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Governors! Here's how to tell if your turnaround head is effective

{Intro} Heads with the best long-term school improvement plans are often nearly fired two years into the job simply because they don't improve exam results quickly enough – here's how to avoid making that mistake, explain Ben Laker and Alex Hill

{Body} Our previous study of the actions and impacts of 411 headteachers trying to turn around a failing school found there was only **one type of leader who had a positive long-term impact**, where the school continued to improve long after they'd left.

We called them Architects, as they systematically redesign a school and transform the community it serves.

However, after our article was published, we received emails from several heads saying, "I'm making all the long-term changes you suggest, but I'm about to be fired! What should I do?" We didn't know – but, we decided to find out!

We went back to our data and found that 90% of the Architects in our study were almost fired at the end of their second year. Their governors gave them one year's grace, but then expected exam results to improve. The problem is, this doesn't happen for at least three years, if you're making the right long-term improvements. This year's exam results are actually an outcome of decisions three to five years ago – before the new head arrived! And you can only quickly improve exam results by changing the students you teach, rather than how they're taught – by expelling poor performing students and attracting better ones from elsewhere – and neither of these actions help society in the long run.

So, rather than focus on this year's exam results, what should governors do? The latest study published by the Centre for High Performance in the Harvard Business Review found there are **nine predictors of future success**: nine building blocks that can be used to challenge how a school operates, engage its community and improve its teaching. We call them the school performance pyramid.

If a head uses these nine building blocks in their first three years, the number of students who graduate with five or more GCSEs will double, or even triple, five years later. But what does this mean for school governors? How can this help them focus on the future, not the past?

Well, there are three main learnings.

First, governors need to check if their head is challenging how the school operates, engaging its community and improving its teaching – using the nine building blocks. They can do this by ensuring the head is committed to staying for more than five years, is prepared to change staff if necessary and will take decisions that not everyone agrees with. That they have 95% students in class, 50% parents at parents' evening and 70% staff with no absence. And are expelling as few students as possible and teaching them from ages 5 to 18 with 100% capable staff.

Second, they need to help their head pick the six most important building blocks for their school. Transformation comes from putting in place six blocks – not all nine. They should see the pyramid as a menu, rather than a recipe, and select, mix and match the right ingredients for their school. For example, if they can't engage parents, then they should engage students. And if they can't engage students, then teach the ones they can, better and for longer.

Third, they should give their heads time to make the right long-term changes, and use the pyramid to check they are on track along the way. And remember that quick fixes can only be achieved by changing the students you teach, rather than how they're taught.

{Credit} Alex Hill and Ben Laker are founders of the Centre for High Performance