

# HOW TO FIX A POORLY FUNCTIONING SCHOOL DISTRICT



## A SUPERINTENDENT’S GUIDE

### *PROLOGUE*

Whether academically or financially distressed, repair of a school district is a long-term complicated job. The nature of the problems, in a general way, might be similar in many cases. However, the solutions are most often specifically designed for that entity. In these cases, one size never fits all.

Successful transformation from a non-functioning school district to one of efficiency and effectiveness relies on a series of steps that must take a portion of time that may not be accepted by the local community or school boards. Parents, in most cases, want their children to get the best education possible in the shortest possible time. Unfortunately, turning such a large vessel around cannot happen quickly.

Are there school districts that have changed the culture and the workings in a short time? There most certainly have been. We will explore those organizations in some detail in a succeeding chapter on “quick fixes.” Most distressed school districts have a habit of hanging on to old and failing ways.

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## *INTRODUCTION*

Since almost all residents of the United States have had some sort of schooling, the populace has some ideas about how important their experiences were. Without an education, the citizenry is disadvantaged to the point of not being able to hold a job or to improve themselves over their lifetimes. Most people understand that and are willing, to some degree, to support local school districts with cash contributions called taxes.

The support of school systems from the state varies wildly across the United States. It travels from 31% in South Dakota to 70% in New Mexico and Minnesota. Although Hawaii funds its schools at 87%, it is an anomaly because it has only one school district<sup>1</sup>. Interestingly enough, the federal government, which appears to have a large role in education in current times, represents only a small part of any school district's budget. Education is a state function and the federal government is a late comer to funding programs in public schools. According to a well-known Supreme Court case, *Rodriguez v. San Antonio* (1973), the word education does not appear in the federal constitution. Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell was the deciding vote in a 5-4 decision that education was neither 'explicitly nor implicitly' found anywhere in the U.S. Constitution. It was therefore, not protected by the Constitution. Hence, no suit in equity relative to

school funding can be heard in federal court.<sup>2</sup> All judicial activities could only then be accomplished within a state.

Adequate funding for school systems has been at the forefront of argumentation about how money affects outcomes for children. The *Money Doesn't Matter* folks reared their heads in the 1980's when the economy tanked and states looked for ways to diminish participation in funding education. An example of this diminution was the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. In the 1974-75 school year, the state funded their schools at 54%. In the 2013-14 year it was 30.8%.<sup>3</sup>

Where then can one look to begin a rehabilitation of a school district? That will be the subject of this monograph. There are explicit steps, in some order, that will, in most cases, lead to a transformation of a failing entity to one that succeeds for the children. There are very few of the usual educational panaceas involved in this activity. Most of what we have learned is the product of uncommon sense and a large dose of humanity. The secret to change is steeped in applied human relations, a product of the 1940's National Training Labs (NTL).

Kurt Lewin developed the program at NTL to delve into how intellect and environment act on each other to produce human behavior. His philosophy was that actual human interaction was more important than lecturing and reading. His T groups (T is for training) were a way to afford participants the ability to learn about their own beliefs and also listen to others, sometimes antithetical beliefs, to understand interactions.<sup>4</sup>

Author Arnold Hillman was part of one of these T-groups at Boston University in 1970 which was led by Kenneth Benne, one of Lewin's colleagues. By that time Lewin had passed away at an early age in 1947. Hillman returned to his position as Human Relations Coordinator in a racially conflicted school district outside of Philadelphia. He was taught to run T-groups in the local community.

The success or failure at an attempt to change the direction of a school district is totally a human effort to modify certain behaviors. As we understand social psychology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are both positive and negative ways to do this. As with the use of *the predictive analysis* approach used by Cambridge Analytica to narrow electoral choices by using corrupt techniques, there are certain accepted and positive ways of changing an environment and therefore modifying behaviors.

## CHAPTER I- HOW DID WE GET HERE?

When the new leader of a school district is tapped for the job, he/she should acquaint themselves with the history of the school district or school. This probably should begin with the moment one applies for the job and ramp up to the first interview. Whether head hunter, school board, or human resource head doing the interview, a future leader should know what she/he is stepping into.

Yes, there are places that will not suit. There are situations where one's skills are not a good match. That is the premise on which decisions about employment lay. None of us have the overarching skills that can fix everything. As a matter of fact, when you hear or read about, "How to fix education in America," or "How to repair our broken system of education," shut your eyes or your computers. There is no such thing as fixing a whole system at once. It has been tried and all the panaceas have failed.

Where success has been most achieved, it has been through leadership in one school or in one school district. Those are the stories that you should read or listen to. When you hear about how a school or school district has been turned around, ask a myriad of questions about what variables folks are looking at and how these positive results have been accomplished. We can predict with certainty that it began with leadership.

We are going to use school and school district interchangeably. The clear question is "How did this place get that way?" That question can be divided into a number of pieces. The first null hypothesis is that you should not come into that question with preconceived notions. Each school district has its own history and its own story of failure. The nature of the failure begins with a look at the long term history of the community and its public education system.

What does it matter if 50 years ago a school district was doing quite well financially and academically? How does that impact what is happening today? The answer is that it does impact current problems. There has got to be a baseline if you are going to seek to improve the school district. The choice of where to begin the search is different in each school district. In some cases, a change in demographics, the economy, the nature of housing, the ups and downs of local businesses have a large impact on what has happened.

Let us suppose that the community was, at one time, a thriving coal producing area. Jobs for youngsters straight out of high school were plentiful. The salaries were above average, and the town thrived on local businesses, and people coming from large companies to stay for days at a time. The town even had to extend the runway at a local airport to accommodate executive jets.

Then the coal industry sank because of new regulations and power derived from other sources. So many of the local establishments went out of business and the town became just a lunch stop on the way to a big city. The jobs for the kids dried up, as did a whole generation of workers. Poverty started to creep into people's daily lives. Welfare was now seen as a necessary part of existence. The brain drain affected the community as young people, as well as other workers, looked to other places for a living.

The schools reflected the decline in the community. As financial hardships hit the district, the schools felt it. The state may have participated in sending revenue to the district, but local taxation fell off the end of the table. Not only was raising taxes counterproductive, but the percent of collections began to shrink. In states where county governments are the distributors of local taxation, the problem is heightened.

As the outside world saw the school district deteriorating, it affected the ability to recruit quality teachers and then teachers in general. As test scores diminished, and graduation rates declined, going on to college rates reduced. All of these variables were available to those applying for jobs, including school superintendents. State departments of education, statewide organization, the internet, colleges certifying teachers and administrators were all good sources of information.

The question then arises, do you apply for a leadership job, such as a school superintendent, in a failing school district? Since the outsiders have given you information, the next step could be phone calls to teacher association heads in the district and other teacher leaders. Remember, as you are checking on the school district, others are checking up on you.

There are, of course, other reasons why both academic and fiscal problems are present. In the financial realm mismanagement is always possible. Misreading of

local state and sometimes federal revenues are most often the case where a district winds up without enough funds to cover expenses.

In some cases, funds derived from one-time funding, such as grants that end in one year or two, run out, and budget creators are unaware that the funds are no longer available. They therefore put those erroneous conclusions into the revenue section of the budget and programs continue with no funds. In a large school district, with many grants, this happens more frequently.

Then there is the issue of skullduggery. There are bad people everywhere. People are often shocked that there could be financial manipulation in a school district. With state, federal and local auditors looking over the district's shoulders, nefarious business can still go on. Therefore, it is always wise to ask for an audit of funds by an outside firm with no ties to the district. Many a time this audit can be the beginning of a repair of the financial controls needed to fix the district.

Academics are another story. It begins with levels of expectations. As we have seen in many school districts across the nation, once a district is labeled as, "Failing," it remains with that word despite improvements to its educational program. The community's view of the schools, parents and non-parents, is one of the most important tasks in fixing the district. People have to believe in the progress and participate in the repair. Chapter 3 will explain how one might do that.

## CHAPTER II WHO DO YOU TALK TO?<sup>11</sup>

It has been said that it is lonely at the top and this is especially true in public education. The job of superintendent of schools can be one of the loneliest and most isolated positions in the public education arena. You have locally elected school board members on one side and parents, teachers, principals, business and community members on the other side. With a low performing or broken school district, the feelings of isolation are compounded with the need to turnaround years and possibly decades of persistent low academic performance by students. Who do

you talk to about issues concerning the district? Who do you talk to about personal issues, personnel issues, or professional growth? What do you do?

