

The Paradoxical Logic of School Turnarounds: A Catch-22

by Tina Trujillo – June 14, 2012

*In the 1955 classic novel *Catch-22*, Joseph Heller chronicles the absurdity of the bureaucratic rules and constraints to which a conflicted Air Force bombardier and others are subjected. Each character lives under the absolute, yet illogical, power of these policies. The Obama administration's current school turnaround policy is a catch-22. This policy mandates that low-scoring schools fire principals and teachers and change schools' management. Such reforms engender the exact conditions that research has linked with persistent low performance—high turnover, instability, poor climate, inexperienced teachers, and racial and socioeconomic segregation. In this way, the policy presents potential turnaround schools with certain impossible dilemmas, or catch-22s, because implementation is likely to lead schools back to the original problems that the turnaround was supposed to solve.*

In the 1955 classic novel *Catch-22*, Joseph Heller chronicles the absurdity of the bureaucratic rules and constraints to which a conflicted Air Force bombardier and countless others are subjected. Each character lives under the absolute, yet illogical, power of these policies. One by one, they come to see the paradoxical nature of the policies, and eventually the bombardier realizes that the main policy—Catch-22—is an empty one, based on illogical reasoning. Its real purpose is to justify the behavior of those in power and maintain the status quo.

The Obama administration's 2009 school turnaround policy is in many ways a catch-22. After announcing its intention to turn around 5,000 of the nation's lowest performing schools over the next 5 years, the federal government poured an unprecedented \$3.5 billion into the federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) program. Such a worthy goal, in the administration's view, required quick, drastic action at the school level. Out of four policy options prescribed by the administration, districts that receive SIG monies choose the turnaround option the second most frequently for schools (Hurlburt, LeFloch, Therriault, & Cole, 2011). This policy mandates that schools fire the principals and teachers and change schools' overall management. If the schools' performance does not adequately improve (each state sets the definition of improvement), states can pull the funding.

Yet the assumption behind school turnarounds—that rapid, dramatic changes in staffing and management can fundamentally improve persistently low-performing schools—is inherently paradoxical because the turnaround option rests on faulty, unwarranted claims. In fact, the policy exists despite evidence to the contrary. Such reforms engender the exact conditions that long lines of research have linked with persistent low performance—high turnover, instability, poor climate, inexperienced teachers, and racial and socioeconomic segregation.

In this way, the policy presents schools targeted for turnaround with certain impossible dilemmas, or catch-22s, because implementing the policy is likely to lead schools back to the original problems that the turnaround was supposed to solve.

For example, architects of the turnaround concept ignored earlier research on analogous reforms that have been implemented to dramatically change school staffing, organization, and management in an effort to achieve similarly dramatic changes in student performance. This research documents a range of negative unintended consequences of these reforms, such as heightened racial or socioeconomic isolation and organizational instability (Mathis, 2009).

Consider reconstitution, the practice whereby employees are forcibly transferred out of chronically low-performing schools. This research shows that firing and replacing school staffs not only fails to yield the intended gains in test scores but also reproduces the same challenges that the reconstitution aims to ameliorate. In Chicago, reconstitution resulted in deteriorated teacher morale and staff replacements of no higher quality than their predecessors (Hess, 2003). Under these same reforms, low-income African American and Latino communities' democratic participation in schools was restricted when the central office made reconstitution decisions in lieu of the discretion of local school councils—the district's earlier school governance structures that were composed largely of parents and community residents (Lipman, 2003). In San Francisco, reconstituted schools repeatedly showed up on later lists of low-performing schools (Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005). In Maryland, in addition to not being associated with higher student performance, reconstitution inadvertently reduced schools' social stability and climate (Malen, Croninger, Muncey, & Jones, 2002). Another study showed how hiring difficulties in five states forced many reconstituted schools to begin the school year with high numbers of substitutes (Center on Education Policy, 2008).

In the Philadelphia School District, where district and state leaders pinned their hopes on turnaround-style reforms and outsourcing of school management for over a decade, administrators recently announced the dissolution of the entire district (Mezzacappa, 2012). The turnarounds were too costly and just did not work (though former district administrators still plan to farm out the remaining schools to external management providers).

