school superintendent, in a failing school district? Since the outsiders have given you information, the next step could be phone calls to teacher association heads in the district and other teacher leaders. Remember, as you are checking on the school district, others are checking up on you.

There are, of course, other reasons why both academic and fiscal problems are present. In the financial realm mismanagement is always possible. Misreading of local state and sometimes federal revenues are most often the case where a district winds up without enough funds to cover expenses.

In some cases, funds derived from one-time funding, such as grants that end in one year or two, run out, and budget creators are unaware that the funds are no longer available. They therefore put those erroneous conclusions into the revenue section of the budget and programs continue with no funds. In a large school district, with many grants, this happens more frequently.

Then there is the issue of skullduggery. There are bad people everywhere. People are often shocked that there could be financial manipulation in a school district. With state, federal and local auditors looking over the district's shoulders, nefarious business can still go on. Therefore, it is always wise to ask for an audit of funds by an outside firm with no ties to the district. Many a time this audit can be the beginning of a repair of the financial controls needed to fix the district.

Academics are another story. It begins with levels of expectations. As we have seen in many school districts across the nation, once a district is labeled as, "Failing," it remains with that word despite improvements to its educational program. The community's view of the schools, parents and non-parents, is one of the most important tasks in fixing the district. People have to believe in the progress and participate in the repair. Chapter 3 will explain how one might do that.

## *CHAPTER II WHO DO YOU TALK TO?*

It has been said that it is lonely at the top and this is especially true in public education. The job of superintendent of schools can be one of the loneliest and most isolated positions in the public education arena. You have locally elected school board members on one side and parents, teachers, principals, business and community members on the other side. With a low performing or broken school district, the feelings of isolation are compounded with the need to turnaround years and possibly decades of persistent low academic performance by students. Who do you talk to about issues concerning the district? Who do you talk to about personal issues, personnel issues, or professional growth? What do you do?

With an increased emphasis on accountability, the need to be politically correct, real or feigned competition between peers, social media concerns and the 24-hour news cycle, who is left to bounce ideas or talk through projects, problems or solutions to fix the broken school district? What many superintendents find is that everything that is said is repeated somewhere. A superintendent once said to me that whenever you speak, know that you are going to be recorded. Anytime that you talk, speak like you are on live television or that you are giving an interview. Give responses to media questions in writing and copy yourself on the email. You often wonder who can you trust? Who can you talk to?

Spouses can be a source for conversation but not necessarily for discussing sensitive subjects especially when you are unable to go into great detail. The one person that a superintendent may confide in when not being a superintendent may not be the best person to talk about highly sensitive issues or controversial topics. This is due to the one-sided nature of the conversation and not necessarily so with other family topics. Make time for family and time to talk but understand that the demands of the job dictate the need to not have causal conversations with spouses. Debrief and find things to discuss that bring meaning without stressing out even more after a board meeting, tough legal issues or everyday stress associated with the position.

Friends who have been a source of constant communication and a repository for confidential information may begin to feel left out when you realize that information you provide becomes public knowledge. This is not due to any ill-

meaning or diabolical plan to ruin your reputation or get you fired, but rather from understanding that information is power and even well-intended lapses on the part of friends can cause undue stress as information is shared that should not have been. Keep your friends just don't confide in them about your job or job-related issues. Continue to visit, shop, eat and play together.

Board members are not your friends either. Especially the one or two who support your every decision. Keep conversations businesslike in nature and minimize the social aspects of the professional relationship. Typically, superintendents develop a strong relationship with their board chair during the beginning of their tenure and that can polarize the board and make other members feel left out of the loop. Remember that the school board is your employer. Resist the urge to be social with board members until after their tenure on the school board. Parents and other community members, teachers, students and church members will all complain to board members when a superintendent attempts to improve or turnaround a poorly performing school district.

Legislators are another group that superintendents can talk to but not necessarily confide in to help fix a broken district. Working with legislative members of the state sends messages to the community, school board members and the media that issues affecting the district are important. Legislators will begin to feel confident enough to call the superintendent for information on education issues and often extends the reach of the circle of influence on matters that may affect the school district. This is one of many steps that would need to occur in the process of fixing a broken school district. Remember, unless you have a personal relationship with your local legislator, you should not confide in this particular group.

