

How To Fix a Failing High School

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By educationrealist

A few weeks ago I took a two-week, 3000 mile road trip. This naturally involved listening to a lot of talk radio, from All Things Considered to Rush Limbaugh, Terry Gross to Sean Hannity, as well as gun rights (a show called Armed America, maybe?) sports, financial advice, and some entertaining law show (something about a Handle?).

Time and again, no matter the station's tilt or speaker's ideology, someone would get around to mentioning our failing schools. This, they all agreed on. So progressives or conservatives, whatever—I'd be yelling back at them. Meanwhile, I'd picked up [The Prize](#) as one of my reading assignments for the trip, so I was mentally yelling at Mark Zuckerberg, Chris Christie, and Cory Booker. On one of those days, I was listening to some Milwaukee guy subbing for Rush, talking about its failing schools, and Trump calling for choice and me growling at everyone for being idiots....

...and at some point, I reminded myself that I was just fuming what I opposed, and the idiots I was fuming at would tell me I hated kids. Or worse, that I was a defeatist, who thought "these kids" couldn't learn. And neither comes anywhere near my point.

Which is what, exactly? What would I do to fix schools? I gave myself a hypothetical:

Superintendent Jones comes to me and says, "High Poverty High has a 50% graduation rate, 70% average attendance, and a staff that's 40% long-term substitutes. Most of the best kids are creamed off by the three local charters. I want you to turn this school around. You need to **move the needle**. What do you need?"

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I would tell Jones that if the "needle" had to be test scores I would have to turn down her generous offer.

Otherwise.

Students

1. I'd review student records and, by grade, start four piles: Functioners, Reachable, Absentees and Disruptors.
2. I'd tell the principal that my first priority was improving academic life for the Functioners.
3. My next priority would be convincing Reachable students to become Functioners.
4. Inherent in priorities 1 and 2 is separating the Disruptors from the other two groups. Disruptors would be given schedules, but the classes would all be with very tough teachers whose primary purpose would be to make their lives interesting if they behaved, insanely tedious if they didn't. Ultimately, the goal would be to transform Disruptors into Reachables—or Absentees.
5. I'd give Absentees very low priority, categorized assimply as either Their Choice or Parents' Choice.
6. Students would be broadly classed by ability. I don't mean tracking, per se. But no more than two years' range required for any teacher's lesson plan.
7. Students would be taught material they needed to learn, not material that the government said they should be learning.

Staffing and Master Schedule

1. Twice the supervisors. As for administrators, one on call to deal with student issues, the rest monitoring the grounds with the supervisor. Keep three admins on campus at all time.
2. Teachers with planned absences had to submit a lesson plan and prepare their students for the absence. Teachers with unplanned absences would be expected in all but a few cases to call in and give an outline of what needs to be done. Basically, as few wasted days as possible.
3. Substitutes show up and teach in twos. I mean, come on. They're cheap. One to take attendance and shepherd kids to bathrooms, one to run lessons.
4. Teachers would be classified based on the degree to which they required Functionals and Reachables, or their ability to motivate Disruptors.
5. I need to be able to either add new courses to the district catalog or, ideally, lie about the course content. Thus I might have eight courses labelled "business math" that were actually 2 classes to handle Disruptors, one class to prepare low-skilled Functionals for algebra 2, and 4 to get seniors ready for placement tests.
6. I would also want a [responsibility center](#), as they are euphemistically known, for those days when Reachables feels like misbehaving. It would be a very boring place where students could only sit still or do work they'd refused to do in class. Remember, Disruptors have their own classes with tough teachers and few removals, but they, too, would be sent here.

Goals

1. Students who wanted to come to school, be safe, and improve their abilities would see an instantaneous improvement.
2. Students with advanced capabilities would be given challenging and rigorous instructions. Students with remedial or average capabilities would not be given fake transcripts that said, for example, they took pre-calculus when they actually took first year algebra. But they would, in

fact, learn more algebra.

3. Students would be given intense instruction in reading interesting books and writing their thoughts. They would not "study literature" until they were reading at 10th grade level and capable of writing their thoughts coherently.
4. The number of students who wanted to come to school, be safe, and improve their abilities would increase.
5. Disruptors who were incapable of behaving with the above students would nonetheless be encouraged and cared for, learning what they can, without interfering with other students.
6. Kids who were absent by their choice would be sent to alternative schools. Parents who kept their children absent would be handled by the state.
7. Students would receive advice and support for post-secondary placement, from vocational to military to college.