With an increased emphasis on accountability, the need to be politically correct, real or feigned competition between peers, social media concerns and the 24-hour news cycle, who is left to bounce ideas or talk through projects, problems or solutions to fix the broken school district? What many superintendents find is that everything that is said is repeated somewhere. A superintendent once said to me that whenever you speak, know that you are going to be recorded. Anytime that you talk, speak like you are on live television or that you are giving an interview. Give responses to media questions in writing and copy yourself on the email. You often wonder who can you trust? Who can you talk to?

Spouses can be a source for conversation but not necessarily for discussing sensitive subjects especially when you are unable to go into great detail. The one person that a superintendent may confide in when not being a superintendent may not be the best person to talk about highly sensitive issues or controversial topics. This is due to the one-sided nature of the conversation and not necessarily so with other family topics. Make time for family and time to talk but understand that the demands of the job dictate the need to not have causal conversations with spouses. Debrief and find things to discuss that bring meaning without stressing out even more after a board meeting, tough legal issues or everyday stress associated with the position.

Friends who have been a source of constant communication and a repository for confidential information may begin to feel left out when you realize that information you provide becomes public knowledge. This is not due to any ill-meaning or diabolical plan to ruin your reputation or get you fired, but rather from understanding that information is power and even well-intended lapses on the part of friends can cause undue stress as information is shared that should not have been. Keep your friends just don't confide in them about your job or job-related issues. Continue to visit, shop, eat and play together.

Board members are not your friends either. Especially the one or two who support your every decision. Keep conversations businesslike in nature and minimize the social aspects of the professional relationship. Typically, superintendents develop

a strong relationship with their board chair during the beginning of their tenure and that can polarize the board and make other members feel left out of the loop. Remember that the school board is your employer. Resist the urge to be social with board members until after their tenure on the school board. Parents and other community members, teachers, students and church members will all complain to board members when a superintendent attempts to improve or turnaround a poorly performing school district.

Legislators are another group that superintendents can talk to but not necessarily confide in to help fix a broken district. Working with legislative members of the state sends messages to the community, school board members and the media that issues affecting the district are important. Legislators will begin to feel confident enough to call the superintendent for information on education issues and often extends the reach of the circle of influence on matters that may affect the school district. This is one of many steps that would need to occur in the process of fixing a broken school district. Remember, unless you have a personal relationship with your local legislator, you should not confide in this particular group.

Other superintendents are a great source but as stated earlier, there are reasons not to confide with a peer unless you are extremely comfortable and have a high-level of trust with another superintendent, particularly if this person is working in a neighboring district. Casual conversations become the news or tagline of the day. What seemed like an innocent comment about a school board member gets back to the entire school board. A superintendent wanting to gain points in a community with a community member, provides a little too much detail about a personnel issue involving a relative of the community member. Who do you talk to?

It seems like an impossible task, but there are people to talk to and confide in. It could be a trusted long-term friend, clergy or a peer or mentor with whom you have developed a relationship and feel comfortable to share feelings. It could be someone who is interested in your personal well-being and is at least moderately interested in the activities you engage in while doing your job. She/he may not necessarily know all the ins or outs of your position but should be able to provide



sound advice or at least help you work through issues on your own. Using common sense cannot be overstated. Who can be trusted to talk and confide in concerning the job and day-to-day demands? Take the time to discern what can be said to which group and stick with your decision.

As you have surmised, it is a mix of people who might be of help to you. The superintendency is a very difficult job. It is now so much more public than it had been in previous times. The pressure seems to grow daily. Not sure what the average tenure of a superintendent is in SC, but it is less than four years for rural superintendents.

The most frustrating thing of all is what happens when you are either canned, or retire. It is then that you really need folks you can talk to. It is in those situations that you will find out in whom you can rely. When that happens, hold those people close

### CHAPTER III TAKING THE FIRST STEPS

Some superintendents come in with a six month or one year plan of how they are going to improve the school district. These plans usually work for a short period of time until reality sets in. The next step after ingesting the history and speaking to all of the necessary folks is to take a breath and put together what you have found. The process up to now seems particularly long and drawn out. However, it does not really take long to figure out what to do first.

The first step is to travel around to all of the districts buildings. In a very large district that may not be possible. One could choose a random section of the school district or select different areas of the community. Visit each kind of school elementary, middle (or junior high) and a high school. It might take you a few days to see 6 or 7 schools. This will make you visible to staff and community, as well as teach you some things about the district's layout.

Steer away from creating listening posts at this stage of your tenure. One might want to do that sometime later in your first year or even the second year. It may well be that you will have ameliorated some of the problems by the time your listening posts are active.

The question arises about how to communicate with your board of education. Most boards have a feeling that they know about personnel and would rather be enmeshed with the hiring of certain segments of the staff, rather than dealing with policy. However, there are ways of handling that problem. If you can, as an old friend once told me, get them interested in educational topics.

How do you do that? One of the most exciting things to do is to get them to tour with you when you go to a school. Teachers probably don't like you opening their classroom doors or laboratories or gyms. If you can get your administrative staff to let them know that you are not snooping or observing, then that might help. Looking around in a building also includes seeing students at lunch, playing in the gym, viewing the custodial staff, etc. In fact, what you are doing is really introducing yourself.

Board members might even come up with suggestions for improvement. Listen to them and don't agree or disagree on the spot. Maybe even get back to your office and write them down or pull out your electronic notepad. Giving value to your board members, as well as staff, community members and students is a valuable tool.

Let us pause here for a moment for something that just came into my mind. We have been presenting these things to new superintendents for so long that we have almost forgotten to include them here. These are for the taking or not taking.

- Make all of your calls, texts and emails early in the morning when you first come to work. Of course there are times when you can't, but get them off your mind.
- Prioritize your communications- always call parents first. Yes, we did say parents.
- Set your desk up this way; two double boxes on each side of your desk. The box on the top left is your INBOX. Underneath that is the box for things that you need to get to pretty quickly. The box on the right top is your OUTBOX. The bottom right box is for things that you have no idea what to do with. You look those over once in a while.
- Travel to as many buildings as you can during the year.

- Hire the brightest people that you can. Having a bunch of people that are smarter than you is a blessing. Make sure that their thinking mechanisms are all different and always much different from yours.
- Communicate with your board members frequently. We still maintain that an actual snail mail letter once a week is the way to do it. Yes, we understand email, text, Instagram, twitter, etc. However, all of those are very public and can be sent along to many others. Yes, you can duplicate, or scan a letter and send it off into the ether. That's a more involved process. A letter is more personal and shows your board that you really mean to communicate. There is a warning here. If there is some confidential material in the letter, be careful not to be too explicit and no names.
- CAUTION- Do not announce that you are going to make dramatic changes in the school district. If there have been a number of changes in leadership in the school district over the last number of years, promising changes will not have any effect on staff.

Those are just a few hints to keep you going when you first start. You will also be dealing with leftover problems from the previous administration. Those pieces of information should come from a variety of sources that you have tapped, as described in Chapter II. Don't always take for granted that your predecessor has briefed you completely.

If you have children of school age, the choice of sending them to your own schools is a family decision. If you have a strong family and your children are of an age that they can understand what you do for a living, have them go to your schools. Going to private schools in or near your district tells the community something. It also sets well in your head that you are making the schools better for your own children. There are all sorts of exceptions to living in the community. It is your choice and a school board cannot really tell you where to live.

## CHAPTER IV HOW TO KNOW WHAT'S WRONG?

If you truly believe that all of this effort in public education should be for the benefit of the children, you are on the right track. Sometimes, it feels like the

priorities in public schools are to benefit those who would profit from the schools and the governments. In looking at what is wrong with a school district that has to be a part of the investigation

Governments, whether state or federal, attempt to determine how well a school is doing based on a paper and pencil test of someone's making. Usually the company that makes these tests makes a pile of dough. According to a legislator of my acquaintance, that is the easiest way of looking at whether a school district is succeeding or failing.

Have you noticed how colleges and universities are relying less on SAT and ACT tests for admission but rather the GPA? Does that mean that we are relying more on human observation, rather than tests? Wouldn't that be wonderful if it were true? In some states, school districts generate their own tests based on teacher creation and give the students a pre and post-test to see about progress.

Even in the NFL, prospects are given something called the Wonderlic Test. It is a snappy test of 50 questions in 12 minutes. It purports to measure intelligence. I must say that during a hiatus from education into the world of hustling bodies (employment agencies) that I used this test to determine something or other. Actually, I did it to prepare my clients so that they would be ready to take the test when they were interviewed by a company.

This test has very little value to those interested in how to measure intelligence, unless you want to know that offensive lineman get higher scores than quarterbacks. Dr. Wonderlic and his family have made a bundle on this test.

