REVIEW OF
WHAT'S TRUST GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Reviewed By

William J. Mathis

University of Colorado Boulder
February 2012

Summary of Review

This report offers recommendations for building community support for federal school turnaround approaches, particularly in communities that oppose these approaches. Parents, the report concludes, want improvement but cherish their local schools and distrust the turnaround options mandated from above by higher levels of government. Thus, community members rise up in anger when their school faces closure, conversion to a charter school, breaking-up, or forced replacement of staff. Arguing that this resistance is due in large part to parents not understanding how bad their schools are, the report proposes that by engaging the public constructively and using eight communication strategies, parents will react more positively towards imposed turnaround approaches. The report does not address the body of research that shows school turnarounds to be generally unsuccessful. Further, even though parents in the study raise concerns that their schools are under-resourced and face significant social problems, the report fails to address these issues. By diverting attention from the real problems correctly identified by the parents and by possibly disrupting ongoing reforms, this communication strategy holds little promise for actually improving education and could prove harmful.

Kevin Welner
Editor

William Mathis
Managing Director

Erik Gunn
Managing Editor

GREAT LAKES
CENTER
FOR EDUCATION RESEARCH & PRACTICE

REVIEW OF *WHAT'S TRUST GOT TO DO WITH IT?*

William J. Mathis, University of Colorado Boulder

I. Introduction

In a No Child Left Behind era, school turnaround policies, already the law of the land and now being re-energized and pushed by the federal government, are at the center of national policy debates. Private educational management organizations are expanding with an eye on lucrative school take-over opportunities.[1] *What's Trust Got to Do With it?*[2] is a report designed for these times. Its purpose is to promote the public acceptance of school takeovers—called "bold school turnaround proposals" in the report (p 2).

The report begins by setting forth what it claims is the problem: members of the public like and defend their local public schools even though they are under-resourced and produce low test-scores. A further problem is that citizens dislike and mistrust outsiders coming in and taking over their schools. Accordingly, the report argues for communications strategies designed to change local public attitudes to be more accepting of states and districts taking "bold action to transform deeply inadequate schools, including closing or fundamentally reshaping the leadership, programs, and staffing at these schools" (p. 35).

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report begins with warnings about the crisis in education and an appeal to the need to end the "cycle of failure" by applying the "boldest" (an adjective used repeatedly throughout the report) approaches, which are the turnaround approaches. The report advocates public relations strategies in order to change community attitudes and build community support for these otherwise unpopular approaches.

The first third of the report cites five themes. These themes are derived from several sources, including Public Agenda's own previous publications, as well as the *Phi Delta Kappan* surveys and documents from the Alliance for Excellent Education, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, *Education Next*, and the Kettering Foundation. Based on this information, the authors conclude that (1) most parents want change, (2) parents have genuine loyalty to their public schools, (3) "many parents don't realize how brutally inadequate local schools are" (p. 9), (4) academic problems are compounded by broader external social problems, and (5) many parents distrust the central office of their local school district. The authors rely on focus groups, surveys, and selected interviews, but it is not clear which source or sources of information informed a given theme.

The second section focuses on "What happens when parents wrestle with choices" (p. 16). It is based on an unspecified number of focus groups of parents and guardians of public school students in four cities, in which the moderator(s) led the groups through the question of how to deal with failing schools based on the four competing options of Race to

The report was not intended to be useful for developing substantive public policy. It is, rather, a mechanism for advancing public acceptance of turnaround policies.

the Top. These are: (1) breaking the schools into smaller units, (2) closing the school and offer a choice between higher-performing schools, (3) changing the staff, and (4) converting to a charter school. When the participants gave "lop-sided" support for keeping their principal and staff (p.19), the moderator pushed them, emphasizing "the potential problems with this approach" and "stress[ing] the excellent track record of the proposed charter working in low-income neighborhoods with students who had struggled previously" (p. 19). The participants were still not convinced.

The report presents two brief sub-sections on the pros and cons of charter schools and the pros and cons of bringing in outside expertise. The charter school section quotes polling data and testimonials saying that people prefer their community school over charter schools. The report offers some evidence that the public is, in fact, persuadable. They point readers to an *Education Next* report that said that when told that President Obama supported charter schools and that "students learn more in charter schools," the positive ratings for charter schools increased (p. 20). Given the tension between the findings from the focus groups and the overall message of the Public Agenda report, evidence of this sort is essential as the report moves toward offering communications recommendations.

