

TURNAROUND SPECIALIST ROUNDTABLE



What does it take to turn around a failing school? John Merrow talked to three so-called “turnaround specialists” hired by the state of Virginia to save its underperforming schools.

The turnaround specialist program, the latest, hottest idea in education, recruits successful principals from high achieving schools and reassigns them to schools stuck at the bottom, after giving them a couple of weeks of summer training. Is this enough to turn around years of failure? Listen in to John Merrow's conversation with turnaround specialists Catherine Thomas, Jaye Harrison-Coleman and Michael McClellan to find out.

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CATHERINE THOMAS

When you go into low-performing schools initially the staff is beat up, there is no morale. It doesn't exist. Not only are the kids failing, but the teachers feel a sense of failure, too, as well. And ... and that's what creates these environments that you see with ... with chaos and out of order and the building is in disrepair. Nobody really cares. And that ... that's deep. That's really deep.

JOHN TULENKO

IF THINGS ARE THAT BAD, HOW DO YOU CHANGE IT? WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO TURN AROUND A SCHOOL LIKE THAT? JOHN MERROW TALKED TO THREE SO CALLED “TURNAROUND SPECIALISTS” HIRED BY THE STATE OF VIRGINIA TO SAVE ITS FAILING SCHOOLS. THE TURNAROUND SPECIALIST PROGRAM, THE LATEST, HOTTEST IDEA IN EDUCATION,

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RECRUITS SUCCESSFUL PRINCIPALS FROM HIGH ACHIEVING SCHOOLS AND REASSIGNS THEM TO SCHOOLS STUCK AT THE BOTTOM—AFTER GIVING THEM A COUPLE OF WEEKS OF SUMMER TRAINING AT BUSINESS SCHOOL. JOHN SAT DOWN WITH TURNAROUND SPECIALISTS CATHERINE THOMAS, JAYE HARRISON-COLEMAN, AND MICHAEL MCCLELLAN.

JOHN MERROW When we started with following Park, there was this ... well, he basically has a year to turn the school around. And this ... does it? Is a year enough to...

JAYE H.-COLEMAN No. Well, I guess it depends on where the school is. You know, if ... if the school is making some progress and the teachers are qualified and the momentum is there, you'll probably do it in a year. But when you walk in to a brand new situation, uh, ... Where your principal has been moved by the district and resentment is in that building and you start from the ground floor and you're trying to build relationships, get things moving and ... and ... and move as quickly as you can, but you've got to change the culture and work on that. You know, the ... the dynamics that you confront with bringing people together has to be taken care of first and then you can move on with turning it around.

CATHERINE THOMAS I think it depends on how you...

JOHN MERROW I'm sorry, Catherine, what?

CATHERINE THOMAS I think it depends on how you qualify a turnaround process, because in a year's time you can certainly address academic achievement. And ... and that's a short-term win from September to June is ... is to get the instructional program launched and up and effective. Longer-term issues, culture, um, hiring and retaining highly qualified staff, building relationships with the community, are things that do take three to five years to evolve, to become really powerful, um, supporters of a school. But in a year's time, you can ... you can turn around ... you can turn a school around.

JOHN MERROW What's the message that the school has received when it's been ... you know, the ... oh, we're ... we're putting you on a list; you're at the bottom. We're sending in some ... some specialist and so on. I mean, is it ... Do they welcome you with open arms, or ... ? Michael?

MICHAEL MCCLELLAN It depends how the program is presented to people or ... or you ... how you present yourselves to the staffs that you inherit. There is a sort of inherent anxiety about anyone that's coming in when you have all these titles associated with who you are. Um, I think it's grossly unfair that in some of these schools you have staffs working as hard as they can. And even

though the progress may not be, um, that which is required by all the legislation, they have made some. My feeling is if you come into school and you know so much math and at the end of the year you know more than you did, that's progress. Um, but this practice of rating schools and giving them the report card while at the same time constantly ignoring that these schools are in different environments or facing extraordinarily different challenges is not only grossly unfair, but it ... it is extraordinarily demoralizing to these, um, teachers.