The object of these references is to inform the reader that determining whether a school district is doing well or not, cannot be measured by any of these tests. Comparing a rural economically disadvantaged county in South Carolina to one of the state's wealthiest counties, is sheer nonsense.

Here is a simple example. Take Advanced Placement courses. From my own personal experience with rural school districts, I have found that a very large group of those districts had no, I said NO AP courses. Those courses cost money to run and for teachers to be trained in the teaching of them.

This was a time, as it is now in South Carolina, that another state was attempting to grade school districts with a composite alphanumeric. One of the variables was AP courses. You can guess what happened. The state eventually removed that metric.

There are so many opportunities that poor school districts do not have; SAT/ACT preparation courses, technology, adequate teacher salaries, number of teachers, counselors, aides, reading specialists, physical facilities, co-curricular activities, etc. A number of studies over the years have concluded that there is a positive correlation between active participation in co-curricular programs and grades.

How can we determine, using real measures of advancement, how well a school district is doing. Some states are using this kind of market basket approach to measuring the success of a school district. Here is a set of variables using a baseline. All of this depends on the stability of the administration, teachers, school boards, and Departments of Education.

- Graduation Rates
- Attendance
- Discipline rates
- Stability of staff
- Going on to post- secondary rates
- Post-secondary graduation rates
- Success in later life (yes, many schools track that)
- Staff development
- Percent of teachers certified in subjects they are teaching
- Retention rates
- Dual enrollment
- Number of Staff

These are just a few of the variables that might be used. Most of them can be codified. There are other, much longer lists (see John Hattie's work on Visible

Learning- he identifies 258 variables).<sup>5</sup> As a person working in education, you can think of a number more.

Just for the heck of it, let me ask you this question? How would you go about improving some of the above variables by consolidation, state takeover, further reliance on high stakes testing, or grading school districts? Those are extant solutions to improve “failing” school districts.

Your first job is to determine how the curriculum serves the students in your new school district. By gathering teachers from all levels of the school district, you will find that the curriculum is consistent, or it is in tatters across the district that it will tell you that staff are unknowing about what they are supposed to be teaching. You might also get that information from your administrative staff. However, you might know that what is written down on paper, may not be what is actually being taught.

Since reading is the basis of almost everything that we do, take a look at the resources being used to help students with reading problems. You might want to talk to your board about policy priorities, such as reading and early childhood programs. If there are few dollars being funneled in this direction, there may have to be a board decision to change that direction.

## CHAPTER V HEAVY LIFTING

You have discovered what things are wrong with your new school district. Let us assume that you can do a few things at the same time. By this time, you will have become familiar with most of the processes by which the school district operates. You can probably get a handle on the physical things rather quickly. The shape of all of the buildings in the district will become evident to you as you travel around. Discussions with maintenance staff will fill in the rest.

If you have a good business manager, or a financial manager, as it is called in some states, your life will be made so much easier. In a large school district the business function may be divided into parts. You may have to put a team together to work on things that have to get done. Most districts already have a 3, 4, or 5 year plan.

You may be thinking that these kinds of items will be taken care of by staff. They may well be, but you must get your hands dirty and know what it is that they are doing. The buildings that house your students must be made safe and clean. Many

a good education program can be sabotaged if a building is in lousy shape and no one sees to it that repairs are done and the building kept clean.

Become familiar with the budget. Actually, become very familiar with both the budget (a projection) and the actual spending. Make sure that a report of the budget and expenditures on a monthly basis are in columns, side by side with last year's spending. Not only become familiar with the expenses, get to know your revenues. In South Carolina, the way in which County Councils distribute funds to their school districts can be done in about seven different ways.

If you concentrate on the revenue side of the ledger, you will always have some idea of how the financial situation is setting. Most discussions seem to center about how much money is being expended both in general and more specifically on certain items. Don't be too surprised to learn that board members and the general public will focus on salaries and benefits, and other esoteric things like football uniforms, band uniforms, and the number of cheerleading squads.

It is your job, as the leader, to help prioritize what things must be done first. If you take a systems approach, as was created in the defense department in the 1960's, you will begin with a circle that encloses the classroom and extends to larger circles that are further away from the classrooms. That will make it easier for your staff, both central office and building staff to see how things are operated. Very often the greatest brawls in education are priority setting. How many superintendents get fired because community groups (boosters) want a new artificial grass football field before you can replace a reading series in the elementary schools?

You may get battered sometimes, but the classroom comes first. Make that clear upon arrival. It will keep you in good stead and allow decision-making a bit easier. There will be times when you cannot believe that priorities in the community and the board are turned to things other than academic. Those particular times will be the locus of your leadership abilities. You might even profit from arguments about hiring a new basketball coach, or demolishing an old building. These discussions tend to tire out an audience and board, paving the way for items that could improve academics.

Building an agenda for a board meeting is a very important step in your desire to improve your school district. There have to be board policies to back up everything that you do at a public meeting; from how and when and how long the public session goes, to which agenda items go first and which go later in the agenda. By the time your first public board meeting takes place, you should have some idea of how the board and superintendent have been operating in the past. Your job is to see if that was an effective way of doing things or was it unsuccessful. You learn these historical happenings from your discussions as outlined in Chapter II.

One of the common mistakes made by a superintendent coming into a new situation is the desire to answer board and public questions oneself. That can become very uneasy as time goes on and you are not able to answer them all. Think for a moment who is at the board meeting with you. If you run a committee system for board members, some financial, extra-curricular and human resource questions could be answered by the board chair of those committees.

One of the most dangerous occurrences is a question that has legal ramifications. Those kinds of questions can get a superintendent into a great deal of trouble. Sitting somewhere at a board table is your solicitor. That person should be well versed in school law and will be able to answer most questions. If not, the solicitor can say, "I will get back to you with an answer." Certainly, you would want to be involved in some answering and discussion. Being in charge does not mean that you answer every question. You will have staff that will help you with those answers.

In Chapter I we discussed other variables, other than tests that define the health of a school district. It is certainly not the easiest thing to do. Tests are simple to display to the public. However, those kinds of high stakes tests are not diagnostic. What is needed are the kind of diagnostic tests that tell you in what areas the students need to improve. There is always a question of grouping in elementary school and in middle school or junior high. Those questions will be part of your decision making after gathering a great number of factors.

The social and economic painting of your school district, the number of students on free and reduced lunch, plain old reading scores, discussion with teachers and administrative staff, will give you a clue how to proceed in helping the children.



Most educators understand that it costs more to educate economically disadvantaged students. Unfortunately, there are legislators and government officials who do not understand that.

Wealthier folks have advantages by giving their children educational opportunities when they are home. Poor people do not. Therefore, there has to be some place in the curriculum for students to get some of those advantages in school. Trips to museums, shows, etiquette lunches, musical experiences and so many others. That will introduce those children to the things that they would not ordinarily get at home.

These kinds of experiences should begin early in elementary school. The nature of these happenings will enable children to absorb cultural, social and word learning that will help them later on in their school careers. If testing is a priority, these occurrences will indeed expand the children's vocabulary and stimulate reading. This has been done before in other school districts across the country.

There is always the chance that one might be challenged by strict constructionists that school is only for learning the basics of reading writing and arithmetic. It will be up to school boards, teachers and administrators to give rational answers as to why these expanded parts of the curriculum are necessary for the students.

## CHAPTER VI THE MONEY TREE

After reading all of these suggestions, the question arises about where to get funds to do all of these things. There really are no simple answers. One of them is implicit in the development of budgets. The most costly part of any budget is human capital. Staff is many times between 60-70% of a school district budget. That includes both health benefits, social security taxes, and other mandated costs. There must be planning for increases in salaries and concomitant increases in benefits and mandated taxes and such. These are all part of the way in which your school district attracts excellent employees. In *right to work states*, such as South Carolina, rural schools, with a small economic base, salaries are low and attracting and retaining teachers is a problem.

Some school districts approach these problems by offering additional bonuses, housing and other benefits that are attractive to younger staff. There may even be

some counseling advice provided, as well as access to medical care that goes beyond the normal. For a fee, the district could provide staff with help for personal problems. There are organizations that are available for counseling help over the phone. In this author's experience, this kind of help reduces the number of sick and personal days.

If there is no specific person hired to write grants, both governmental and private, hire one. Finding someone who can develop or has developed connections to funding agencies will be like finding a gold mine. Even in turbulent times in our country, these kinds of people seem to be able to get blood out of a stone. By the time this person is finished, they have more than made up the cost of their salary. Funds for some of the trips mentioned above might be backed up by grants from private organizations.