The outside expertise sub-section emphasizes the importance of local input in a school-closure or school-change decision. This conclusion is supported with quotes from outside experts and parents' statements about the importance of a principal knowing the community.

The recommendations constitute the final major section of the report. The authors expound eight key communication "principles" to build trust, engagement and involvement. These principles were drawn from a "strategy session of education, community and public engagement experts" (p. 23) at a one-day meeting in Washington. The eight recommendations are as follows (direct quotes, pp. 23-32):

(1) Lay the groundwork by talking with parents, students, teachers, and community leaders and residents early and often.

(2) There has to be a vision.

(3) Invite the community to help shape the vision,

(4) Provide information—not too little and not too much.

(5) Remember to tell stories [testimonials].

(6) If you can, avoid the standard "public hearing" format—or at least don't rely on it as your sole communication vehicle.

(7) Communicate through trusted sources.

(8) Don't surprise people—and don't mangle communications basics.

The report ends with a section briefly describing "How the research was done" (p. 35). The researchers used 38 one-on-one interviews, focus groups in four major cities, and a strategy session: "The purpose was to gather insights on how to improve communications and outreach when states and districts take bold action to transform deeply inadequate schools, including closing or fundamentally reshaping the leadership, programs, and staffing at these schools" (p. 35).

III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report proclaims its purpose as follows: "We believe it is possible for leaders to forge more productive community relationships—the kinds of relationships that strengthen school turnarounds and support student learning (p. 3)." While it is never explicitly stated, these particular turnaround approaches are universally assumed to be positive, and perhaps essential, although documentation for this assumption is not provided. In fact, this is highly contested ground, with considerable evidence that the turnaround approaches are ineffective or even harmful.[3]

The report embraces an unstated assumption that the community members' knowledge of their school is somehow incorrect and uninformed and therefore must be reformed by the missionary efforts of an external communications strategy. The feelings of community members as described in the report may be as hostile as is stated, but the report effectively ignores these concerns by offering solutions designed to modify their understandings rather than to address the real problems facing these communities. Combining this apparent dismissal of community concerns along with the imposition of unproven turnaround approaches may suggest a colonialist and ideology-driven approach to some readers.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The report draws on "three strands" of information: "An assessment of parents' views on school turnarounds," "Public Agenda's reservoir of opinion research and engagement work," and "Advice from communications and engagement experts" (p. 3). Drawing heavily on work from think tanks (e.g., the Alliance for Excellent Education, Fordham, and *Education Next*), it does not take advantage of research literature.

The authors describe their approach as a "qualitative opinion research" strategy although what this means is not well-developed (p. 4). Extensive references are made to internal Public Agenda documents, with an emphasis on three reports from 1993, 2006 and "forthcoming." Besides these references to their own work, items from the 2010 *Phi Delta Kappan* poll are also presented as evidence.

While the report endorses and encourages the federally promoted turnaround approaches, it does not include a discussion of the considerable body of research that raises questions about the effectiveness of these models.[4] Of the proposed turnaround approaches, charter schools are given the most prominent attention. Yet even this discussion is devoid of any reference to research. In fact, the efficacy of all these turnaround reforms is simply assumed.

While the parents in the study's focus groups and interviews realized that schools cannot single-handedly counter external cultural factors, the vast literature on this topic is not mentioned.[5] The reader is left to assume, as the report seems to, that if the institutional turnaround approaches were employed, then the broader social problems that thwart learning would be overcome.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The Five Themes

The first third of the report asserts that urban parents want better schools, are loyal to their community schools, are unaware of the inadequacy of those schools, and are deeply aware the schools are affected by surrounding social problems. Further, many distrust their district's central office. While these concerns may, in fact, be real, true and intense, only weak documentation is provided. Ample evidence could probably have been mustered, but it was not—perhaps reflecting an intended audience relatively unconcerned about methodology.

A fundamental bias is reflected in the assumption that closing or converting the local school is a normative good. While many urban schools are certainly inadequate by any number of measures including facilities, funding, supplies, staffing or test scores, the authors jump from this fact to an embrace of turnaround policies. They ignore the vast literature on educational funding adequacy,[6] which is essential to resolving school deficiencies. The alternative approach favored by parents in the affected communities, school improvement, was never seriously considered, nor was the related alternative of increasing support for "persistently failing schools." Limiting the options to the federal take-over approaches excludes what many in the affected communities consider the most fundamental concerns.

What happens when parents wrestle with choice?

The middle section of the paper is short and reports on the focus groups, as well as the pros and cons of charter schools and the pros and cons of using outside experts. Logically,

this section should bridge the discussion of the five citizen themes with the lengthy end section on communication strategies. However, the bridge does not span the gap.

