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How to Turn Around a Failing School

by Alex Hill, Liz Mellon, Jules Goddard, and Ben Laker

AUGUST 05, 2016



To say that school reforms are a contested area is something of an understatement. There are some strongly held opinions in education about what improves a school, such as raising teaching standards and reducing class sizes.

Our findings challenge some of these beliefs. To understand how to turn around a failing school quickly, using as few resources as possible, we studied changes made by 160 UK academies after they were put into remedial measures by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) up to seven years

ago. (In the UK, an academy is a publicly funded school or group of schools. One school can acquire others to form a group, which shares resources, making investment easier and cuts less painful. Academies have devolved decision-making powers, bypassing local government.)

This provided us with the rare opportunity to look at a large number of organizations which all:

- Are regulated, documented, and measured in the same way

- Provide a similar service
- Have made similar changes

However, each academy:

- Made these changes in a different order
- Operated in regions with different levels of competition and access to resources

This is research gold, as it's possible to isolate variables and understand the impact of changing them. For example, we were able to say 30 academies made X change, while 40 didn't, and then draw conclusions from the differing outcomes. We could analyze the effects of 58 types of investment, on 18 performance measures over time, in 160 academies operating in 18 different regions. We were given full access to the academies' management information systems, leaders, staff and students so we could see how they worked, the decisions they'd made and the impact they'd had.

So what did we find? Like any turnaround, there is no magic bullet — a series of remedial steps need to be taken. And each step's impact depends and builds on the previous steps in the sequence, as well the school's location, because the latter determines access to good leaders, teachers, and students.

Here are recommendations based on the effective (and ineffective) practices we uncovered:

Don't improve teaching first. This was a very common mistake. Many schools tried to improve teaching while still struggling with badly behaving students, operating across a number of sites or having a poor head of school in charge. You can't expect teachers to sort out all the problems themselves — you need to create the right environment first.

Do improve governance, leadership, and structures first. Otherwise, you're putting great

teachers in a position where they fail — they'll waste time doing or managing the wrong things.

Don't reduce class sizes. While reducing class size works, it is not the best use of resources. It is expensive and you can create the same impact by improving student motivation and behavior, which takes fewer resources. We found class sizes of 30 performed as well as class sizes of 15, when standards of student behavior had been addressed first.

Do improve student behavior and motivation. The best way to create the right environment for good teachers is to improve student behavior and motivation. Controversially, we found that the fastest way to do this is to exclude poorly behaved students: Pay other schools to teach them or, as most academies did, build a new, smaller school for these students. However, while this “quick win” produced immediate results, it was not the best long-term solution (and indeed, it's probably not the best solution for society either). The better, more sustainable practice was to move poorly behaved students into another pathway within the existing school, so that they can be managed differently and reintegrated into the main pathway once their behavior has improved.

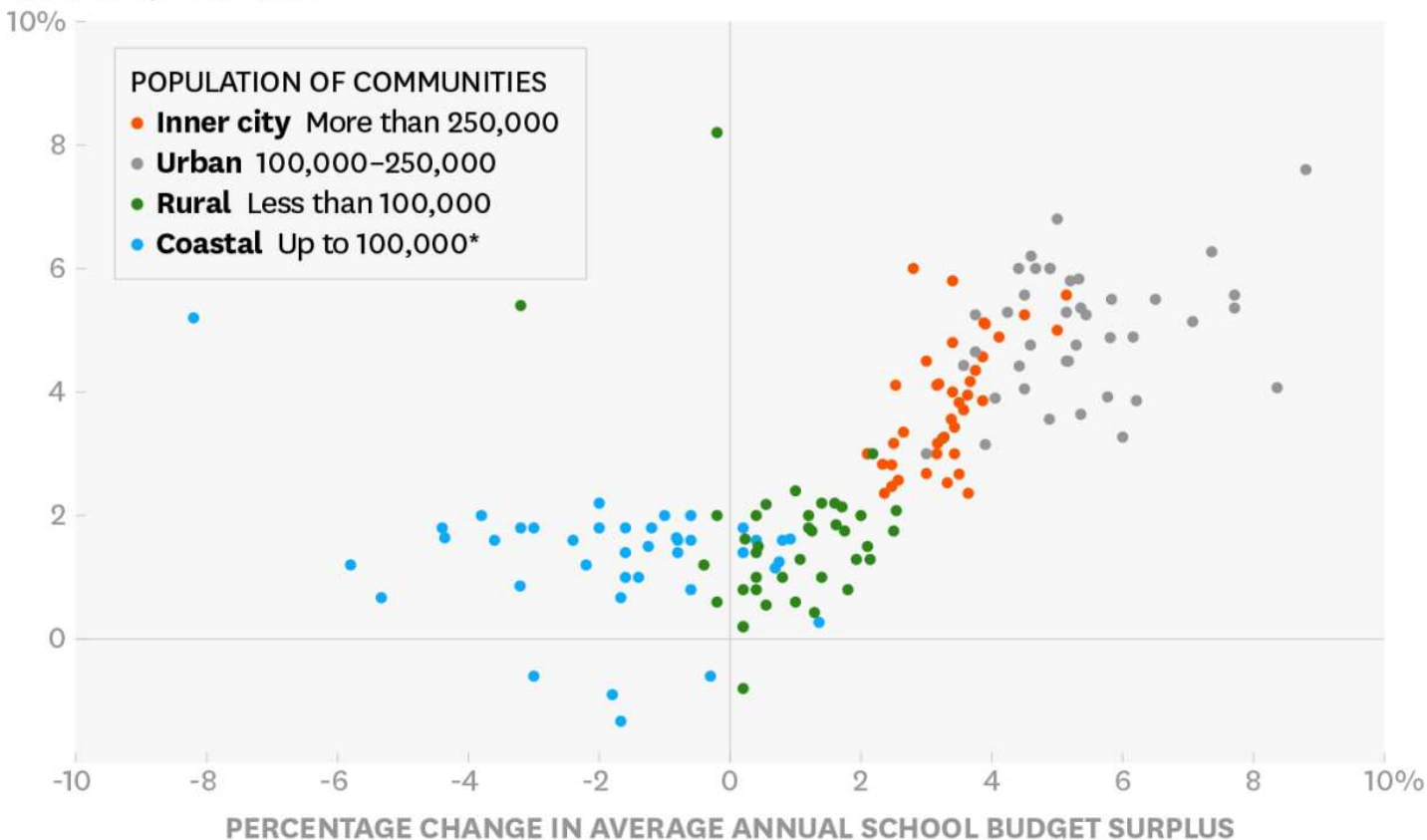
Don't use a “zero tolerance” policy. Many schools tried to come down hard on poor behavior with a “zero tolerance” policy. However, the short term, positive impact didn't last and in some cases, students revolted and even rioted.