In the early eighties, school districts began to create community foundation funds that were directed by the school district. These funds were developed by the school district for the purpose of funding such "extra" things that a district might need. It was not a booster organization, but a 501C3 organization with its own board and set of guidelines. In some cases, the fund grew to a point where it could actually hand out scholarships for students. Community members and businesses were encouraged to contribute to the fund. The community members were also encouraged to leave funds for the foundation in their wills. Of course it is important to find a way to show appreciation for the gifts

For those who are less than enthused about entering the political circus, this may not be a suggestion for you. However, most folks have found it mandatory to become, at least, friendly with their legislators. In many states and in the federal government, there are some funds that are discretionary. Not saying that pork barrel still exists as a standard, but some legislators have access to mystery money. They may also be able to help you with grants that you may apply for from the state or federal governments.

When rates on certificates of deposit are low, as they are now, looking for better places to invest school district funds is not a priority. However, as rates increase, investment procedures and placement become very important. The financial manager should be able to tap into rates from most banks and government backed

funds. One of the great difficulties for a rural district is that the community believes that you should invest in local banks. As time has gone by, local banks are a thing of the past. There are very few local banks in our country these days. Therefore it is easier to shop around for rates at far away financial institutions. That is something that you can do coming in to the superintendency.

Athletic funds are usually a headache. In many cases, those funds reside at the high school level, whether athletics or co-curricular or class funds, these monies should be audited each year. Many an athletic fund is the home of financial mismanagement or corruption. After a while, ask to see the audit and go over it with your financial manager and an accountant of your choosing.

As you look into the many parts of the school district, you will run into a few brick walls. At that point, it is not necessary to be a bull in a china shop. Have some patience and you will soon be able to slide in unnoticed, or have a trusted staff member do it for you.

## THE QUICK FIX CHAPTER VII

If you have been around long enough, you will have run across a school district that has turned itself around in a very short time. You might marvel about how that was done. Those are particularly singular happenings. Usually, the answer to the question is “internal leadership” or as some call it, “The Advantage of the Homer.”

There are always arguments about whether an outsider can come in and fix things in a broken school district, or someone who has been in the district for a long while. The research is very spotty in this area.

*Hiring insider candidates is based at least in part on the notion that someone who has deep roots in a district or knows it well has a better chance of succeeding by having an intuitive knowledge of the district, its potential and its pitfalls — and will be less likely to leave, if only because there will be fewer surprises and therefore less stress. Such home-grown superintendents may also be more loyal to the district because they have enduring familial ties, as well as close friendships in the area.*

*On the other hand, being an insider can have its disadvantages. It could make it more difficult to shake up district leadership if the targets of the shakeup are people the new superintendent knows or has worked with for years. Unlike an outsider, it's also not assured that someone who has risen up through the ranks will bring fresh ideas, perspectives or experiences to the table.<sup>6</sup>*

As you can see from this description of the choices that the Los Angeles Unified School District had to make, the choices of insider and outsider are not clear. A quick fix is normally within the scope of an insider. If the insider has the capacity to obviate long time relationships while improving the academic climate, then a quick fix is possible.

An example of this kind of turnaround occurred in a small school district in Western Pennsylvania. The district was once a thriving steel producing area. As the mill closed, and the school district deteriorated, school leaders had little ability to improve things.

The board then hired a gentleman who had been in the district for many years. He had intimate understanding of the district and the community. He had taught in the district and understood its history. He had no fear of alienating his former co-workers or the the school board, and so was able to inspire the community. He was able to go out into the community and get their permission to change things.

He did so with a vengeance. He had the support of the community and was able to bring in new programs, revise the curriculum, focus on early childhood and pre-school. His mantras were aimed at taking care of the community; “Twinkle to Wrinkle,” “Lust to Dust,” “Cradle to Grave.” His district philosophy was, “Care and Education for All.”

He also applied for every grant that might have been available. He ran what is called a Community School. There were programs for senior citizens, mothers, and a host of community members. The question always arises. What happens when the leader leaves? Did things revert to the way they were before he took charge? I will let you draw your own conclusions.

A similar occurrence at a Philadelphia high school showed how a local leader can impact a school very quickly. In this case the new principal came in with experience within the school district. He saw that he would not succeed unless he had community support and a truce with a local gang (sad to say). He went out into the community, held meetings in all of the sending communities and got permission to make some wholesale changes.

His meetings with the local gang were equally successful. He got a promise from them that they would view the school grounds and surrounding areas as “safe” territory and a neutral zone. His idea was to make this school the pride of the community. He succeeded within a year. He used all of his connections to make the school a kind of “space academy.” His boundless energy was infectious. He was also given permission to have teachers transferred if they so desired. Many of them did and new staff that came in was enthused to be there.

There is a third example of the turnaround that we have run across. It is not in education, but in the penal system. Here in South Carolina, the Allendale Prison was considered one of the most dangerous of all the jails in the state. John Pate, a 20 year Army veteran and had served on the staff at Allendale for 10 years and became its warden in 2010. His intimate understanding of the institution and the inmates enabled him to perform a transformation in less than a year. We were privileged to meet with Warden Pate and had a tour. The institution is very unusual in its treatment of inmates. Our two tour guides were murderers who had life sentences.

Remember, these are exceptions. However, as you know, exceptions are those happenings that prove the rule.

## NOW FOR THE HARDEST PART CHAPTER VIII

There are so many suggestions about how to start improving the academics in a school district that has been in decline. Some of the variables mentioned in chapter IV are symptoms of things that are wrong. How and when to approach solutions raises so many questions that it is near impossible to answer all of them at once.

After all, the leader of the school district cannot do all of these things by him/herself. He/she must accumulate a team that will believe in the same kind of moral judgements as the superintendent and also the board of education. We cannot assume that gathering these folks will happen all at once. Let us begin with this kind of premise. As the folks come on board, or join from within the staff, priorities will be established.

Let us look at one of the symptoms and peel it back to its core. Attendance is a harbinger of failure. A student cannot, under normal circumstance, learn in school if he/she is not there. However, there are some caveats. Poor attendance does not usually begin in the earlier grades. Yes, there will be some that do. The bulk of non-attendance begins in middle school or junior high school. It becomes more flagrant as the student remains on the rolls in the upper grades. If things reach a crescendo, then 10<sup>th</sup> grade is the fulcrum and the student drops out.

With this kind of understanding of attendance, a leader can focus on stemming the tide of dropouts and increasing attendance at a much earlier age. The students who are in the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade when the new superintendent comes in need a special kind of treatment. There may even be a need for an alternative school, if it is not already in place.

As with the Quick Fix examples, the new leader should be able to determine whether the early education programs that are extant are working. Some of those programs, if they are federally funded, require evaluations. You might want to look at those evaluations. Some of the programs are state mandated or state funded, or both. The investigation of whether these programs are working should be a priority.

Some of these programs might be:

- Pre K
- 0-3 programs
- 4 year old programs
- Kindergarten
- Read to succeed
- Title I
- 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning centers
- First Steps
- Montessori Learning
- Parents as Teachers
- Community based programs such as Head Start

These would be the beginning steps in a series of programs that not only involve children, but involve their parents. In the end, it is the parents who will see to it that their children will learn to read. Many homes do not have books, nor do they go to libraries, or read online. In some districts, books are sent home with children to start a home library. There are also outside organizations that raise funds to buy

books. These service organizations can be very helpful to a school district, in not only providing outside funding, but to get the word out to the community.

Working with parents can be very gratifying and very frustrating at the same time. Many parents cannot make teacher meetings during the daytime because they are working. Some accommodation must be made to allow teachers and parents to get together. The more parents and community people you get involved at an early stage in a child's education, the better it will be for the child, the school and the community.

### *Middle School*

Your position as a new superintendent recently arrived at your school district; you have many things coming at you at once. It may be that there will be problems at the middle school, if you have one. Middle school seems to be the place that the community focuses on when complaints are made. Parents seem to be more concerned with their 5<sup>th</sup> graders going to sixth grade than when their children go to high school or enter kindergarten.

The middle school was created in the 1960's to foster integration. It was thought that getting the children of all stripes together earlier, would enable kids to know each other better and get along. What the "experts" did not realize is that trying to make the middle school a kind of *Summerhill*<sup>7</sup> does not work. It is the wrong time in child development to try and have children do things that they are not used to.

Elementary schools, with mostly one teacher and a group of youngsters has been the child's experience for 6 years. Certainly there are times when some schools have students in 5<sup>th</sup> grade rotate teachers for a bit, but they generally have one teacher and one classroom to rely on. Middle school is nothing like that.