JAYE H.-COLEMAN

You can make gains in one year ... year. But you completely turn around a school in one year, will not have sustainability. You'll make progress. But the turnaround process takes time and ... and ... and I ... I still say it depends on where you start. It depends on where you start. You walk into a school that's in their fourth year and you know you have to do it within the ... that two- year span or that school is going to close or sanctions or whatever, uh, the pressure is on. But the immediate thing is to get people the change of what has been going on for so long to cause failure has to be addressed. You've got to get teachers in the classroom teaching, lessons plans done, classroom management taken care of. So it is a process. And everybody doesn't walk in to schools where the majority of the people are highly qualified, ready to go, ready for this new person to come in and say, hey, you need to tweak what you're doing and do it a little better.

JOHN MERROW

Let's go to Catherine, yeah

CATHERINE THOMAS

What we're finding, um, universally when you look at ... at the ten schools last year and now 20 schools this year, there's some common elements that turnaround people found when ... when they came in that got that school to be a performing school. Many of the schools were at one point in time a high performing school that ... that nose-dived and tanked. Typically. Jaye's got a different situation because they closed schools and put a school together. That's unique. Truly extraordinary and unique. And brought different issues to ... to her. But generally speaking this is what we're finding. And when I came in as ... as a new principal, because I was the person sent from Richmond to a rural area, it ... the ... the ... the resistance was ... was huge. And ... and if that didn't get, um, addressed immediately, you weren't going to be able to do a thing. You weren't going to be able to take one step forward. So when I came in, I came in with ... with I'm here to help. You were at one time a high-performing school. And ... and now we've ... we've lost our vision, we've lost our purpose and it's about getting everybody back up on the same page and rebuilding the team again. And ... and I've got the resources to help you. And ... and that's the way that ... that I came in with it.

JOHN MERROW

Not, "I'm here to save you.

CATHERINE THOMAS No.

MICHAEL MCCLELLAN One of the most important things that you have to do in any change, whether it's public or private sector, you have to be really compassionate and understanding of the people that you expect to change, because really you can't change anyone. But you can create an environment where people will change themselves. And that's what you hope for.

JOHN MERROW I'm curious about that process that you've gone through where your own ... your own learning. Tell me a little bit about the kinds of things you learned as you've been going through this.

MICHAEL MCCLELLAN Um, when you talk about staffs, staffs, uh, as you said earlier about getting these report cards that say you're no good. Over time they get beat up and they lose that spirit and that enthusiasm. And sometimes it's really because of the administration. There is no nurturing of teachers. There's no support. Those teachers that are struggling, you don't get them in the things they need to succeed or those ... or teachers who are struggling that you know are never going to succeed. To create that ambiance within your school where they celebrate learning, where it's a place that nurtures and cares for kids, where it's also a place where teachers are cared for and nurtured. Um, it's an extraordinarily difficult thing to do.

JOHN MERROW Can you do it in a year?

MICHAEL MCCLELLAN No. There is no model that says any sustainable change will be done in a year.

JAYE H.-COLEMAN Your determination, of course, will definitely leave the speed in which things are done and ... and how you would handle things. But I guess one of the dilemmas I had, when ... when I went to the first school that I the ... as a principal in Portsmouth, the principal left. She resigned. Um, and when I walked into that school I was received as this is our new principal, she left us. So I was the hero. And the school that I have now has been open for ten years and the ... the faculty been there for that ten years, most of them. And their principal was removed. So that ... the resentment that took the first year to just work with the resentment and send people where they needed to be. Putting people on that bus and getting them in the right seat was the goal for that particular year. And if we made gains, we made gains because we did the work in process. But I couldn't do the same thing I did at my former school when I got to this school. And that was a rude awakening for me, because I thought I could go in there running and get the job done and do it. Um, I had to build relationships before I could even process.