Other superintendents are a great source but as stated earlier, there are reasons not to confide with a peer unless you are extremely comfortable and have a high-level of trust with another superintendent, particularly if this person is working in a neighboring district. Casual conversations become the news or tagline of the day. What seemed as a comment about a school board member gets back to the entire school board. A superintendent wanting to gain points in a community with a community member, provides a little too much detail about a personnel issue involving a relative of the community member. Who do you talk to?

The choice then to find someone to talk to or confide in seems like an impossible task but there are people to talk to and confide in. It could be a trusted long-term friend, clergy or a peer or mentor with whom you have developed a relationship and feel comfortable to share feelings and someone who is interested in your personal well-being and is at least moderately interested in the activities you engage in while doing your job. She/he may not necessarily know all the ends or outs of your position but should be able to provide sound advice or at least help you work through issues on your own. Using common sense cannot be overstated. Who can be trusted to talk and confide in concerning the job and day-to-day demands? Take the time to discern what can be said to which group and stick with your decision.

As you have surmised, it is a mix of people who might be of help to you. The superintendency is a very difficult job. It is now so much more public than it had been in previous times. The pressure seems to grow daily. Not sure what the average tenure of a superintendent is in SC, but it is less than four years for rural superintendents.

The most frustrating thing of all is what happens when you are either canned, or retire. It is then that you really need folks you can talk to. It is in those situations that you will find out in whom you can rely. When that happens, hold those people close.

### CHAPTER III TAKING THE FIRST STEPS

Some superintendents come in with a six month or one year plan of how they are going to improve the school district. These plans usually work for a short period of time until reality sets in. The next step after ingesting the history and speaking to all of the necessary folks is to take a breath and put together what you have found. The process up to now seems particularly long and drawn out. However, it does not really take long to figure out what to do first.

The first step is to travel around to all of the districts buildings. In a very large district that may not be possible. One could choose a random section of the school district or select different areas of the community. Visit each kind of school elementary, middle (or junior high) and a high school. It might take you a few days



to see 6 or 7 schools. This will make you visible to staff and community, as well as teach you some things about the district's layout.

Steer away from creating listening posts at this stage of your tenure. One might want to do that sometime later in your first year or even the second year. It may well be that you will have ameliorated some of the problems by the time your listening posts are active.

The question arises about how to communicate with your board of education. Most boards have a feeling that they know about personnel and would rather be enmeshed with the hiring of certain segments of the staff, rather than dealing with policy. However, there are ways of handling that problem. If you can, as an old friend once told me, get them interested in educational topics.

How do you do that? One of the most exciting things to do is to get them to tour with you when you go to a school. Teachers probably don't like you opening their classroom doors or laboratories or gyms. If you can get your administrative staff to let them know that you are not snooping or observing, then that might help. Looking around in a building also includes seeing students at lunch, playing in the gym, viewing the custodial staff, etc. In fact, what you are doing is really introducing yourself.

Board members might even come up with suggestions for improvement. Listen to them and don't agree or disagree on the spot. Maybe even get back to your office and write them down or pull out your electronic notepad. Giving value to your board members, as well as staff, community members and students is a valuable tool.

Let us pause here for a moment for something that just came into my mind. We have been presenting these things to new superintendents for so long that we have almost forgotten to include them here. These are for the taking or not taking.

- Make all of your calls, texts and emails early in the morning when you first come to work. Of course there are times when you can't, but get them off your mind.
- Prioritize your communications- always call parents first. Yes, we did say parents.

- Set your desk up this way; two double boxes on each side of your desk. The box on the top left is your INBOX. Underneath that is the box for things that you need to get to pretty quickly. The box on the right top is your OUTBOX. The bottom right box is for things that you have no idea what to do with. You look those over once in a while.
- Travel to as many buildings as you can during the year.
- Hire the brightest people that you can. Having a bunch of people that are smarter than you is a blessing. Make sure that their thinking mechanisms are all different and always much different from yours.
- Communicate with your board members frequently. We still maintain that an actual snail mail letter once a week is the way to do it. Yes, we understand email, text, Instagram, email, etc. However, all of those are very public and can be sent along to many others. Yes, you can duplicate, or scan a letter and send it off into the ether. That's a more involved process. A letter is more personal and shows your board that you really mean to communicate. There is a warning here. If there is some confidential material in the letter, be careful not to be too explicit and no names.
- CAUTION- Do not announce that you are going to make dramatic changes in the school district. If there have been a number of changes in leadership in the school district over the last number of years, promising changes will not have any effect on staff.