It becomes clear in the report's discussion of the focus groups that their purpose was to test messaging that would manipulate those groups' participants (and, by extension, the wider community) into favoring federal turnaround approaches. Only options using the turnaround approaches were presented, and the groups had to choose among only these options. The focus groups, nevertheless, soundly rejected the turnaround approaches. Examples are given of the "moderator(s)" testing approaches to influence the focus groups' perceptions by interjecting favorable comments about the turnaround options and unfavorable ones about improving the community public school (p. 19). For example, "What do you say to those who believe that this is not enough of a change?" the moderator asked. "The teachers who were not doing that great are still there, and without new leadership, the school may fall behind again." While stopping short of outright saying that public opinion should be manipulated to support the predetermined ends, that is the clear purpose of the report.

Communications and Engagement 101

The final major section, covering community involvement techniques, will be familiar to those who have attended a seminar on public engagement. The eight advisory points can be fairly characterized as common aphorisms. The abstract and vague recommendations such as "laying the groundwork," "having a vision," "community participation," etc., are generic.

As to how these points were derived, the report says, "The advice in this section is culled mainly from the strategy session of education, communications, and public engagement experts convened by Public Agenda in May 2011." (P.23). No evidence is given as to how the 50 listed participants came to agree on such a list, and the agenda for the day notes only a presentation on communication strategies.

"How the research was done"

The report finishes with a single page on the authors' research methods. Those looking for an experimental design, a literature review, details about the study or other common features of social science research will be disappointed. The research is based on focus groups, 38 selected interviews with parent advocates, and a one-day meeting with turnaround specialists, national experts, and school leaders.

The focus-group sessions were held in four major cities. The report does not explain how the participants were selected, although they are said to be "representative." It is unclear how these meetings were organized or conducted. No protocols for the meetings are given. Selected quotes are presented in the text, but how these were derived and the representativeness of these remarks is not addressed.

Thirty-eight interviews with "13 parent advocates who have publicly spoken out on the issue, ten leaders working locally with school turnarounds or community engagement, ten

national experts and thinkers, and five school or district leaders," (p.35) were reported. Yet, how this input was used or who these people were is not clear.

The one-day meeting was held in Washington, D.C., and the composition of its participants favors the Beltway and vested-interest groups. The schedule included a panel discussion with Chester Finn and Diane Ravitch, a presentation of Public Agenda's work on turnarounds, and a presentation on "communications basics" by the former head of Public Agenda. It seems that the communications presentation of the meeting formed the core of the report's communications and engagement section, but this is ambiguous.

How the authors derived their conclusions is consistently unclear.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The explicit purpose of the report is to explain ways to change the attitudes of parents away from support for improving their community public school and toward a more positive view of the authors' favored restructuring alternatives (pp. 2, 35). Thus, the document is openly offered as a tool to advance a predetermined policy agenda. While the authors allude to their "research," this report cannot be considered as a research document in any conventional use of the term.

The reported attitudes and concerns of parents of children in low-performing schools may be valid, but their validity is addressed only cursorily. Likewise, the communications strategies may be effective as tools. However, neither topic is linked in the report to improving the education of children in low-performing schools. The failure to address the educational and social problems of children in high-need schools is not only a great shortcoming, but also potentially diverts limited resources into non-productive areas.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

The report was not intended to be useful for developing substantive public policy. It is, rather, a mechanism for advancing public acceptance of turnaround policies. When considered in light of the massive scale of the problems in urban education (which the parents recognized, as did the authors), there is little promise that the recommended communication strategies or the turnaround approaches they promote would improve education in any meaningful way.

The report's criticism of parents for not knowing what's good for them ("Many parents do not realize how brutally inadequate local schools are." [p. 9]), and its notion that parents should be taught to accept the dissolution or take-over of their community schools, could be perceived as inappropriate attempts at social engineering. That is, this perspective could be interpreted as paternalistic and arrogant. Thus, *What's Trust Got to Do With It?* is ironically titled. Trust has everything to do with the problem. Yet, perhaps the greater problem is in the authors' complete lack of trust in the views of the parents.

Notes and References

1 Miron, G. (2012). Miron, G., Urschel, J.L., Yat Aguilar, M.A, & Dailey, B. (2011). *Profiles of for-profit and nonprofit education management organizations: Thirteenth annual report - 2010-2011*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved January 6, 2012, from http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/EMO-profiles-10-11.