- JOHN MERROW Are ... are those two goals, better test scores and changing the culture of the school, are they in harmony or do they conflict in any way?
- JOHN MERROW Let's start with Catherine.
- CATHERINE THOMAS They're in harmony, and it ... and it ... and it's part and parcel. And ... and I ... I don't think that the focus should be on ... on the ... the time, you know, can you do this in a year or not. I really think that that ... that totally takes away from ... from the mission that we have when we go into these ... into these low-performing schools that so desperately need the help and resources that we bring to them. So I think focusing on a year, can you do this in a year or not, that's really not the ... the critical point. The ... the critical point is can you put a leader inside a situation that's desperate for children and turn it around so hat it becomes a high-performing, um, program ... school that provides a rigorous educational program for children, whether that in some cases can ... can be a year or two years or three years I ... I really don't think that that should be ... should be the focus. It's about putting that effective person in there. When ... when you look at going in you're looking at ... you're looking at what can you have an immediate ... -mediate action on. Then at the same time you're looking at those long-term goals. And the long-term goals are ... are building a sustainable organization. That ... that does take a longer amount of time. But ... but the immediate things you can do is ... is to focus teachers on teaching, and that in turn gets you the increase in ... in the achievement immediately. But you'll get a big jump that first year and then year two and three it's harder and harder and harder to push up that achievement.
- JOHN MERROW Michael, you wanted to...
- MICHAEL MCCLELLAN Catherine's exactly right. I think you go in there and there is some fundamental things which people ... the general public would say, well, gee, that ought to be something that's in place, to basically go and restore order. I mean, I ... I have a school that had over 5,000 discipline referrals for 800 plus kids. That's ... that's obscene. I mean, how ... how could you in your wildest imagination think that you could be worrying about test scores when you have an average of 30, 40 kids a day in the front office just for, um, ... there's no order.
- CATHERINE THOMAS And that's lost learning time, because they're hanging out in the office. So how are they possibly going to be ready to take a test when they're hanging in the office two or three times a week losing two to three hours of instruction?

MICHAEL MCCLELLAN And it's not only for them. If you have the classroom teacher that has to stop, write a referral. So while she stops to do that, all these other students are deprived of her expertise. And if you figure out that they're doing that 5,000 times a year and you multiply it out just collectively how much learning time is lost.

JOHN MERROW And your experience is similar to Park Land's. I mean, his middle school, pretty chaotic as well.

MICHAEL MCCLELLAN I think if the public collectively knew what we deal with in our public schools and some of the schools they would be outraged. Um, that to me was probably, um, the great epiphany. Because I've been in high schools with 4,000 and 6,000 kids and there wasn't that much behavior issues. But it just seemed ... that particular school has averaged, since the year 2000, over 4,000 referrals a year for 850 kids. We have 900 now. So that's outrageous. Absolutely outrageous. In the inner city schools, um, where I've been, the ... the discipline is the number one concern. Because without order there is no learning. And I'm not talking about oppressive discipline. I'm talking about simple compliance with regular rules and procedures, simple courtesies that individuals extend toward one another. Um, and a lot of that is the result of what goes on external to the school and it finds its way into the schoolhouse. And the old adage about where they're just for reading, writing, arithmetic, carries little weight if you're confronted with this on a daily basis.

JOHN MERROW How about you, Catherine?

CATHERINE THOMAS This is my third school to turn around. And what we found is that when we got the kids engaged in the instructional program once we got the teachers to be more effective to be able to engage the kids, then we saw our discipline totally fall to the wayside. when I got there, I heard from all the teachers, discipline, discipline. Our kids are out of control. They come off the bus out of control. And we just weren't providing the program to the kids that engaged them in a way that was meaningful to them. So this year it's a totally different, um, environment inside of our school. and kids are in the learning process. And we have a couple of things that we deal with. But not to the degree that we did yesterday. But our teachers are more effective. Our teachers are more engaged. Our teachers are exuding a more positive, um, tolerant, motivating attitude out to the children. And that's what they, in turn, receive back. And I ... I think that when you go into low-performing schools initially the staff is beat up, there is no morale. It doesn't exist. Not only are the kids failing, but the teachers feel a sense of failure, too, as well. And ... and that's what creates these environments that you see with ... with chaos

and out of order and the building is in disrepair. Nobody really cares. And that ... that's deep. That's really deep. And that ... that's one of the main things that ... that as a leader you have to come in and really address. You've got to, so to speak, really ... really the troops up. I mean, get them going. And ... and change that attitude and that mind set. And then in turn all of the pieces seem to kind of come with it.

JOHN MERROW But what Michael said was first he had to restore ... I think what you were saying is first you have to restore order. And how did you do that, Michael?

JAYE H.-COLEMAN Can I...

JOHN MERROW Well, Jaye, I mean, I'm sorry. Jaye.

JAYE H.-COLEMAN Can I please interject?

JOHN MERROW Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

JAYE H.-COLEMAN Um, I agree with Michael on restoring order. I had to restore a whole faculty basically. I brought people with me from my former school to carry on the vision and mission that we had there. I hired new people. And then I had the ones that stayed to see if they were going to make me or break me, because they wanted their principal back. We are at the point ... yeah, we were ... academics is always it. Pushing academics. But if you don't have classroom management, if you don't want to do ... and you have had ten years of a very relaxed, laid-back, you know, get the job done if we do, they can't really get it, they're not going to get there mentality. So I ... I wasn't fortunate enough to have the faculty to say, (Snaps), let's go and we ... we run with that. And ... and it's so different. It is hard for one person to speak for all turnaround, because everybody has a different situation and walk into different places at different times.

