
Turning Around Maple Shade Middle School

A Principal's Initial Reform Efforts

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This case was written for use in courses dealing with school administration, specifically those related to organizational change, school improvement/turnaround, and the principalship. It explores a veteran principal's first year as a "turnaround specialist" in a low-performing middle school, where she works with a sense of urgency to achieve an increase in student achievement. Students reading the case should assume the role of the principal as they analyze and reflect on changes made during year one and determine a course of action for year two.

Keywords: *low-performing; organizational change; school improvement; turnaround*

Case Narrative

As the new school year began at Maple Shade Middle School, teachers, students, and parents felt a mix of excitement and anxiety. Because of the school's poor performance in past years, its principal had been replaced by turnaround specialist Patrice Pattwell, who was charged with shaking things up and improving performance. Few would have guessed that Pattwell was just as anxious as the rest of the school community. She was under pressure to deliver results quickly, and at the same time build a foundation for sustained success beyond her tenure. Her initial analysis revealed problems in almost every area of the school, and their interconnectedness meant that she might need to make multiple major changes at once. What should her top priorities be, and how quickly could she implement the changes that the school so badly needed?

Maple Shade Middle School

Maple Shade, a middle school in northern Virginia served approximately 400 students in grades six through eight, 73 percent of whom qualified for free or

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reduced-price lunch. When turnaround specialist Patrice Pattwell was hired in July 2005, the school faced a number of challenges. Eighth-grade students struggled in core subjects, earning state test scores too low to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) or state accreditation. Faculty members were largely inexperienced, most having taught for fewer than five years. Although eight of the school's 26 teachers had master's degrees, five teachers had only provisional credentials and four teachers in core subject areas did not meet the federal definition of "highly qualified." Teachers were responsible not only for teaching students new material, but also for remediating the many students who came to Maple Shade from one of its low-performing, feeder elementary schools. In addition, a new challenge was fast approaching: Spring 2006 would mark the first time that sixth- and seventh-grade students across Virginia participated in the state's testing program. Teachers in these grades now would be in the spotlight as they prepared students for high-stakes tests that would determine whether their school earned state accreditation and met AYP.

The Virginia School Turnaround Specialist Program

In 2003, Virginia Governor Mark Warner proposed training "turnaround specialists" to lead the state's lowest performing schools. His idea resulted in the creation of the Virginia School Turnaround Specialist Program (VSTSP) in 2004. Administered jointly by faculty members from the University of Virginia's Darden Graduate School of Business Administration and Curry School of Education, the program provided principals with best practices from business and education. Following summer training sessions consisting of case-method-driven executive development, principals were supported in their new schools with regular site visits from peer coaches and extra funding in the form of \$50 per student provided by Virginia's Department of Education. The minimum expectation, rewarded with a salary differential, was that one of the following conditions would be met by the end of the first year: achievement of AYP, full accreditation by the state, or a 10 percent reduction in the overall failure rate in English or math. Principals in the program were charged with quickly effecting dramatic changes in their schools to reach these lofty goals.

Patrice Pattwell

Patrice Pattwell, 55, was accepted into the VSTSP in early 2005 and officially became principal of Maple Shade Middle School on July 1. She had been an administrator for 10 years but believed her 20 years in the classroom gave her "a lot of appreciation for what teachers do each day." In her role as an elementary school principal over the previous three years, she led her school to full state accreditation for the first time. Pattwell attributed her success to a collaborative leadership style, but she also understood that the role of principal required making tough decisions. At her previous school she implemented a controversial plan to pair special education

and regular education teachers. Many teachers initially resisted, but the new arrangement resulted in significant achievement gains for students and enjoyed full faculty support by the end of the year. According to Pattwell, “Some decisions may be uncomfortable, but they still need to be made.” When it came to making decisions, Pattwell believed it was essential to use student achievement data to understand where and how changes should be made.