The first problem is that middle school is only three grades in duration. You are a freshman one year and two years later, you are a senior. Students, even in small school districts, come from a number of elementary schools. These schools are generally circumscribed by neighborhoods or towns and boroughs. Most of the parents know each other. Most of the students know each other. They may have even gone to the same religious institutions.

Because when students come from different elementary schools, they generally hang out together in school, in gym, at lunch, and in passing classes. They also go home to the district in which their former elementary school was situated. Having all of these students mesh in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade is just a pipe dream. What really happens is that children who are having problems seem to encounter more problems in middle school.

It appears, from some research done with Florida schools, that students who transition from a middle school either 5-8, 6-8, or 7-8 have a more difficult time academically going forward than do students who go from a k-8 configuration to high school.<sup>8</sup> Not that there are no successful middle schools that present programs that fit with the age and development of pre-teen and young teen students.

In an interview with my granddaughter, Cassidy Grace, a rising 8<sup>th</sup> grader, I had an opportunity to ask her questions about her transition from 5<sup>th</sup> grade to the middle school and both positive and negative happenings in her memory. “Grandpa, I had very little trouble going from my elementary school to the middle school. Although we came from a few elementary schools, we soon found friends from other schools that we hung around with.”

Interesting that Cassidy Grace did not find it necessary to “hang around” with only the students from her old elementary school. She described going from class to class and meeting new students who would become friends. From my discussions with her, it was obvious that both the staff and administration of the middle school had planned that the transition would be smooth. I then asked my granddaughter about some of the students who did not seem to be able to handle the changes. “Some of the kids had problems at first and took a longer time to get used to middle school. I believe that some of these students will continue to have problems and will be possible dropouts when they get older.”

In a later discussion, with Cassidy now approaching 10<sup>th</sup> grade she said, “It was hard to see all of the kids that I saw in middle school. I was now in a large high school. I did see one of those students who wound up in juvenile detention. I know that is not much to go on. I did see that a number of those who I did know who were having trouble in middle school, had trouble in ninth grade academically.”



I was impressed with Cassidy's observational skill. I guess any grandpa would be proud. It was, however, a clear indication that there are middle schools that have planned for the transition and some that have not done any or very little planning at all. As Cassidy Grace observed, "It's easy to see which teachers like the students."

### *High School*

I append this special section about high school. Leadership is one of the most important attributes of any administrator in any school within the school district. High school is usually the most public of the district schools. The principal of the high school(s) is the most public of administrators. Communities know the high school principal's name long before they know the superintendent's name. With the myriad of extra-curricular activities, the principal stands out at each of these events. He/she is seen at most of these events that parents and community residents attend.

Some staff members in high school believe that it is their job to present content to students. Many of these staff members will have been in front of classes for which this is appropriate. However, as we have seen over the past number of years, content is just a part of the education of a high school student.

One hears the cry, "They did not teach these kids manners at home, so why would we think that we would have any success teaching them manners here at school?" I wonder how many times you have heard this plaintive cry. In essence, the people who say these things are really talking about structure and not just manners.

Most colleges and universities present education classes as if teachers will be teaching in a suburban school district. I am sure that I do not have to tell you that this is not what we find in rural schools or in metro schools. Yes, there are certain college profs, now growing in numbers, who are aware of these differences, but they are not a plentiful lot.

If you are in a school district with a number of high schools, some of these things will be very difficult for you. However, leadership and the choice of a principal will be of utmost importance to the success of those schools. This is not to say that leadership is not important in the other buildings. The principal in a high school is

generally a more public person and is much more involved in extra-curricular activities.

That said, the most successful high schools in any size school district have long traditions of structure and long term goals. These are not just idle words. You may want to use the word “traditions” to express a point. Students of that age need to know what is going to happen next. Whether a block schedule or a traditional schedule, students must be aware that there are processes by which the schools function. These processes should be within the purview of all of the students no matter what their academic situations are.

When a high school student body gets confused, it is a recipe for the kind of chaos that does not go away for years. How then does a new school superintendent make sure that each of his/her high schools runs smoothly? It does not take long for one to see how things are being approached in a high school. In a moment of personal experience, this author had the experience of seeing firsthand how a high school could perform poorly. One only had to walk the halls, look into the classrooms, visit the gymnasium (yes the gym), speak to some staff members and some students and all became clear.

A short study of the high school curriculum will soon tell you what might be done to shore up academics. Yes, there are state standards to adhere to. However, once past the standards, what are the students actually being taught? Is there a need for an accreditation visit from one of the accreditation organizations? I have always found that helpful in seeing where things could improve.

Having a few observations here and there may also help you understand how things are being taught. Staff would either appreciate your visits or not. However, it will also show that you are interested in what is going on. Review techniques for observations with administrators responsible for that activity.

A review of extra-curricular activities could be a quicksand activity. There are many stakeholders in these clubs and teams. One of the most difficult things to keep track of is funds to support these efforts. Hopefully, there has been an outside audit of the funds. Here you will find the “Boosters,” who may be of help or hindrance to you. How about new band uniforms or a new football field with AstroTurf, or new wrestling mats, or trips for the art students to go to a museum,

etc. Although these events more rest in the principal's hands, they will eventually get to your desk. Just be prepared.

You will also start making decisions about professional development. These will all be things that have to be laid out. Let's assume that you have a great number of new teachers, new to the profession or to the school district. Decisions will have to be made. One of the discussions will always be about discipline, or classroom management. There will be a distinction between elementary and secondary programs. However, there are distinctions between grades. One could not expect professional development for kindergarten teachers to be the same as 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers. The same can be said about teaching 6<sup>th</sup> graders and high school seniors.

One may want to approach professional improvement from a child development perspective. Time is always a restriction on what one can do with professional development. There are all sorts of possible ways of presenting material, including electronic methods. There are usually times in the yearly school district schedule to provide opportunities for staff development.

Another possibility is to contract with a local university to provide coursework in an area of the school district's choosing. Those courses could be taught at the college, on the school district's campus, and an online method. Districts have even provided these courses without cost to the individual and emoluments in the way of increased salary.

Research based material could be made available to staff during the school year and discussions could be directed on individual school campuses. An example of such materials could be <https://www.verywellmind.com/child-development-theories-2795068>,<sup>9</sup> a review of some child development theories.

Large scale programs, such as those focusing on one subject such as classroom management, administrative leadership and others can be purchased from private vendors. You might also involve staff, as time goes on, in planning for professional development during a school year. The trick to all of this staff participation is having the right people and the right spread of people doing the planning. Remember, secondary people will tend to want content and primary and elementary staff may want methodology.

There is also a great need to have programming for non-professional staff members. Whether custodial, teacher aides, transportation or administrative assistants, these folks need as much up to date training as is available to them. Normally what happens is that they get no programming, or are thrown into a jumble of staff that is not relevant to their needs.

## TEACHER OBSERVATION

The discussions and research about teacher observation has been going on longer than my tenure here on earth. There have been contrary arguments about the value of observation, not only the methodology, but the very need to do them.

On one side of the discussion are those who believe that improving education for students lies within the realm of teacher observation. If teachers are going to improve, how will one be able to help them if there is no understanding of what the teacher is doing in the classroom?

Observation techniques and classroom management seem to go together. In the early 1960's there came an inventory of teacher behaviors in the classroom. The Bales inventory claimed that there were a number of activities performed in the classroom by a teacher that were positive and some that were negative. The development of these kinds of observational inventories led to a description of five kinds of teaching styles.

<https://education.cu-portland.edu/blog/classroom-resources/5-types-of-classroom-teaching-styles> <sup>10</sup>

There are also a myriad of teacher checklists. The author has included one such example of this kind of observation. It appears in most of these observational checklists that what appears is subjective. I have seen an old checklist that looked at the evenness of the venetian blinds.

<http://www.austincc.edu/hr/eval/procedures/ClassObservCheck.pdf>

The development of observational techniques and when to use them leaves many with a question of whether these actions will, in fact, improve teaching. The other side of the argument about improving teaching rests with the premise that,

“Teachers are not made, they are born.” There really is no way to prepare for such a discussion.

I am constantly befuddled by what makes a successful teacher. Is it one that teaches you French songs in a French class, so that you remember them 65 years later? Or is it a teacher who claimed to be ill most of the year in her class and got the students to teach the class beautifully.

