

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

IN CHAPTER 1, Law and Government Academy principal Adam Johnson struggles with a key question: How should he handle students who aren't trying and who are not "cutting it" in the school? Is it fair to the students who are taking advantage of turnaround to acquire better educations and opportunities? It is easy to feel that students like Danny Contreras, who borrowed a computer programming text to read over Christmas vacation (chapter 7), "deserves" a quality education. But what about students who are less inspired, or simply uninterested? Is there a point beyond which schools should not be expected to reach a student, or does this run counter to the very idea of turnaround and educational equity?

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HARTFORD SUPERINTENDENT Steven Adamowski (chapter 2) believes that uniforms and partners help connect student academic learning to the real world. Do you think having students wear dress shoes and ties really makes a difference? Why is it important? What role can partners play in strengthening urban schools? What partners might be tapped in your community?

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CHAPTER 3 DISCUSSES the closing of the Ramon E. Betances School in Hartford at the end of the 2009–2010 school year. Although the school had made some academic progress and was less chaotic than a few years earlier, test scores and improvements were behind district targets (described in chapter 2). District leaders opted to redesign the school, upsetting the acting principal and faculty who had embraced a data-driven approach and were committed to turning around performance themselves. Would you have closed Betances? Why or why not?

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THIS BOOK INCLUDES some very strong leaders who have strikingly different leadership styles from one another. In chapter 4, Sharon Johnson in Cincinnati believes in the school as “family” approach, and embraces the mother role, while Terrell Hill in Hartford talks tough to kids and their parents, staying on them as a way of getting them to step up and find capabilities in themselves. Is there any style you believe is more or less effective? What leads you to that conclusion? Do different grade levels and school environments call for different leadership styles?

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IN CHAPTER 4, Dwight principal Stacey McCann has the task of combining her high-performing elementary school with a low-performing middle school as part of a turnaround strategy to create the Dwight-Bellizzi Asian Studies Academy (opened in fall 2010). In October 2009, the regularly scheduled joint staff meeting falls on the day when the district has issued bonus checks to teachers and staff at high-performing schools. McCann decides to go ahead and pass out the checks to the Dwight staff, who have earned them, obviously bypassing the Bellizzi staff, who did not earn bonus pay. This created an obvious spectacle that McCann chose not to avoid. Would you do the same thing? Why or why not?

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TOP-PERFORMING URBAN charter schools like Achievement First have a full-time staff of recruiters to find teacher candidates. In chapter 4, Achievement First founder Dacia Toll describes how their approach presumes much on-the-job learning and growth among new teacher hires. In contrast, while district schools do schedule regular professional development, they assume teachers arrive with more teaching experience and skills. What do you see as the pros and cons of each approach in a turnaround setting? How can teachers from these different training backgrounds best work together?

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AS DESCRIBED IN CHAPTER 5, Anthony Smith, principal of Taft Information Technology High School, began his turnaround by walking door to door and asking for support from the community. He also made clear

that his “covenant” was with the community, not the board of education. Why is community support so important for failing schools? What can the community offer students that a school board cannot? How might these two sources of support work together more effectively?

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IN A SCENE at the end of chapter 5, teacher Bridget Allison at Hartford Public High School’s Law and Government Academy describes being on the cusp of exhaustion at the very moment that a former student visits to share his success—and to thank her. How familiar is this experience to you? How common is the push-pull between feeling utterly used up—and determined to alter the opportunities for your students? What fuels your commitment when your energy is exhausted? How central is teacher passion and energy to school turnaround?

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THE CORPORATE-SCHOOL relationship is not always easy to navigate because of wants and expectations on both sides. In chapter 6, Jack Cassidy of Cincinnati Bell makes the point that you need “to go big or stay home,” and so gives students his cell phone number in case of emergency. He says the company has actually given relatively few actual dollars but supports the school through its volunteer efforts (tutoring programs, organizing fundraisers, painting classrooms) and access to laptops, cell phones, and internet access—the company’s core business. Do you think Jack Cassidy’s approach to supporting Taft students is more helpful than if he were to just make a large corporate dollar donation? Why or why not?

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CITIZEN SCHOOLS CEO Eric Schwarz (chapter 6) says that good non-profit partners can help schools network more effectively—even with their own parents. Administrators at Garfield Middle School in Revere sound grateful for the regular phone calls to parents made by Citizen Schools’ staff. Does it make sense, in effect, to outsource something as basic as parent-school communication? Is this a pragmatic solution for time-starved school leaders? Have you tried any alternative approaches to better connect with parents given that teacher time seems scarcer?

AT THE END of chapter 7, Hartford Public High School Nursing Academy senior Shaquana Cochran admits to being a poor student who was about to drop out when a key connection with a teacher helped her re-engage in school and turn around her life plans. The value of teacher-student connections is a frequent and powerful theme in urban success stories. How does the current turnaround environment support—or fail to support—such mentoring relationships?

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WHICH SCHOOL FEATURED in this book would you most like to work in? Why?

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WAS THERE ANY school leader, district administrator, or teacher described in this book whose challenges or style particularly resonated with you? What attracts you to these leaders, and why? Are there leaders you would have found it difficult to work with? Why?

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LEADING TURNAROUND AT the school level requires a willingness to think and act on the fly and sometimes diverge from the prescribed plan. How much latitude should district leaders allow principals? How patient should district leaders be in expecting results? Is three years enough to show progress? Why or why not? Have you seen examples in your school or district of midstream changes that you thought were surprising, but effective?

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SCHOOL TURNAROUND IS difficult and uncertain—but exciting—work. Not every school faces extreme gaps, and yet there may be lessons to take from the experiences of those on the front lines. Is there anything that struck you as something you could use in your own school or district? What challenges or opportunities do you see ahead in applying these “takeaways” to your own situation? Are there any dilemmas described in the book that sound familiar to you or that resonate with your own front-line experience?