Planning for a Turnaround

Patrice Pattwell spent July and August speaking with Maple Shade’s faculty and staff and examining various sources of school data. Shortly before the school year began, she was interviewed by a member of the VSTSP Research Team and asked to identify, based on her knowledge of the school to that point, problematic conditions that she believed would need to be overcome for Maple Shade to meet its goal of improved student achievement. Pattwell’s list of conditions included

1. low reading achievement,
2. low math achievement,
3. attendance problems,
4. discipline problems,
5. unaligned curriculum,
6. data deprivation,
7. lack of inclusion,
8. ineffective staff development, and
9. personnel problems.¹

Pattwell gave priority status to three of these conditions. She saw low reading achievement as the most important issue the school faced, explaining, “We have too many children that are too far behind. We have students who are reading at the second-grade level, but they are in the eighth grade.” Little movement could be made in any of the other core subject areas until literacy was addressed.

Another high priority was Maple Shade’s curriculum; it was not in alignment with Virginia’s Standards of Learning, on which annual assessments were based. According to Pattwell, this problem emanated from the school district. “Basically, the division had been using the state curriculum framework, and they really didn’t understand the difference between the curriculum framework and a curriculum guide.” Pattwell knew that students would have a hard time passing the state test if they were not being taught what it assessed.

A third major focus for Pattwell was improving staff development. She learned from teachers that in previous years “they would have a differentiated instruction workshop one week and something else the next week, but it was never pulled together. And there was no follow up to see if teachers ever used what they learned. One of my goals is to connect staff development and then follow up with teachers to

ensure they are taking new strategies and methods into their classrooms.” With such a young faculty, Pattwell was sure that better staff development would go a long way toward increasing student achievement.

Though she acknowledged that it would be “a tough process,” Patrice Pattwell believed that by the end of the year the school would “make it” and achieve both full accreditation and AYP.

Implementing Change

To address the conditions present in her school, Pattwell employed a variety of new initiatives throughout the year (see Figure 1 for a timeline).

When Pattwell analyzed achievement scores from the previous year, she saw that although some students at Maple Shade were two or more grade levels behind in reading, others were “just a little behind.” To assist students who needed a small boost, Pattwell purchased a supplementary program that teachers used as a part of the regular English curriculum. Pattwell believed that a “more intense” reading program was needed for students who were two or more grade levels behind. Hoping to empower and get buy-in from the faculty members responsible for closing this achievement gap, she asked English and special education teachers to choose a program. This “very extensive selection process” lasted from August until November, during which teachers evaluated ten different programs—one per week. After finishing the evaluation process, the teachers eventually chose a scripted reading program that would take the place of struggling students’ regular English classes. English teachers received training on the program during the first quarter, and the program was implemented during the second quarter. English classes were rescheduled so that one teacher at each grade level was responsible for teaching all students needing the program. English department faculty members received further training in January.

Pattwell saw that her school’s reading and math textbooks were not closely aligned to the state Standards of Learning, so she quickly purchased new reading and math textbooks that offered a higher degree of alignment. But even though the new textbooks were more aligned with the standards than in the past, they were not completely aligned. Additionally, textbooks for science and social studies, which were not new, were not aligned with the standards. Since the district did not employ curriculum specialists in each area, the responsibility for alignment fell to individual schools. Teachers therefore were asked to work after school, combing through the curriculum framework and finding where gaps existed in the textbooks. When gaps were identified, supplementary lessons were created and resources for those lessons found.

According to Pattwell, previous staff development at the school was disjointed; various “one-time” sessions were held, but with no common theme or direction connecting them. In addition, strategies presented to the faculty during staff development never were revisited in subsequent meetings or reinforced during classroom

Figure 1
Major Changes Initiated by Patrice Pattwell During 2005-2006 School Year