JOHN MERROW Mm-hm. Well, one of the things we've seen with Park is, you know, some real challenges, trying to restore order, trying to get his faculty to ... to really be part of that and meeting resistance there.

JAYE H.-COLEMAN I have a lot of resistance, a lot of resistance. I ... I think the education association probably knew what time I came to work, what time I left. I was reported over and over and over and over again. Um, this turnaround specialist. And even though the superintendent explained what a turnaround specialist was, I still had the resistance. And I had to work through that. And I couldn't get rid of everybody. So with some people I had to build relationships and get the ball rolling.

QUESTION How about for you, Catherine?

CATHERINE THOMAS Um, the biggest obstacle was to come in immediately and, um, rally the teachers together. They had been through three tumultuous years with the previous principal where the scores had declined from an all-time high of 82 percent to an all-time low of 33 percent. So when I ... when I got there it was at the end of a three-year battle that they had waged with the former principal. And the staff was fractured. Feelings and emotions were ... were very raw, very much on the surface. And that's all that the staff wanted to help about was ... was what had taken place for the previous three years. And that was the focus. And who ... who liked who and who didn't like who and why this happened and why that happened and ... and the finger pointing and the blame. And no one wanted to address the why part of 33 percent. How did we fail our students, lose our focus and go from 82 percent passing to 33 percent passing. How did that happen? But no one wanted to really talk about that. So immediately I had to pull together a leadership team and ... and get the focus back on the school, back on students and ... and back on achievement. And we had to ... to put the past behind us and move forward.

JOHN MERROW Why is that tough to do? Why would the ... I mean, wouldn't teachers want to get back up to 82 percent?

CATHERINE THOMAS I think they want to but I think that ... that ... that when you're in the heat ... when you're in the moment, when you're with a group of people you have group think. And if the collective group wants to stay there and ... and cycle through, uh, this emotional kind of wasteland toxic place that they've been for three years that has become the norm in the school, this ... this emotional tension, this focus on what people are and aren't doing. Adult issues. Not ... nothing to do with students at all. And that ... the norms change inside of a building. So when you come in one of the things is ... is to try to establish a new norm. And that's part of ... of institutionalizing behavior or moving to the sustainability phase, too, of a school.

JOHN MERROW You would have had to ... to change the conversation.

CATHERINE THOMAS Literally. And it ... it's ... it's so cool because just ... just the other day I had a conversation in the ... in the teacher's lounge at ... at lunch time. And teachers were talking to me about books that their students were reading and who scored what on a test. The ... the entire dialogue in the building is very, very different, very different. Last year at this time in the teacher's lounge we had, uh, para educator threaten to stab another teacher. So you can see that the conversations have changed inside the school.

JOHN MERROW How about you, Michael? Obstacle?

MICHAEL MCCLELLAN Almost exactly what Catherine faced. Um, metaphorically the staff just brutalized for three years. Faculty meetings were used to pit, um, staff against one another. The previous administration intentionally would orchestrate these ... I would characterize them as battles. Staff was threatened. Comments like, "If I'm going down, you're going down with me." But you have to say, look, things are going to be better. Um, you have to give them that opportunity to vent, to let all of that out. I met with ... like most of us, I met with each staff member for like two weeks individually and I had four or five just cry...because they ... they had been sitting on it. And as Catherine said, it's raw emotion. And once they get over that and they get a sense that, you know, your focus is also on them. And so those are ... those are kinds of fundamental things that you confront. And that toxic ... as Catherine said, that toxic culture, when you have staff pitted against one another, when you have the ... I call them the ins and the out, the cliques and ... and that's nurtured in a negative way by the administration. You have a school, um, that's "fractioned." And, um, you know, you have your faculty meeting. But then the real meeting takes place in the parking lot. And then everybody ... you know, that's the agenda.

JOHN MERROW I'm intrigued by that, Michael. You said your school was chaotic. What did you do to get the school under control, to get the discipline issue off to the side, if you will?