This small story will give you some idea of my confusion. In 1970, I was a human relations coordinator in a large blue color suburban Philadelphia school district. The district was racially troubled and I was tasked to halt the violence in the schools (not my choice of job). We had very few African American teachers. I was then told to go and recruit such teachers.

A good friend of mine was the head of the education program at Grambling College in Louisiana. I flew down (losing my clothes in the travels) to Grambling and spoke to some possible candidates. I was also taken on a trip to the newly integrated Ouchita Parish Schools. I was taken to one of the elementary schools and discovered that the integration was of the teachers, and not the students. The students were all African American.

The principal led me down a hallway to a third grade classroom. He told me that this teacher was one of his best. I was impressed that he wanted me to see a class in his school, much less inhabited by one of his best teachers. I opened the door and the principal walked in with me and introduced me to the teacher. She was a woman in her 50's with the traditional bun in the back. She had been teaching for 30 years.

I was prepared to see some innovative teaching techniques that I had never seen. I was so wrong. I was told by the principal before we entered the classroom that his school was now non-graded. I did not bother to ask any questions. As I sat down in the back of the room to observe, I noticed a large wooden contrivance on the window ledge. It was divided into quite a number of cubby holes. I counted the holes and there were 180. What a coincidence, that was the number of days in a school year.

It was no coincidence. Since this was in April, most of the cubby holes were empty. There were worksheets in all of the remaining holes. The children were working on the current work sheets.

The teacher went around the room and seemed to be helping individual students with their work. There was not a sound in the room other than the shuffling of the teacher's shoes as she walked around to the student's desks.

I was there for half an hour watching this scene. It was certainly not an example of great teaching. To me, it was busywork. After leaving the classroom, I met with the principal and my friend from Grambling. They asked me what I thought. I was honest and told them that I could not understand how this could be good teaching.

They looked at me and smiled. The principal told me that this third grade class had the highest reading scores in the entire parish (county). When the child reaches the fourth grade reading level, the teacher called the principal and asked that the child should now be moved to fourth grade (non-gradedness). No child had been absent one day since the beginning of the school year. If a child did not show up in the morning, the teacher would call the principal to take over her class and she would get into her car and go to the child's home and bring the child to school.

As I write this, I realize that it all seems impossible. If someone had told me the same story, I would not believe it. Since I saw it for myself, it shook my belief in what good teaching is. I am not sure I can explain what good teaching is, but I know it when I see it.

## DISCIPLINE/CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT<sup>15</sup>- CHAPTER IX

When we consider the best ways to educate our children, we readily acknowledge the importance of the student/teacher relationship. That leads us to classroom management. Today most teachers will agree the "discipline" is their greatest challenge.

If we could change classroom management in a way that would reduce discipline problems, we would have more relaxed teachers and happier students. Both of those outcomes will enhance learning.

Disruptive behavior in students is most often caused by a physical or mental disorder or modeling of disruptive behaviors at home, by peers or in the classroom.  
<https://education.seattlepi.com/typical-causes-poor-behavior-classroom-4001.html>

Punitive efforts to correct such behavior may only reinforce that behavior.

<http://web.sbu.edu/psychology/lavin/negative%20punishment.htm>

If educators are not familiar with the use of positive reinforcement as a classroom management skill, they should be provided with any necessary training.

<https://www.positivediscipline.com/teachers>

<https://www.teachhub.com/classroom-management-try-positive-discipline>

Colleges and universities will be key in providing guidance and training. Training should be focused on new teachers and existing teachers and administrators who volunteer to be trained in the new approach to school discipline.

How will the district KNOW if any of these changes in discipline strategies are effective?

- Because moving from punishment for “bad” behavior to rewarding “good” behavior may represent a paradigm shift, a district should have ongoing contact and support from at least one classroom management trainer.
- All schools must record and report the number of suspensions and expulsions they impose and at what level (primary, elementary, middle and high school).

Students don’t care what you say until they know that you care.

At the beginning of the school term, every teacher in every classroom should make clear his/her classroom rules. These rules should be simple, stated in the positive

and inclusive, i.e. “We must all behave in a way that helps everyone learn.” There should be classroom discussion about what the rule means, and examples given.

- A teacher might even have the class decide with her what silent sign she might offer a student if that student is doing something that is not helpful i.e. a frown directed at the student or placing her finger over her lips in a “shhh” sign. It is best if teacher signals are non-verbal as that does not interrupt the class lesson.

- It is also wise for a teacher to discuss with students the one word he will say to get everyone’s attention i.e. “Waterfall!” and all students must answer, “Shh”- which is the sound of a waterfall.

- The first line of defense in classroom management is positive reinforcement. i.e. Students are looking at the teacher when she is speaking. The teacher might pause the lesson and say, “When you look at me when I am speaking, I know you are paying attention and that helps everyone learn.”

- At every level of schooling teacher must show respect for students, provide opportunities for discussion, interactive learning and a safe place for students to be. Students learn in different ways and lessons should vary to include lecture, discussion, writing and teamwork,

- The younger the child, the more important and the easier it is for positive behavior to be rewarded. Stickers, putting a student’s name on the board, big smiles, compliments, positive notes home are all ways to reinforce good behavior.

- A whole class should never be punished for the misbehavior of one student.



- A teacher must never threaten to do something unless he/she intends to follow through.

#### Mildly Disruptive Behavior:

- The first time a student is mildly disruptive or is breaking a school rule, the teacher should try ignoring that behavior, as acknowledging it in a public way reinforces that poor behavior. Instead, the teacher can continue the lesson while slowly moving around the classroom to stand near enough to the student, so the student realizes the teacher is watching.

- Teachers must always be on the lookout for ways to acknowledge appropriate behavior. Sometimes a teacher must work hard to “catch” a student behaving properly and quickly reward that behavior.

<https://teachbeyond.org/news/2015/01/proactive-classroom-management>

#### Behavior that is so disruptive that it interferes with a lesson:

- A teacher must always behave in such a way as to ensure a student values his/her approval. Then, losing the teacher’s approval will be a powerful form of censure.
- A teacher might say to the student, “Please go into the hallway until you can control yourself, then you may come back and join us.”
- When the rest of the class is busy, a teacher might take a student into the hallway- leaving the door open- and ask, “Are you feeling alright or are you having a problem? I know you didn’t mean to hurt someone’s feelings, or take something that doesn’t belong to you or interrupt our learning, etc. What could you have done instead of what you did?” and then, “That was a good answer. Here is a sticker for being so smart.”

- If the behavior continues, the teacher might contact the parent and ask if anything unusual is going on at home that might cause the student to be disruptive. One technique is to write notes home to the parent pointing out what the student has done well that day or even that hour. Parents should be asked to read the note with the student, sign it and have the student return it to class.

- If the disruptive behavior continues, the teacher should refer the student to the guidance counselor or even for testing by the school psychologist. The student might need an IEP. In addition, these two experts might observe the student in class or make suggestions that will help the teacher help the student behave in a more constructive way.

- If none of these strategies work, the psychologist might recommend the child be moved to an alternative school until such time as the alternative school staff believes the student can return to the regular classroom.

<https://www.aft.org/periodical/american-educator/winter-2003-2004/how-disruptive-students-escalate-hostility>

<https://dsl.uw.edu/faculty/disruptive-behavior-in-the-classroom/best-practices/>

### An Alternative School:

- An alternative school is an educational setting designed to address the educational, behavioral, and/or medical needs of students of all ages that cannot be adequately addressed in a regular classroom setting. It can be established in a building that is separate from the traditional school building or can be a classroom in the same building.

- Classes are small, with 10 to 12 students in an elementary program or 20 students in a middle for high school program. Students are evaluated for academic, social

and physical needs. The curriculum is highly structured, and the behavioral guidelines are also structured. Consequences for disruptive behavior and positive reinforcement for positive behavior are discussed with new students and parents ahead of time and addressed immediately. Consequences are immediate.

- “Forty-three states and the District of Columbia have formal definitions of alternative education. The literature suggests that the definition of alternative education should include the target population, setting”...”services,”... “and structure.” ...“Alternative education serves primarily students with behavioral problems (35 states). The most common alternative education services are regular academic instruction (21 states), counseling (14 states), social/life skills (13 states), job readiness (12 states), and behavioral services (anger management, conflict resolution (11 states.” <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED546775.pdf>  
<https://cehdvision2020.umn.edu/blog/aggressive-behavior-in-students/>

Behavior that is physically threatening:

Dealing with “Behaviorally Dangerous” Students

Protect yourself before an incident occurs.