August	September
New reading textbook adopted.	Teachers begin weekly benchmark testing.
New math textbook adopted.	Teachers learn to disaggregate test data for weekly and quarterly benchmark tests, in part through regular meetings with school's data specialist.
Teachers in each department begin aligning curriculum, identifying gaps in textbooks, and finding resources to fill gaps.	December
Supplementary reading program implemented in regular English classes.	Second supplementary reading program implemented.
English and special education teachers begin evaluating supplementary reading programs for students needing more intense assistance.	February
Teachers receive staff development on Marzano's High Yield Teaching Strategies and are required to include them in lesson plans, which now must be turned in to administrators.	Teachers create remediation plans for their classes based on second quarter benchmark results.
Inclusion of most special education students in regular education classes begins.	Teachers create individual student remediation plans for tutors to use with students involved in after-school program.

observations. Her solution was to start the year by presenting one of Robert Marzano's nine "High Yield Teaching Strategies" (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001) every few weeks during staff development. Teachers were asked to turn in lesson plans weekly to confirm that strategies were being used, and administrators visited each teacher's classroom nearly every day to look for evidence of the strategies.

Another of Pattwell's initiatives involved students with disabilities, who comprise one of the subgroups taken into account when AYP is determined. Pattwell decided to include nearly all special education students in regular classes—severely disabled students remained in self-contained classes—believing that exposure to the

subject matter in these classes would give them the best chance to pass state tests and help the school meet AYP. As a result, classes included a wider range of skill levels and more faculty members became involved in the IEP (Individualized Education Plan) process.

Although quarterly benchmark testing already was in place, Pattwell wanted teachers to have some way to gauge where students were in between those tests. She therefore required teachers to create and administer benchmark tests on a weekly basis to track student progress. Pattwell believed that testing could be useful in determining where students, individually and collectively, needed help, but only if the resultant data were analyzed properly. To that end, she spent time during meetings teaching her faculty how to disaggregate and analyze data. A part-time staff member was hired to work with teachers in disaggregating data from their weekly and quarterly tests. After analyzing results from the second benchmark test, Pattwell wanted teachers to become more focused in their instruction. She required them to design remediation plans for their classrooms, based on the Standards of Learning (SOL) topics students had not mastered, and to begin re-teaching in those areas. After-school SOL tutoring began during the second semester, two days a week for two-and-a-half hours. Staffed by a small group of Maple Shade teachers and a tutoring company, the program promised to target instruction based on each student's specific needs. Teachers were asked to look at students' benchmark data and create individualized tutoring plans that would be given to the after-school tutors.

Reflecting on the Data

Two weeks after the school year ended, Pattwell indicated progress in the elimination of problematic conditions. Of the nine she identified in August, Pattwell believed four had been partly eliminated and four mostly eliminated, with only one problematic condition—low attendance—persisting at year's end (see Table 1). She labeled low reading achievement, her top priority, as being partly eliminated. Failure to completely eliminate the problem was attributed to the intense supplementary reading program being in place for only the second semester. She felt that her second major issue, unaligned curriculum, was mostly eliminated. The bulk of the work was complete, but some objectives, like matching resources to the curriculum, remained unfinished. Likewise, she considered the problem of ineffective staff development to be mostly eliminated, but some district level staff development activities still were not aligned with Maple Shade's.

Unfortunately, student performance on 2006 state tests did not match Pattwell's optimistic assessment (see Table 2). Across all three grade levels, Maple Shade students scored an average of 16 percentage points lower than schools across the state in reading and 25 percentage points lower in math. Among eighth-grade students,

Table 1
Perceived Progress Made Toward Eliminating Nine
Conditions Identified in August 2005^a

Conditions	Still Persists	Partly Eliminated	Mostly Eliminated	Completely Resolved
Low reading achievement		√		
Low math achievement		√		
Attendance problems	√			
Discipline problems			√	
Unaligned curriculum			√	
Data deprivation			√	
Lack of inclusion		√		
Ineffective staff development			√	
Personnel problems		√		

^aBefore student test results were known.