Those are just a few hints to keep you going when you first start. You will also be dealing with leftover problems from the previous administration. Those pieces of information should come from a variety of sources that you have tapped, as described in Chapter II. Don't always take for granted that your predecessor has briefed you completely.

If you have children of school age, the choice of sending them to your own schools is a family decision. If you have a strong family and your children are of an age that they can understand what you do for a living, have them go to your schools. Going to private schools in or near your district tells the community something. It also sets well in your head that you are making the schools better for your own

children. There are all sorts of exceptions to living in the community. It is your choice and a school board cannot really tell you where to live.

#### CHAPTER IV HOW DO YOU KNOW WHAT'S WRONG?

If you truly believe that all of this effort in public education should be for the benefit of the children, you are on the right track. Sometimes, it feels like the priorities in public schools are to benefit those who would profit from the schools and the governments. In looking at what is wrong with a school district that has to be a part of the investigation

Governments, whether state or federal, attempt to determine how well a school is doing based on a paper and pencil test of someone's making. Usually the company that makes these tests makes a pile of dough. According to a legislator of my acquaintance, that is the easiest way of looking at whether a school district is succeeding or failing.

Have you noticed how colleges and universities are relying less on SAT and ACT tests for admission, but rather the GPA? Does that mean that we are relying more on human observation rather than tests. Wouldn't that be wonderful if it were true? In some states, school districts generate their own tests based on teacher creation and give the students a pre and post-test to see about progress.

Even in the NFL, prospects are given something called the Wonderlic Test. It is a snappy test of 50 questions in 12 minutes. It purports to measure intelligence. I must say that during a hiatus from education into the world of hustling bodies (employment agencies) that I used this test to determine something or other. Actually, I did it to prepare my clients so that they would be prepared to take the test when they were interviewed by a company.

This test has very little value to those interested in how to measure intelligence, unless you want to know that offensive lineman get higher scores than quarterbacks. Dr. Wonderlic and his family have made a bundle on this test.

The object of these references is to inform the reader that determining whether a school district is doing well or not, cannot be measured by any of these tests.

Comparing a rural economically disadvantaged county in South Carolina to one of the state's wealthiest counties, is sheer nonsense.

Here is a simple example. Take Advanced Placement courses. From my own personal experience with rural school districts, I have found that a very large group of those districts had no, I said NO AP courses. Those courses cost money to run and for teachers to be trained in the teaching of them.

This was a time, as it is now in South Carolina that another state was attempting to grade school districts with a composite alphanumeric. One of the variables was AP courses. You can guess what happened. The state eventually removed that metric.

There are so many opportunities that poor school districts do not have; SAT/ACT preparation courses, technology, adequate teacher salaries, number of teachers, counselors, aides, reading specialists, physical facilities, co-curricular activities, etc. A number of studies over the years have concluded that there is a positive correlation between active participation in co-curricular programs and grades.

How can we determine, using real measures of advancement, how well a school district is doing. Some states are using this kind of market basket approach to measuring the success of a school district. Here is a set of variables using a baseline. All of this depends on the stability of the administration, teachers, school boards, and Departments of Education.

- Graduation Rates
- Attendance
- Discipline rates
- Stability of staff
- Going on to post- secondary rates
- Post-secondary graduation rates
- Success in later life (yes, many schools track that)
- Staff development
- Percent of teachers certified in subjects they are teaching

- Retention rates
- Dual enrollment
- Number of Staff

These are just a few of the variables that might be used. Most of them can be codified. There are other, much longer lists (see John Hattie's work on Visible Learning- he identifies 258 variables).<sup>5</sup> As a person working in education, you can think of a number more.

Just for the heck of it, let me ask you this question? How would you go about improving some of the above variables by consolidation, state takeover, further reliance on high stakes testing, or grading school districts? Those are extant solutions to improve "failing" school districts.