MICHAEL MCCLELLAN Um, you just have to establish systems and you have a system in place. Students understand what the expectations are. Teachers understand what the expectations are of them. And kids, regardless if they're in elementary, middle, senior high, kids want to know, tell me what you expect of me. Tell me what I'm supposed to do. Tell me what happens if I don't do what I'm supposed to do. And then you follow ... follow through. Um, then you have to spend time with the community and say, look; this is the whole purpose of school. We're here to educate our students. We'll give them the best we can when they come through that door. But when they come through that door, here are the expectations while they're here.

JOHN MERROW But reaching the community, um, you know, Park's School has 700-plus kids. Not even 100 parents came to parents' night. And it's ... it sounds easy; you'll reach into the community. But maybe it's not as easy as it sounds.

MICHAEL MCCLELLAN No, you have to go where the parents are. If they don't come ... one of the things I did when I got to Farmville was speak at some of the churches. And go where the parents are. And sometimes in the community you simply say, okay, we're going to have open house. But you have to take into consideration how are the parents going to get there, what ... you know, how they're going to get home. And it's a ... as you are sensitive for

the children you also need to be sensitive for the parents. And so you ... you have to create the opportunity for the parents, not expect the parents to create the opportunity to come to you.

JOHN MERROW

In Park's school, um, teachers that have a couple of kids acting out, and they would refer them to the office. They'd get them out of the class. You could almost understand it from a teacher's point of view. You've got 30 kids. You've got two troublemakers. If I get rid of those two I can do ... do my teaching with the remaining 28. But if every teacher puts two or three kids out into the hall, you have chaos. Catherine?

CATHERINE THOMAS

Well, what we did at our school ...

JOHN MERROW

And then maybe Jaye.

CATHERINE THOMAS

It's because, as I said, when I came, that was one of the top issues for teachers is we don't have any discipline, our students are ... aren't behaving. We can't teach because of that. So we pulled together a group of teachers and we formed a ... a discipline committee. And we developed school-wide rules for the school, which got posted and put up everywhere and ... and the kids can recite them by heart to you because, um, in the morning message every morning we said the school rules all together. So everybody knew that that was the focus last year was to get that established. We established grade level rules and consequences for the whole entire school. Everybody had the same set of classroom rules and everybody had the same set of consequences and that we ... we developed as a staff. Every ...

JOHN MERROW

Did you do that in the first week? Or is that somewhere?

CATHERINE THOMAS

Yes. It was in the first month of school.

JOHN MERROW

Let me ask Jaye. Jaye, you were ...

JAYE H.-COLEMAN

Well, one of the major things we did at our first retreat was a talk about the discipline of ... in the school and the numbers of referrals that had been ... we had the records that had been sent to the district office. And so we did do basically the same thing. Um, we used Marvin Marshall's plan of positive discipline within the school. And it's about teaching procedures, procedures for everything. And not one-time procedures. You go through it over and over again. The second thing, and I stopped suspending ... my kids want to be suspended. They enjoy being suspended. That's time to go home and do ... so I stopped suspensions. I do ST5s where they have to come back in with their parent in order not to be suspended. And that gives me an opportunity to meet with the parents and talk about this is what you signed at the beginning of the year that you were going to support. We need this kind of support. Teachers do not put children out in the hallway.

If it becomes so offense then the documentation should come that we looked at probably placement in our elementary alternative program. But you have to document. And you can't put a child out because you get angry or because they frustrate you. That's your job and you need to look at what teaching styles are you using. Are you using concepts and ideas that bring about the child is engaged and wants to be there to learn? And that can happen. But you have to work at it. It is not easy.

MICHAEL MCCLELLAN A teacher who is well prepared, has planned the lesson, has, uh, taken into consideration the students they are teaching, and has those students regularly engaged in what I called chunking ... you take the lesson and break it ... and so there's constant engagement, those stu ... those teachers do not have discipline problems. The talking heads and those who have not prepared the ... for the, uh ... to ... maximize their instruction time, the kids fill in the gaps. And usually they don't fill them in in the best of ways. my feeling about teaching is it's 80 percent students, 20 percent teacher. The teacher is the coach, the students are doing all the work. And when you don't have that, and I know all of us who have been in classes ... when you go in a classroom and that's not in place, you have kids gazing into space, chewing on pencils, doing everything non-instructional. And the middle school child because of the stage they're in physically and emotionally is an individual that needs to engaged.

JOHN MERROW The three of you have been through this for a while now. Michael, you're in your first year. Go ... take ... I want you to think back to the first year. I mean, there have been times when Park said to us, we've been following him around, "This feels like failure."