Table 2
Percentage of Students Passing State Assessments, Maple Shade
Middle School and Virginia, 2005-2006

	Maple Shade	Virginia	Difference
6th Math	19	51	-32
6th English	68	83	-15
7th Math	14	44	-30
7th English	75	81	-6
8th Math	64	76	-12
8th English	51	78	-27

Table 3
Percentage of Eighth-Grade Students Passing State Assessments, Maple
Shade Middle School, 2003-2004 Through 2005-2006

	2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-2006
8th Math	56	68	64
8th English	46	66	51

scores decreased from the previous year by 15 percentage points in reading and 4 percentage points in math—this after double-digit increases in both subjects the previous year (see Table 3). Based on its test results, Maple Shade did not achieve a turnaround as defined by the VSTSP. The school did not reach AYP or full state accreditation, and failure rates in reading and math increased rather than decreased.

After a year of extremely hard work, Pattwell was at once curious and upset. What could have accounted for Maple Shade's low performance? She had diagnosed the school's challenges, prioritized which should be addressed first, and implemented changes that were aimed squarely at eliminating them. She was convinced that the changes she introduced at Maple Shade were both necessary and educationally sound. As she began jotting down notes about what had transpired over the past year, it hit her: What if she had asked her faculty to implement too many new initiatives during the course of the year?

Pattwell also realized that her change agenda had taken place within the context of other changes. The 2005-2006 school year had been the first year that sixth- and seventh-grade students participated in end-of-year state testing. Teachers in these grades, for the first time, had to organize their curricula around the testing schedule, learn the rules and strategies of the testing process, and offer students varying degrees of academic and moral support in the months leading up to the test. In addition, Pattwell's arrival meant that the school's young teachers were adjusting to a new leadership style and new expectations.

Patrice Pattwell knew that Maple Shade clearly had needed an overhaul, but had she tried to turn it around too fast? She decided to put planning for year two on hold until she reflected extensively on year one.

Teaching Notes

Overview

This case was written for use in courses dealing with school administration, specifically those related to organizational change, school improvement/turnaround, and the principalship. It explores a veteran principal's first year as a "turnaround specialist" in a low-performing middle school, where she works with a sense of urgency to achieve an increase in student achievement. Students reading the case should assume the role of the principal as they analyze and reflect on changes made during year one and determine a course of action for year two.

"Because schools operate in different contexts and therefore have different needs, reform efforts need to be appropriate for the school context" (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2003, p. 1). In the case of Maple Shade, the context of an inexperienced faculty that already was faced with expanded state testing and an adjustment to new leadership may not have been taken into account. Patrice Pattwell's reform efforts likely were too numerous and extensive to take hold in this context, leading to an overburdened faculty and disappointing student achievement results. Still, under pressure from the district—which hired her specifically to turn around Maple Shade—to meet specific performance objectives in just one year, it may have been impossible for Pattwell not to pursue so much change.

Table 4
Percentage of Eighth-Grade Students With Disabilities Passing State Assessments, Maple Shade Middle School and Virginia, 2005-2006

	Maple Shade	Virginia	Difference
8th Math	55	44	+11
8th English	28	49	-21

The pressure for immediate improvement can cause principals to make hasty decisions and fail to consider the unintended consequences of those decisions. For example, Pattwell's decision to immediately "mainstream" special education students was done in the hopes of improving that particular subgroup's academic achievement. But in eighth-grade math, where special education students scored 11 percentage points above the state average (see Table 4), the score for all students dropped 4 points from the previous year (see Table 3) and was 12 points lower than the state average (see Table 2). In this case, teachers who were not prepared to teach full inclusion classes may have focused so much on students with special needs that other students' needs were not addressed. In eighth-grade English, on the other hand, special education students scored 21 percentage points below the state average (see Table 4) and the score for all students dropped by 15 points (see Table 3). These teachers may have been so bogged down in a new reading textbook and two new reading programs that neither special education students nor regular education students received the attention they needed. In the view of many educators and parents, children cannot wait for reforms to pan out years down the road; they must work for children today so their opportunity for an excellent education is not lost. However, this simply may not be possible in all cases. Change and improvement take time, and changes that are forced through quickly may be ineffective or have unplanned, deleterious effects.