Your first job is to determine how the curriculum serves the students in your new school district. By gathering teachers from all levels of the school district, you will find that the curriculum is consistent or it is in tatters across the district that will tell you that staff are unknowing about what they are supposed to be teaching. You might also get that information from your administrative staff. However, you might know that what is written down on paper, may not be what is actually being taught.

Since reading is the basis of almost everything that we do, take a look at the resources being used to help students with reading problems. You might want to talk to your board about policy priorities, such as reading and early childhood programs. If there are few dollars being funneled in this direction, there may have to be a board decision to change that direction.

## CHAPTER V HEAVY LIFTING

You have discovered what things are wrong with your new school district. Let us assume that you can do a few things at the same time. By this time, you will have become familiar with most of the processes by which the school district operates. You can probably get a handle on the physical things rather quickly. The shape of all of the buildings in the district will become evident to you as you travel around. Discussions with maintenance staff will fill in the rest.

If you have a good business manager, or a financial manager, as it is called in some states, your life will be made so much easier. In a large school district the business function may be divided into parts. You may have to put a team together to work on things that have to get done. Most districts already have a 3, 4, or 5 year plan.

You may be thinking that these kinds of items will be taken care of by staff. They may well be, but you must get your hands dirty and know what it is that they are doing. The buildings that house your students must be made safe and clean. Many a good education program can be sabotaged if a building is in lousy shape and no one sees to it that repairs are done and the building kept clean.

Become familiar with the budget. Actually, become very familiar with both the budget (a projection) and the actual spending. Make sure that a report of the budget and expenditures on a monthly basis are in columns, side by side with last year's spending. Not only become familiar with the expenses, get to know your revenues. In South Carolina, the way in which County Councils distribute funds to their school districts can be done in about seven different ways.

If you concentrate on the revenue side of the ledger, you will always have some idea of how the financial situation is setting. Most discussions seem to center about how much money is being expended both in general and more specifically on certain items. Don't be too surprised to learn that board members and the general public will focus on salaries and benefits, and other esoteric things like football uniforms, band uniforms, and the number of cheerleading squads.

It is your job as the leader to help prioritize what things must be done first. If you take a systems approach, as was created in the defense department in the 1960's, you will begin with a circle that encloses the classroom and extends to larger circles that are further away from the classrooms. That will make it easier for your staff, both central office and building staff to see how things are operated. Very often the greatest brawls in education are priority setting. How many superintendents get fired because community groups (boosters) want a new artificial grass football field before you can replace a reading series in the elementary schools?

You may get battered sometimes, but the classroom comes first. Make that clear upon arrival. It will keep you in good stead and allow decision-making a bit easier.

There will be times when you cannot believe that priorities in the community and the board are turned to things other than academic. Those particular times will be the locus of your leadership abilities. You might even profit from arguments about hiring a new basketball coach, or demolishing an old building. These discussions tend to tire out an audience and board, paving the way for items that could improve academics.

Building an agenda for a board meeting is a very important step in your desire to improve your school district. There have to be board policies to back up everything that you do at a public meeting; from how and when and how long the public session goes, to which agenda items go first and which go later in the agenda. By the time your first public board meeting takes place, you should have some idea of how the board and superintendent have been operating in the past. Your job is to see if that was an effective way of doing things or was it unsuccessful. You learn these historical happenings from your discussions as outlined in Chapter II.

One of the common mistakes made by a superintendent coming into a new situation is the desire to answer board and public questions oneself. That can become very uneasy as time goes on and you are not able to answer them all. Think for a moment who is at the board meeting with you. If you run a committee system for board members, some financial, extra-curricular and human resource questions could be answered by the board chair of those committees.

One of the most dangerous occurrences is a question that has legal ramifications. Those kinds of questions can get a superintendent into a great deal of trouble. Sitting somewhere at a board table is your solicitor. That person should be well versed in school law and will be able to answer most questions. If not, the solicitor can say, "I will get back to you with an answer, Certainly, you would want to be involved in some answering and discussion. That is certain. Being in charge does not mean that you answer every question.