Recent examinations of the initial SIG turnaround efforts have documented other ways in which logistical challenges associated with the dramatic staffing overhauls may outweigh potential benefits. In New York, districts that selected the turnaround option struggled to find enough qualified personnel to fill vacant slots; they ended up swapping principals from one SIG school to another. In Louisville, over 40% of the teachers hired to work in turnaround schools were completely new to teaching (Klein, 2012).

From an empirical perspective, reconstituting school staff appears to precipitate the same conditions that led to the low performance in the first place. It destabilizes schools organizationally and socially. It undermines the climate for students and teachers. It increases racial and socioeconomic segregation. It does not improve the quality of new hires. And it actually breeds more problems with turnover and permanent staffing.

Like the characters in Heller's novel, educators in potential turnaround schools can earnestly try to improve the situation quickly, yet when the conditions triggered by the policy mirror the conditions that led to their dismal situation to begin with, research shows that they find themselves, and their students, stuck. They're stuck in a catch-22.

Despite this paradox, advocates of turnarounds maintain that education should take up such dramatic reforms because presumably they have produced the desired results in the corporate sector from which the interventions have been borrowed (e.g., Murphy & Meyers, 2007).¹ However, research also shows that corporate turnarounds rarely yield the positive results that reformers expect (Altman, 1968; Nystrom & Starbuck, 1984). Studies show how turnarounds in the corporate sector have fared little to no better than less dramatically reformed organizations (Hassel & Hassel, 2009). Some analysts have found that such popular management techniques are associated not with greater economic performance but with greater perceptions of innovation (Staw & Epstein, 2000). Others have found that the most popular turnaround approaches successfully improve organizational performance in only a quarter of the cases (Hess & Gift, 2008).

By ignoring this evidence, architects of the federal turnaround policy don't just overestimate the promise of turnarounds to bring about radical school improvement; they misrepresent the record of corporate turnaround practices and their applicability to public schools.

If we know that turning around a chronically low-performing school is unlikely to happen under such a policy—in part because of the policy's inherently illogical rules and the conditions it facilitates—why does the federal government prop up the policy with such conviction?

Heller offers us some ideas here, too. In the novel, a character decides to sell chocolate-covered cotton to the government. Why? Because he knows it looks good on the surface. People will want it, at least for a while, because the lack of substance on the inside is hidden from view. In his bureaucratic environment, the visual appeal of his product is enough to hide the lack of deep, authentic quality.

School turnarounds are a lot like chocolate-covered cotton. Turnaround policies look good on the surface. The government pours extraordinary funds into the school. A flurry of staffing changes occurs. It's a spectacle. But deeper changes are not required. The policy does not address the racial and economic isolation of schools targeted for turnaround. It sidesteps the challenges of building a pipeline of qualified teachers and principals into the hardest to staff schools and districts—and retaining them. It says nothing about how to deepen educators' professional learning opportunities.

The federal turnaround policy creates the outward appearance of well-intentioned policy makers without addressing broader systemic inequities. And in a political environment that puts a premium on bureaucratic accountability and managerial efficiency in schools, appearances go a long way (Trujillo, 2012; Trujillo, in press).

Unfortunately, when all is said and done, the current policy is grounded in the familiar arguments in support of corporate-style reforms—arguments contradicted by empirical evidence. The policy is paradoxical. It uses our nation's neediest schools—those serving primarily poor children and children of color—as laboratories for educational experiments, notwithstanding existing proof that the experiments will not succeed because they recreate the conditions that produced the needs in the first place.

The upshot of this paradox is an illogical reliance on turnarounds as a tactic for lifting the performance of chronically low-scoring schools, and an exaggerated promise of a strategy for dramatically altering the staffing, organization, and management of our country's neediest schools. In doing so, the current turnaround policy distracts the public from more fundamental questions about the types of policies that can genuinely challenge the status quo by securing the necessary conditions for all students to succeed. Because at the end of the day, the schools targeted for turnaround are still caught, inescapably, in a catch-22.

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Notes

1. For a critique of one such turnaround advocacy report, see Trujillo (2011).

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