1. Know your school policy and procedures.
2. Know or develop a school-wide CRISIS plan.
3. Prepare yourself for crisis events. (KEEP COPIES OF ALL DOCUMENTS.) A. Have a working system of communications, using tools such as the intercom, or code word with another teacher or school employee who works near you. Develop your own safety net that works for you. B. Regularly review and update your plan to meet the needs of the current population.
4. Classroom teachers should develop, post, and disseminate to parents and students a well defined discipline policy for their classrooms. Suggestion: Send the policy home for signature by a parent or guardian. When a student’s behavior becomes threatening, school employees are advised to: 1. Notify another adult for

help, i.e., call on the intercom, send another student for help. 2. Isolate the student, **BUT KEEP HIM OR HER UNDER VISUAL CONTACT.** This may mean you have to remove all other students from the area. 3. **DO NOT TOUCH THE STUDENT UNLESS THE STUDENT IS A DANGER TO SELF, OTHERS, OR PROPERTY.** 4. Have an administrator or designee remove the student to a secure area. It is the responsibility of the administrator or designee to notify parents or guardians and appropriate authorities regarding the incident and district policy and to arrange a meeting to coordinate a plan for the reintegration of the student into school and/or the classroom.

5. If you receive an injury, seek medical help and file for Workers' Compensation or Episode of Violence compensation immediately.

6. Review your district discipline policy.

7. Document the incident and the sequence of events. **KEEP COPIES OF ALL DOCUMENTS.** A. Identify all witnesses. B. Identify the number of students present. C. Identify the student sent to get the administrator/designee. D. Document all action taken by you, the person providing assistance and the administrator involved."

<http://www.ncae.org/wp-content/uploads/Dealing-with-Dangerous-Students.pdf>

- Schools with students who may be physically violent should have a resource officer on the premises. That officer should be on call at all times while students are in the building and should immediately report to the classroom when a teacher alerts the principal.

<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/mar/29/percentage-public-schools-resource-officers-rise-r/>

## SCHOOL BOARDS AND HOW TO GET FIRED-CHAPTER X

Seems strange to include this in a monograph, with a roadmap to failure. At its worst, the superintendency is a short term job. The average tenure of superintendent of schools in the United States is less than 5 years. That includes all kinds of districts. It appears that the more successful chief school administrators tend to last just a bit longer than those who bomb out in a hurry.

What can you do to make sure that you get fired quickly? The initial surmise is that you would come in conflict with the school board almost immediately. That can happen in circumstances when the board that hired you is defeated at the polls and their successors want to undo everything that the former board has done. This includes getting rid of the school superintendent. This happens more than you might suppose.

How do you avoid getting canned? If these people spent time and money to invest in getting rid of the former board's accomplishments, including you, you might want to clean up your resume and head for the hills.

Every school board is different. This may be a redundant statement, but many an applicant for the superintendency has a glorified view of a school board. It might help to find out what you are facing in an interview. Who are these folks who are sitting across the table? You are on your own trying to find out what a board is like. A good source might be local newspapers. Beware of prejudice that may run rampant in a school district about its board members.

One example of a misreading occurred to this author when not familiarizing himself with a school board. A head hunter placed this author in the finals of a superintendent search in a wealthy suburban school district. How lucky do you have to be to get into the finals of a plum job paying lots of dollars ?

The district had everything; a supportive community, resources, excellent students and anything that wealth could buy. The board was made up of professionals (not always the best boards) who were keenly involved in the search. There was only one problem. They did not like their school district. The interview turned into a description of all of the school district's ills. I did not see them as ills. One of the board members explained that his children did not get the kind of education that he wanted for them. All of his children went to Princeton and were successful there and in their professions.

How does one counter these irrational sentiments. As a sentient being, I told them that they might be mistaken in their views. At one point the argument became particularly hot. There seemed to be no end to their recriminations. The interview lasted about an hour and did not end well.

The next morning the head hunter called and told me that they wanted to offer me the job. I was astounded. There seemed to be no area in which the board did not agree with anything that I said. The head hunter was astonished when I told him that I would not be the superintendent there. He asked me how he would explain it to the board president. I volunteered to call the board president and explain it to him. I did call and told the board president that our philosophies did not mesh and that it would be a mistake for me to take the job. He thanked me and that was it.

How often does that happen? Much more often than you think. Understanding that the board will be your employer is a hard concept. Some boards do not understand their role as a policy maker. They may believe that their expertise in personnel (even if they have never hired anyone). Some might be “experts” in such areas as busing, purchasing, curriculum, athletics, music, finance, etc.

Many a chief school officer has found that working with a school board is draining. Success at the job of superintendent may rest on relations with the school board. Since school boards change and problems differ from time to time, it is imperative that you help train your board not to take it upon themselves to solve problems. Encourage your board to direct complaints to the appropriate person working for the school district.

## SCHOOL SECURITY- CHAPTER XI

The search for prevention of the horrors of school shootings usually focuses on a specific piece of hardware or software that is installed in a school buildings. These things such as motion detectors, metal detectors and such have some positive value. However an even more effective way of handling the possibility of a school shooter coming into t a school building and taking lives is much more in the nature of a plan with devices as the second step.

In thinking of the shooting in San Clarita, California, many of the common plans will not work. What does one do to protect students from a fifteen year old student who goes to that school from destroying lives. That is a much more complicated question. That requires preventative measures that are more human than a device, or having human security patrolling the halls.

Since each school has its own culture, the nature of both planning, devices and the identification of possible shooters is different for each building. In a high school of my knowledge, doors to the school were always open and unguarded so that parents could come in. Out of school students could come in at odd times and play basketball. That is no longer the case.

A good plan that I have looked at seem to be a somewhat complete one. Here is the URL:

<https://www.schoolsecurity.org/trends/best-practices-for-school-security-and-emergency-preparedness-planning/><sup>13</sup>

Hopefully your plans for security are ones that are within the policy guidelines for the school board. The board should be there at the beginning of the plans. After all, it is their ultimate responsibility to safeguard the children.

## MY SOLICITOR, MY FRIEND- CHAPTER XII

Does your solicitor come to every one of your public board meetings? Does your solicitor sit with the board members and face the public? If neither or either of these answers is no, you have made a big mistake. It is also a mistake that your school board is making.

If you have been to many board meetings, you will understand what the function of the solicitor is. It isn't just casual advice. The solicitor speaks as the one person in the room who can say whether something is legal or illegal. His word is a barrier from being sued. You may agree with or disagree with the lawyer, but once he/she says it, you really have no clear path to go against his/her opinion.

In some cases, he may issue a written opinion on some subject or other. He may also calm the waters at a public meeting by saying, "I am not sure about that, but I

will give you an answer at the next meeting. Let me look it up.” He/she can say that to a question asked by a constituent at a public meeting. Remember, the superintendent does not have all of the answers. If you think that you do, you might consider retiring right then.

Let me give you an example of how a solicitor might save you. On a senior class trip, students were told orally, and on paper, that they should not use drugs. The parents were notified of this edict. Nine students were caught smoking marijuana on the trip.

The principal took quick action and notified the superintendent. After an investigation the superintendent decided that a fit punishment was that the seniors were not to attend graduation exercises- not to walk across the stage to get their diplomas. As you can imagine, the parents and students were furious. They sued the school district and the superintendent.

The case went to county court. The solicitor was the prosecuting attorney. He had only one witness, one of the nine students. He asked them only a few questions- had they smoked marijuana, had they been notified ahead of time, did their parents know about the stricture. Yes, was the answer. The solicitor went back to the table and said that was enough. The judge threw out the suit.

Board meetings can sometimes lead to flareups that are completely unexpected. What would your reaction be to a request by board members to review teacher personnel files to see if they are ... If you turn and face your solicitor and say, “Ms. Jones is that legal?” You will save yourself a great deal of trouble. In these times of parent litigiousness, you might want to have your solicitor on speed dial.

There are so many questions in certain areas-discipline, special education, personnel, arbitration, etc., it is important that a solicitor is involved. Each lawyer or law firm deals with school district payments differently. Along with the standard payment for appearances at school board meetings and results thereof, there are charges for all other things. Make sure the board does not pick the cheapest one. You need a competent attorney, one who is familiar with school law.

You take a great chance in not familiarizing yourself with some aspects of your state’s school code. It is not something that one always goes through in school law



courses. Get to know your solicitor, if necessary when you become a superintendent inquire as to the history and competence of your attorney. You might not want Aunt Martha's longtime lawyer, cousin Ralph.

### COMMENTARY<sup>14</sup> CHAPTER XIII

Arnold's poignant monograph on "how to fix a poorly functioning school district" could not come at a better time. He questions common assumptions and offers practical advice. We need more of both.