Another factor that may have hampered the turnaround effort at Maple Shade was the absence of a "stop doing" list (Collins, 2001, p. 139). Teachers were asked to learn more and do more, but their new principal did not support them by eliminating previous duties or freeing up time for them during the school day. When members of an organization are required to change, "individual skills and confidence cannot guarantee success unless structure is also realigned to the new initiative" (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 373). In this case, one wonders from what source teachers were to draw the extra time and energy necessary to implement such an ambitious change agenda. The continual adding on of new initiatives may have overwhelmed them.

The possibility exists, though, that Maple Shade's teachers were not overwhelmed and instead were experiencing an "implementation dip." Fullan (2001) defines this as "a dip in performance and confidence as one encounters an innovation that requires new skills and new understandings," and has found that "all successful schools experience 'implementation dips' as they move forward" (p. 40). From this

perspective, Maple Shade may have been in exactly the right place after one year of change, with better results awaiting in year two of the turnaround process.

Discussion Questions

1. Assuming that Patrice Pattwell's change agenda was too ambitious which of its components do you think the faculty could reasonably have been asked to undertake in year one of Maple Shade's turnaround?
2. To what extent should turnaround principals consult their faculties about the types of changes that need to be pursued and the speed at which they should be implemented?
3. According to Bolman and Deal (2003), when members of an organization are required to change, "individual skills and confidence cannot guarantee success unless structure is also realigned to the new initiative" (p. 373). Is it possible, though, that no matter how much support is provided to a faculty, a saturation point exists after which new changes fail to take hold? What school-based variables might influence when this saturation point is reached?
4. Can it be assumed that failing schools in a district can be turned around if they continue to operate within the same structures/rules as non-failing schools in the district? (For example, in most public schools teachers are officially paid for 30-35 hours of work per week, with the expectation that they will put in extra hours as necessary. Would the likelihood of successfully implementing a change agenda similar to Patrice Pattwell's be increased if teachers were compensated for 40-50 hours of work per week, and thus had more time available for planning, meetings, professional development, reflection, etc.?)

Classroom Activities

The following activity should be done individually:

1. Each student should assume the role of Patrice Pattwell in August 2006, after test scores were released, and compose a letter to the superintendent that explains (a) Maple Shade's performance, (b) what could have been done differently in year one, and (c) what can be done in year two to improve performance.

The following activities should be done in groups of 2-3 students:

1. In his chapter critiquing theories of school reform, Payne (2008) suggests that reformers "construct a conversation that reflect[s] a [sense] of urgency, something that recognizes both that change takes time and that children don't have it" (p. 199). Students should assume the role of Patrice Pattwell in August 2005 and prepare either a letter or PowerPoint presentation for parents that explains how these competing demands will be met in year one of the turnaround process.
2. Duncan's (1972) definition of climate for change includes perceptions of an organization's personnel along four dimensions. Using the first three dimensions—need for

change, openness to change, and potential for change (pp. 228-229)—students should develop a set of questions that a turnaround specialist could use to gauge teachers' perceptions of their school's need for, openness to, and potential for change. This can be a general tool for any low-performing school, or can be geared specifically toward Maple Shade based on Patrice Pattwell's initial analysis in August 2005. Students are free to choose the format (e.g., short answer, multiple choice, Likert scale) and content of the questions, but must be prepared to explain why a particular format was chosen, why certain questions were asked, how resultant data would be analyzed, and how analysis of the data could inform the change agenda for year one of the turnaround.

Note

1. Pattwell was interviewed regularly throughout the year so that her school's improvement efforts could be tracked. When asked during these interviews if she may have (a) misdiagnosed any of the nine conditions (i.e., thinking something was a problem when it was not), (b) failed to diagnose a condition that ended up needing attention, or (c) failed to properly identify the most pressing concerns, she expressed confidence in her initial diagnosis and in the priorities she set.

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Appendix

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