In Chapter I we discussed other variables, other than tests that define the health of a school district. It is certainly not the easiest thing to do. Tests are simple, but most tests are not diagnostic. Those are the kind of tests that tell you in what areas the students need to improve. There is always a question of grouping in elementary

school and in middle school or junior high. Those questions will be part of your decision making after gathering a great number of factors.

The social and economic painting of your school district, the number of students on free and reduced lunch, plain old reading scores, discussion with teachers and administrative staff, will give you a clue how to proceed in helping the children. Most educators understand that it costs more to educate economically disadvantaged students. Unfortunately, there are legislators and government officials who do not understand that.

Wealthier folks have advantages by giving their children educational opportunities when they are home. Poor people do not. Therefore, there has to be some place in the curriculum for students to get some of those advantages in school. Trips to museums, shows, etiquette lunches, musical experiences and so many others. That will introduce those children to the things that they would not ordinarily get at home.

These kinds of experiences should begin early in elementary school. The nature of these happenings will enable children to absorb cultural, social and word learning that will help them later on in their school careers. If testing is a priority, these occurrences will indeed expand the children's vocabulary and stimulate reading. This has been done before in other school districts across the country.

There is always the chance that one might be challenged by strict constructionists that school is only for learning the basics of reading writing and arithmetic. It will be up to school boards, teachers and administrators to give rational answers as to why these expanded parts of the curriculum are necessary for the students.

## CHAPTER 6 THE MONEY TREE

After reading all of these suggestions, the question arises about where to get funds to do all of these things. There really are no simple answers. One of them is implicit in the development of budgets. The most costly part of any budget is human capital. Staff is many times between 60-70% of a school district budget. That includes both health benefits, social security taxes, and other mandated costs.

If you are in a state that allows for negotiations, no budget development will be without discussions and planning for increases in salaries and concomitant



increases in mandated taxes and such. These are all part of the way in which your school district attracts excellent employees. In *right to work states*, such as South Carolina, rural schools, with a small economic base, salaries are low and attracting and retaining teachers is a problem.

Some school districts approach these problems by offering additional bonuses, housing and other benefits that are attractive to younger staff. There may even be some counseling advice provided, as well as access to medical care that goes beyond the normal. For a fee, the district could provide staff with help for personal problems. There are organizations that are available for counseling help over the phone. In this author's experience, this kind of help reduces the number of sick and personal days.

If there is no specific person hired to write grants, both governmental and private, hire one. Finding someone who can develop or has developed connections to funding agencies will be like finding a gold mine. Even in turbulent times in our country, these kinds of people seem to be able to get blood out of a stone. By the time this person is finished, they have more than made up the cost of their salary. Funds for some of the trips mentioned above might be backed up by grants from private organizations.

In the early eighties, school districts began to create community foundation funds that were directed by the school district. These funds were developed by the school district for the purpose of funding such "extra" things that a district might need. It was not a booster organization, but a 501C3 organization with its own board and set of guidelines. In some cases, the fund grew to a point where it could actually hand out scholarships for students. Community members and businesses were encouraged to contribute to the fund. The community members were also encouraged to leave funds for the foundation in their wills. Of course it is important to find a way to show appreciation for the gifts

For those who are less than enthused about entering the political circus, this may not be a suggestion for you. However, most folks have found it mandatory to become, at least, friendly with their legislators. In many states and in the federal government, there are some funds that are discretionary. Not saying that pork barrel still exists as a standard, but some legislators have access to mystery money.

They may also be able to help you with grants that you may apply for from the state or federal government.

When rates on certificates of deposit are low, as they are now, looking for better places to invest school district funds is not a priority. However, as rates increase, investment procedures and placement become very important. The financial manager should be able to tap into rates from most banks and government backed funds. One of the great difficulties for a rural district is that the community believes that you should invest in local banks. As time has gone by, local banks are a thing of the past. There are very few local banks in our country these days. Therefore it is easier to shop around for rates at far away financial institutions. That is something that you can do coming in to the superintendency.

Athletic funds are usually a headache. In many cases, those funds reside at the high school level, whether athletics or co-curricular or class funds, these monies should be audited each year. Many an athletic fund is the home of financial mismanagement or corruption. After a while, ask to see the audit and go over it with your financial manager and an accountant of your choosing.