2 Johnson, J., Rochkind, J., Remaley, M., & Hess, J. (2011). *What's Trust Got to Do With It? A Communications and Engagement Guide for School Leaders Tackling the Problem of Persistently Failing Schools*. New York: Public Agenda Foundation. Retrieved December 31, 2011, from http://www.publicagenda.org/files/pdf/WHATS_TRUST_GOT_TO_DO_WITH_IT.pdf.

3 The research literature, in general, concludes that the turn-around strategies are either unproven, ineffective or harmful. See for example:

Center on Education Policy (2007, May). Educational architects: Do state agencies have the tools necessary to implement NCLB? *From the capital to the classroom: Year 5 of the No Child Left Behind Act*. Washington, DC: author.

Center on Education Policy (2008, September). *A call to restructure restructuring: Lessons from the No Child Left Behind Act in five states*. Washington, DC: author, 18, 25.

David, J.L. (October, 2010). Drastic school turnarounds are risky. *Educational Leadership*. Retrieved January 9,2012, from http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/oct10/vol68/num02/Drastic-School-Turnaround-Strategies-Are-Risky.aspx.

Mathis, W. (2009). *NCLB's Ultimate Restructuring Alternatives: Do they Improve the Quality of Education?* Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved January 6, 2011, from http://epicpolicy.org/publication/nclb-ultimate-restructuring.

Ravitch, D. and Mathis, W. J.(2010). A review of college- and career- ready students. In *The Obama Education Blueprint: Researchers examine the evidence*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

Wong, K.K. & Shen, F.X. (2002, spring). Do school district takeovers work? *The State Education Standard*. Washington, DC: National Association of State Boards of Education. Retrieved December 3, 2008, from http://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/Documents/pdf/pcep/PCEP_schooldistrict.pdf.

Ziebarth, T. (2004, March). State takeovers and reconstitutions. *State Notes: Takeovers*. Denver: Education Commission of the States.

4 For instance, a sampling of relevant and prominent reports on charter schools includes the following:

Bifulco, R. & Ladd, H. F. (2006, Winter). The Impacts of Charter Schools on student achievement: Evidence from North Carolina. *Education Finance and Policy*, *1*(1), 50-90.

Braun, H., Jenkins, F., & Grigg, W. (2006). *A Closer Look at Charter Schools Using Hierarchical Linear Models*. Washington, DC: National Center for Educational Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Carnoy, M., Jacobsen, R., Mishel, L., & Rothstein, R. (2006, winter). Worth the price? Weighing the evidence on charter school achievement. *Education Finance and Policy, 1*(1), 151-161.

Gleason, P., Clark, M., Tuttle, C. C., & Dwoyer, E. (2010). *The Evaluation of Charter School Impacts: Final Report (NCEE 2010-4029)*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved January 4, 2012, from http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/PDFs/education/charter_school_impacts.pdf.

Lubienski, S. T. & Lubienski, C. (2006). School sector and academic achievement: A multilevel analysis of NAEP mathematics data. *American Educational Research Journal, 43*(4), 651-698.

5 Rothstein, R. (2004). *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.

Berliner, D. C. (2009). *Poverty and Potential: Out-of-School Factors and School Success*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved January 15, 2012, from http://nepc.colorado.edu/files/PB-Berliner-NON-SCHOOL.pdf.

6 There are more than 70 major and contemporary school funding adequacy studies. None were cited nor was the underfunding of needy schools addressed. For a synthesis of these studies, see

Mathis, William J. (2009). After five years: Revisiting the cost of the No Child Left Behind Act. In J.K. Rice & C.F. Roellke (eds.), *The Costs of Accountability: Implications of High Stakes Education Policies for Resources and Capacities*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

DOCUMENT REVIEWED: **What's Trust Got to Do With It?**
                           A Communications and Engagement
                           Guide for School Leaders Tackling the
                           Problem of Persistently Failing Schools

AUTHORS: Jean Johnson, John Rochkind, Michael
                           Remaley and Jeremiah Hess

THINK TANK: Public Agenda

DOCUMENT RELEASE DATE: 2011

REVIEW DATE: February 7, 2012

REVIEWER: William J. Mathis, University of Colorado
                           Boulder

E-MAIL ADDRESS: wmathis@sover.net

PHONE NUMBER: (802) 282-0058

SUGGESTED CITATION:

Mathis, W. J. (2012). *Review of "What's Trust Got to Do With It?"* Boulder, CO: National
Education Policy Center. Retrieved [date] from
http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-whats-trust.