Do create an “all through” school. Keep students from the age of five until they leave at ages 16 or 18. In this way, school leaders can create the right culture early on and ensure that poor behaviors never develop. It also makes teaching at secondary school level (age 11 up) much easier, as you don't have to integrate older students with different views about standards.

In the UK, Urban and Inner-City Schools Have an Edge

Both student and financial performance improved over a five-year period.

PERCENTAGE CHANGE IN 16-YEAR-OLD STUDENTS ACHIEVING AT LEAST Cs IN MORE THAN FIVE SUBJECTS, 2010–2015



*COASTAL ACADEMIES ARE BROKEN OUT SEPARATELY BECAUSE THEY OFTEN FACE ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES, INCLUDING REMOTE LOCATIONS, SEASONAL RESIDENTS, AND OLDER POPULATIONS.

SOURCE ALEX HILL ET AL.

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Don't use a super head. Many academies parachuted in a “super head” from a successful school to turn themselves around. Although this had a positive short-term impact, it didn't create the right foundations for sustainable long-term improvement. These “super heads” tended to be involved only for one to two years and focused their changes on the school year (ages 15–16) and subjects (mathematics and english) used to assess performance, so they could make quick improvements, take the credit, and move on.

In every case, exam results dipped after the “super head” left and only started improving three years later. The new head spent up to \$2 million cleaning up the mess created by

diverting attention, resources, and teaching capability from other age groups and subjects.

Do improve all year groups. Although schools can improve short-term performance by cutting and reallocating resources, they will not create sustainable improvement unless they invest in all age groups and subjects.

Don't expect inner city schools to be more difficult. Another common view is that it is more difficult to turn around an inner city school. However, we found it is easier, as they have greater access to good leaders, teachers, and students.

Do invest more in rural and coastal schools. It is more difficult to attract good leaders, teachers and students in rural and coastal areas. Improvement was much slower in these regions.

Don't expect spending more money to solve your school's problems any faster... More resources can help to overcome specific challenges, such as attracting good leaders and teachers, but at least in these 160 British academies, what mattered most to the overall speed of improvement was making the right changes in the right order.

...But, at the same time, don't expect to improve without spending more, at least in the short term. To improve student learning, schools must have the basic resources they need to improve student behavior, pay higher salaries to attract good teachers, and employ staff to manage parents so teachers can spend more time teaching and leaders can spend more time leading. Expect financial performance to dip in the short-term. Pursuing financial performance over operational performance will not serve students well in the long term.

There are three key learnings from this research. First, you need to create the right environment before improving teaching standards. Great teaching is wasted without the right governance,

leadership, and structures, with well-behaved students.

Second, the most significant improvement occurred when schools changed their students by excluding poor behavior, creating multiple pathways for students with differing needs and creating a school for ages five through 16–18. This change consistently improved performance more than any other.

Third, you have to plan for a dip in financial performance before your exam results will improve. You either need to part of a larger group (such as a multiacademy trust) with access to the resources you need to get through this dip. Or, acquire another school early on in your journey to increase your revenue and spread your costs across a larger number of students.

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