As you look into the many parts of the school district, you will run into a few brick walls. At that point, it is not necessary to be a bull in a china shop. Have some patience and you will soon be able to slide in unnoticed, or have a trusted staff member do it for you.

## THE QUICK FIX CHAPTER 7

If you have been around long enough, you will have run across a school district that has turned itself around in a very short time. You might marvel about how that was done. Those are particularly singular happenings. Usually, the answer to the question is “internal leadership” or as some call it, “The Advantage of the Homer.”

There are always arguments about whether an outsider can come in and fix things in a broken school district or someone who has been in the district for a long while. The research is very spotty in this area.

*Hiring insider candidates is based at least in part on the notion that someone who has deep roots in a district or knows it well has a better chance of succeeding by having an intuitive knowledge of the district, its potential and its*

*pitfalls — and will be less likely to leave, if only because there will be fewer surprises and therefore less stress. Such home-grown superintendents may also be more loyal to the district because they have enduring familial ties, as well as close friendships in the area.*

*On the other hand, being an insider can have its disadvantages. It could make it more difficult to shake up district leadership if the targets of the shakeup are people the new superintendent knows or has worked with for years. Unlike an outsider, it's also not assured that someone who has risen up through the ranks will bring fresh ideas, perspectives or experiences to the table.<sup>6</sup>*

As you can see from this description of the choices that the Los Angeles Unified School District had to make, the choices of insider and outsider are not clear. A quick fix is normally within the scope of an insider. If the insider has the capacity to obviate long time relationships while improving the academic climate, then a quick fix is possible.

An example of this kind of turnaround occurred in a small school district in Western Pennsylvania. The district was once a thriving steel producing area. As the mill closed, and the school district deteriorated, school leaders had little ability to improve things.

The board then hired a gentleman who had been in the district for many years. He had intimate understanding of the district and the community. He had taught in the district and understood its history. He had no fear of alienating his former co-workers, the school board, and so was able to inspire the community. He was able to go out into the community and get their permission to change things.

He did so with a vengeance. He had the support of the community and was able to bring in new programs, revise the curriculum, focus on early childhood and pre-school. His mantras were aimed at taking care of the community; “Twinkle to Wrinkle,” “Lust to Dust,” “Cradle to Grave.” His district philosophy was, “Care and Education for All.”

He also applied for every grant that might have been available. He ran what is called a Community School. There were programs for senior citizens, mothers, and a host of community members. The question always arises. What happens when the leader leaves? Did things revert to the way they were before he took charge? I will let you draw your own conclusions.

A similar occurrence at a Philadelphia high school showed how a local leader can impact a school very quickly. In this case the new principal came in with

experience within the school district. He saw that he would not succeed unless he had community support and a truce with a local gang (sad to say). He went out into the community, held meetings in all of the sending communities and got permission to make some wholesale changes.

His meetings with the local gang were equally successful. He got a promise from them that they would view the school grounds and surrounding areas as “safe” territory and a neutral zone. His idea was to make this school the pride of the community. He succeeded within a year. He used all of his connections to make the school a kind of “space academy.” His boundless energy was infectious. He was also given permission to have teachers transferred if they so desired. Many of them did and new staff that came in was enthused to be there.

There is a third example of the turnaround that we have run across. It is not in education, but in the penal system. Here in South Carolina, the Allendale Prison was considered one of the most dangerous of all the jails in the state. John Pate, a 20 year Army veteran and had served on the staff at Allendale for 10 years and became its warden in 2010. His intimate understanding of the institution and the inmates enabled him to perform a transformation in less than a year. We were privileged to meet with Warden Pate and had a tour. The institution is very unusual in its treatment of inmates. Our two tour guides were murderers who had life sentences.

Remember, these are exceptions. However, as you know, exceptions are those happenings that prove the rule.

## NOW FOR THE HARDEST PART CHAPTER 8

There are so many suggestions about how to start improving the academics in a school district that has been in decline. Some of the variables mentioned in chapter four are symptoms of things that are wrong. How and when to approach solutions raises so many questions that it is near impossible to answer all of them at once.