The last two decades of recent reforms have petered out. Both NCLB (Bush Administration) and Race to the Top (Obama) toggled between centralization of control/high stakes accountability and decentralization, deregulation and choice. Neither one worked as student achievement scores have stalled and gaps have widened.[i] And now the COVID-19 pandemic is spreading across the nation. As of early April 2020, we are now expecting 100-200,000 deaths; jobs are being lost by the millions; and schools are shuttered for the rest of year. Teachers and administrators have been scurrying of late, trying to apply the technologies they currently have been using to connect with and try to educate and care for their homebound students. Despite the influx of new technologies for personalized learning many teachers, students, and parents are not ready for round the clock distance learning. And schools, are often safe havens for many students, and the face-to-face relationships they have with their teachers are essential to their well-being.

COVID-19 is exposing deep inequities in schooling – including the limits of new technologies for personalized learning, as well as the limitations of charter schools and social entrepreneurs in truly turning public education around. The reauthorization of ESSA in the last days of the Obama administration, and the softening of the federally defined school accountability standards, has opened the door to rethinking accountability which has so defined what teachers and

administrators do and how schools as organizations remain stuck in the 1920s. Will COVID19 help us radically rethink the importance of public institutions and public schools as centers of their communities where an array of academic as well as social and physical health needs of students (and their families) are served? As Arnold so poignantly says “rural schools are the community.”

Before the outbreak of COVID-19, close to half of all children in our nation’s schools had been exposed to potentially traumatic events such as domestic or neighborhood violence, household mental illness, abuse, or neglect. Over the last 15 years the happiness of young people has dropped precipitously. Before the U.S. became the epicenter of the pandemic, 46 percent of America’s teachers reported high daily stress— primarily caused by “feeling responsible for outcomes over which they have limited control”. When we come out of COVID-19 it will be difficult to imagine what the numbers will be.

Even though more schools offer kids more computers and fewer textbooks, and most classrooms have smartboards instead of chalkboards, most students still attend schools designed in the 1920s, with the influence of Fredrick Taylor’s scientific management principles in mind. Students now need to meet power standards and not just know the facts. That is good. But the divvying of instruction, via a teacher, a video, or software is still divided up neatly into the twelve years of schooling over about approximately 7 hours in each of 180 days between August and June. Students go from classroom to classroom, mostly learning to meet standards defined by experts in English and Language Arts and math, and to some degree science and social studies/history – depending on state accountability mechanisms. Schools organize teaching and learning inside of a lock step curriculum, and dole it out in individual classrooms by teachers who are expected to know and do everything inside of their very own 4-walled classroom.

More teachers are learning through affinity networks and leading in informal ways. But their professional development is still most often controlled by others – and they have little time during their work week to learn from each other. In top-performing nations, school systems devise teaching schedules that embed effective

professional learning practices in teachers' daily work. Teachers can teach in teams and work with the same cohort of students over a number of years, giving them more time to customize lessons. Professional learning communities can focus on sustained action research, as opposed to a hodge-podge of issues. And, as is in the case in Singapore, some proportion of teachers have a dedicated amount of "free time" to devise their own innovations outside of the official curriculum. Social and physical health services are available inside of the school and teachers have time and space to work with other professionals to serve the whole child. A master teacher can earn as much or more than a principal. In Singapore, their reform motto is teach less; learn more. It is time for us to do the same.

## CONCLUSION

If the aforementioned tome does not answer all of your questions about fixing a poorly performing school district, then it is up to you to finish it on your new job. Some ask this question, "What is the most important thing about taking over a school district?" My answer is to learn about the community before you start making decisions. Listening to community residents, parents, students, staff, will get you started on the right foot.

When do you do that, both before and after you are hired. Start to take a look at local papers, copies of board minutes, and school district publications. etc. You can also learn a bunch by walking through the school buildings both in and out of session. That will tell you a great deal about how the district and individual buildings are run.

Don't be afraid to get your hair done/cut in a local establishment. How about eating at a local restaurant (not a high end one or a fast food one). Let yourself be seen in town or whatever passes for a town in your school district. Let people become comfortable with your presence. It's really not too hard to do.

Do not act in haste. That will ensure failure. That is not to say that if there are items that must be fixed quickly, such as building systems or other more dangerous things, you should not get them fixed immediately, unless they are immediately dangerous. You will then wonder why the previous administration did not fix it. Your tenure with the district will depend on your leadership ability. It will also need to be inclusive. I am aware that is a 1960's word. It does not mean that you do not move until everyone agrees with you. It means that you build consensus by listening to others.

I have not been a school superintendent in a long while. I was also a RESA (Regional Education Service Agency) Director for 9 years. Truthfully, I would not want to be a superintendent of a schools right now. That may also be a reason why so many superintendents have retired, left, or have been removed by their boards. From my information that number will only climb with the end of this calendar year.

Because I have so much more time to devote to research (reading stuff) I have seen the conundrums that supes are in on a daily basis. The pressure to open schools to in-person instruction is immense. Guidelines for opening seem to change with every new printing of papers from the CDC.

The national scene is very confusing. NREA has a ZOOM meeting with rural school organizations each month. The differences among the states is vast and the political situation is also very different in each state. Sometimes when I listen to other rural organization heads, I sigh and think that I am happy to be here in SC.

That is not to say that we are constantly doing the right thing. We seem to be close to the founts of information and have direct access to those that are making decisions. Recently CDC has put out a picture of how to determine low risk to highest risk of Covid-19. You may want to look at that on our website [www.scorsweb.org](http://www.scorsweb.org).

One thing for certain. Each of our school districts are different. It would be nice if we could have a one size fits all solution, but we don't. Each school district will have to determine its own course.

It would be nice if we could get all of our children back into school as they always have, but that is not possible at this juncture. The decisions that are made locally are probably the best that we can do. As I said the pressure is getting greater with each day, to open the schools. You know that will not happen soon. It appears that the Department of Education is trying its best to give rational guidance. They do not want you to make decisions based on “one piece of paper.” You know your district and know that the situation is. You have been feeding your students since March. Many of you have even been feeding families.

I am hoping that the authorities will listen to your particular description of your district and rely on you and your boards view. The safety of the children and the staff are most important. You are also protecting the community as a whole. I would rely on your best judgement.

There are no surefire ways of guaranteeing success. There will be steps and missteps. Your reaction to all of these things will stamp you as a leader. This is a long journey at best. Act with confidence, don't promise too much. If you do promise, make sure that you carry out your promise. If you do these things, folks will begin to have confidence in you.

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Public School Revenue Sources, NCES, [nces.ed.gov/program/coe/indicator-CME.ASP](http://nces.ed.gov/program/coe/indicator-CME.ASP), figure 2.

<sup>2</sup>Rodriguez v. San Antonio School District 411 US 1 (1973)

<sup>3</sup>Bissett, Janice and Hillman, Arnold, "History of School Funding in Pennsylvania 1682-2013, 2013, p. 57

<sup>4</sup>NTL Institute, "Lewin's Legacy," , [www.ntl.org/ntl-legacy](http://www.ntl.org/ntl-legacy).

<sup>5</sup>Visible Learning: A Synthesis of over 800 meta-analysis relating to achievement, 2008, Hattie John, Routledge.

<sup>6</sup>LA's Choice: Selecting an insider or outsider for next School Superintendent, [www.edsources.com](http://www.edsources.com), highlighting strategies for student success, 1/8/18 Louis Freedberg.

<sup>7</sup>Neill, A.S., Summerhill, a radical approach to child rearing, 1960 Hart Publishing.

<sup>8</sup><https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/ed/12/09/do-middle-schools-make-sense?>

<sup>9</sup>Seven Different Learning Theories. <https://www.verywellmind.com/child-development-theories-2795068>

<sup>10</sup>Five types of Classroom Teaching Styles, <https://education.cu-portland.edu/blog/classroom-resources/5-types-of-classroom-teaching-styles>

<sup>11</sup>Chapter 2 written in conjunction with Don Doggett

<sup>12</sup><http://www.austincc.edu/hr/eval/procedures/ClassObservCheck.pdf>

<sup>13</sup>[www.schoolsecurity.com](http://www.schoolsecurity.com)

<sup>14</sup>Dr. Barnett Berry, Research Professor, Founding Director, AL4SC accelerated for Learning and Leadership for South Carolina College of Education, University of South Carolina, [berrybw@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:berrybw@mailbox.sc.edu)

<sup>15</sup>Carol Hillman, consultant, Bright Futures Unlimited, penned this Chapter in anticipation of legislation to be proposed.