After all, the leader of the school district cannot do all of these things by him/herself. He/she must accumulate a team that will believe in the same kind of moral judgements as the superintendent and also the board of education. We

cannot assume that gathering these folks will happen all at once. Let us begin with this kind of premise. As the folks come on board, or join from within the staff, priorities will be established.

Let us look at one of the symptoms and peel it back to its core. Attendance is a harbinger of failure. A student cannot, under normal circumstance, learn in school if he/she is not there. However, there are some caveats. Poor attendance does not usually begin in the earlier grades. Yes, there will be some that do. The bulk of non-attendance begins in middle school or junior high school. It becomes more flagrant as the student remains on the rolls in the upper grades. If things reach a crescendo, then 10<sup>th</sup> grade is the fulcrum and the student drops out.

With this kind of understanding of attendance, a leader can focus on stemming the tide of dropouts and increasing attendance at a much earlier age. The students who are in the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade when the new superintendent comes in need special kind of treatment. There may even be a need for an alternative school, if it is not already in place.

As with the Quick Fix examples, the new leader should be able to determine whether the early education programs that are extant are working. Some of those programs, if they are federally funded require evaluations. You might want to look at those evaluations. Some of the programs are state mandated or state funded, or both. The investigation of whether these programs are working should be a priority.

Some of these programs might be:

- Pre K
- 0-3 programs
- 4 year old programs
- Kindergarten
- Read to succeed
- Title I
- 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning centers
- First Steps
- Montessori Learning
- Parents as Teachers
- Community based programs such as Head Start

These would be the beginning steps in a series of programs that not only involve children, but involve their parents. In the end, it is the parents who will see to it that their children will learn to read. Many homes do not have books, nor do they go to libraries, or read online. In some districts, books are sent home with children to start a home library. There are also outside organizations that raise funds to buy books. These service organizations can be very helpful to a school district, in not only providing outside funding, but to get the word out to the community.

Working with parents can be very gratifying and very frustrating at the same time. Many parents cannot make teacher meetings during the daytime because they are working. Some accommodation must be made to allow teachers and parents to get together. The more parents and community people you get involved at an early stage in a child's education, the better it will be for the child, the school and the community.

Your position as a new superintendent recently arrived at your school district; you have many things coming at you at once. It may be that there will be problems at the middle school, if you have one. Middle school seems to be the place that the community focuses on when complaints are made. Parents seem to be more concerned with their 5<sup>th</sup> graders going to sixth grade than when their children go to high school or enter kindergarten.

The middle school was created in the 1960's to foster integration. It was thought that getting the children of all stripes together earlier, would enable kids to know each other better and get along. What the "experts" did not realize is that trying to make the middle school a kind of *Summerhill*<sup>6</sup> does not work. It is the wrong time in child development to try and have children do things that they are not used to.

Elementary schools, with mostly one teacher and a group of youngsters has been the child's experience for 6 years. Certainly there are times when some schools have students in 5<sup>th</sup> grade rotate teachers for a bit, but they generally have one teacher and one classroom to rely on. Middle school is nothing like that.

The first problem is that middle school is only three grades in duration. You are a freshman one year and two years later, you are a senior. Students, even in small school districts, come from a number of elementary schools. These schools are generally circumscribed by neighborhoods or towns and boroughs. Most of the

parents know each other. Most of the students know each other. They may have even gone to the same religious institutions.

Because when students come from different elementary schools, they generally hang out together in school, in gym, at lunch, and in passing classes. They also go home to the district in which their former elementary school was situated. Having all of these students mesh in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade is just a pipe dream. What really happens is that children who are having problems seem to encounter more problems in middle school.

It appears, from some research done with Florida schools, that students that transition from a middle school either 5-8, 6-8, or 7-8 have a more difficult time academically going forward than do students who go from a k-8 configuration to high school.<sup>7</sup> Not that there are no successful middle schools that present programs that fit with the age and development of pre-teen and young teen students.

In an interview with my granddaughter, Cassidy Grace, a rising 8<sup>th</sup> grader, I had an opportunity to ask her questions about her transition from 5<sup>th</sup> grade to the middle school and both positive and negative happenings in her memory. “Grandpa, I had very little trouble going from my elementary school to the middle school. Although we came from a few elementary schools, we soon found friends from other schools that we hung around with.”

Interesting that Cassidy Grace did not find it necessary to “hang around” with only the students from her old elementary school. She described going from class to class and meeting new students who would become friends. From my discussions with her, it was obvious that both the staff and administration of the middle school had planned that the transition would be smooth. I then asked my granddaughter about some of the students who did not seem to be able to handle the changes. “Some of the kids had problems at first and took a longer time to get used to middle school. I believe that some of these students will continue to have problems and will be possible dropouts when they get older.”

I was impressed with Cassidy’s observational skill. I guess any grandpa would be proud. It was, however, a clear indication that there are middle schools that have planned for the transition and some that have not done any or very little planning at all. As Cassidy Grace observed, “It’s easy to see which teachers like the students.”

## *High School*

I append this special section about high school. Leadership is one of the most important attributes of any administrator in any school within the school district. High school is usually the most public of the district schools. The principal of the high school(s) is the most public of administrators. Communities know the high school principal's name long before they know the superintendent's name. With the myriad of extra-curricular activities, the principal stands out at each of these events. He/she is seen at most of these events that parents and community residents attend.

Some staff members in high school believe that it is their job to present content to students. Many of these staff members will have been in front of classes for which this is appropriate. However, as we have seen over the past number of years, content is just a part of the education of a high school student.

One hears the cry, "They did not teach these kids manners at home, so why would we think that we would have any success teaching them manners here at school?" I wonder how many times you have heard this plaintive cry. In essence, the people who say these things are really talking about structure and not just manners.

Most colleges and universities present education classes as if teachers will be teaching in a suburban school district. I am sure that I do not have to tell you that this is not what we find in rural schools or in metro schools. Yes, there are certain college profs who are aware of these differences, but they are not a plentiful lot.

If you are in a school district with a number of high schools, some of these things will be very difficult for you. However, leadership and the choice of a principal will be of utmost importance to the success of those schools. This is not to say that leadership is not important in the other buildings. The principal in a high school is generally a more public person and is much more involved in extra-curricular activities.

That said, the most successful high schools in any size school district have long traditions of structure and long term goals. These are not just idle words. You may want to use the word "traditions" to express a point. Students of that age need to know what is going to happen next. Whether a block schedule or a traditional



schedule, students must be aware that there are processes by which the schools function. These processes should be within the purview of all of the students no matter what their academic situations are.

When a high school student body gets confused, it is a recipe for the kind of chaos that does not go away for years. How then does a new school superintendent make sure that each of his/her high schools runs smoothly? It does not take long for one to see how things are being approached in a high school. In a moment of personal experience, this author had the experience of seeing firsthand how a high school could perform poorly. One only had to walk the halls, look into the classrooms, visit the gymnasium (yes the gym), speak to some staff members and some students and all became clear.

A short study of the high school curriculum will soon tell you what might be done to shore up academics. Yes, there are state standards to adhere to. However, once past the standards, what are the students actually being taught? Is there a need for an accreditation visit from one of the accreditation organizations? I have always found that helpful in seeing where things could improve.

Having a few observations here and there may also help you understand how things are being taught. Staff would either appreciate your visits or not. However, it will also show that you are interested in what is going on. Review techniques for observations with administrators responsible for that activity.

A review of extra-curricular activities could be a quicksand activity. There are many stakeholders in these clubs and teams. One of the most difficult things to keep track of is funds to support these efforts. Hopefully, there has been an outside audit of the funds. Here you will find the “Boosters,” who may be of help or hindrance to you. How about new band uniforms or a new football field with AstroTurf, or new wrestling mats, or trips for the art students to go to a museum, etc.

Although these events more rest in the principal’s hands, they will eventually get to your desk. Just be prepared.

You will also start making decisions about professional development. These will all be things that have to be laid out. Let’s assume that you have a great number of

new teachers, new to the profession or to the school district. Decisions will have to be made. One of the discussions will always be about discipline, or classroom management. There will be a distinction between elementary and secondary programs. However, there are distinctions between grades. One could not expect professional development for kindergarten teachers to be the same as 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers. The same can be said about teaching 6<sup>th</sup> graders and high school seniors.

One may want to approach professional improvement from a child development perspective.