CATHERINE THOMAS Never.

JOHN MERROW You've never ..?

CATHERINE THOMAS No.

JOHN MERROW You never had a low ... ? Come on now.

JAYE H.-COLEMAN I ... I ... I have.

JOHN MERROW Okay, let's start with Jaye, yeah.

JAYE H.-COLEMAN Uh, I ... I've had that feeling "This feels like failure." Uh, I ... I was engaged with a ... a program in my school that I ... I didn't not support that program. It was there when I got there, and I could not readily walk in and change it, but I could look at what was going on in the classroom and the response the kids were doing on the benchmark. And knowing that my program didn't match the benchmark made me horribly afraid that this

looks like failure, because I had absolutely nothing to go on to make sure that my kids were coming up to where they needed to be at different sectors in the school year. So I had that feeling, "This feels like ... " And I ... I didn't keep it to myself. When I saw "This looks like failure," I called everybody, I called literally everybody from the superintendent ... to UVA to the State Department. And I said, "This looks like failure," and I wasn't wrong. I mean, I am supposed to be the stronghold, you are supposed to look at me and say, "This is my principal, and we're going to follow her because she is the leader, and we are going to do what we need to do to get these kids where they need to be."

JOHN MERROW No roller coaster for you at all, Katherine, you were always up, you were..?

CATHERINE THOMAS I had to be. I had to be. That's my job. That's my job.

JOHN MERROW Well, what ... what was your reality?

CATHERINE THOMAS My ... we ... we had some tough spots, but ... but you're going to hit tough spots when you're implementing new ideas, new programs, it's ... it's just part and parcel, it comes with it. And it ... it's keeping an unwavering constant faith that you're on the right track, you're heading in the right direction, and at the end it's ... you're going to come out okay. And we ... we had validation through, uh, test scores and benchmark testing that we had put into place. Sometimes the benchmark scores didn't come back where we wanted them to be, but ... but that was good information for us because then we knew what we needed to do.

JOHN MERROW But there were tough spots.

CATHERINE THOMAS It made ... it made the job even that much more clear. Sure there's tough spots, it's hard work. And ... and I think to ... to not send the message out there that it's not hard work, that ... that's just not the case. It's hard work. And you have to love ... to want to press and push yourself that ... that much. I'm the one that's out there selling these folks, the community, the teachers and the kids, this big idea that if you follow me, if you have this blind faith in me, I'm going to take us where ... where we need to be. And ... and I had to have that ... that every day. the other thing I think as a ... as a ... and when you're in this kind of position as a turnaround specialist, or even a principal, you have to find some other network sources to keep you pumped to find ways ...to re-energize and reinvigorate yourself. Because when you walk in that building in the morning, every single day people look at you, and they take the read of the day off you. And if you walk in that door as the principal of that school and you've got failure on your face, then everything you say and do exudes failure. And where are you going to go from that? So, no. No, we just ... we hit some ... we hit some

tough patches, but I think also that that builds unity amongst your staff, because you've got to figure your way out.

JOHN MERROW

I wonder, is it lonely work?

JAYE H.-COLEMAN

It is very lonely, because you see the failure; you see, this looks like, feels like, smells like failure, and you know that you have to address it. There's no one that's going to stand beside you when you're addressing it. You have to tell people that you've known for awhile: 'You know, I ... I really think this might be better, or this might lead to change.' I have to ... the buck stops with me. Anybody can help me make the decision, but in the final end, I have to be accountable for every decision that comes ... even when a team comes together, I've gotta be accountable.

CATHERINE THOMAS

What makes it lonely, uh, for me is because I ... I feel that this is ... this is my family. My family has just grown in a tremendous way. And ... and those teachers are part of my family, and every single kid that's in that building is a part of my family. And just like I do with ... with my close, close home family and this extended family, I worry about everybody. And ... and you have intimate knowledge about children in your building who've been abused, or live in ... in, um, really terrible conditions, or you know they don't have food or electricity or ... or something really horrific happened at home. And you know intimate things about your ... your staff - who's having different kinds of personal problems or maybe a staff member has cancer. And ... and all of that, you have to hold up inside of you, and you can't go around and talk about all this stuff. And these are all your little family members that are consigned in your head, and then, when you lay down at night, and you try to finally get quiet after one of those 16-, 18-hour days, you ... you kinda ... you ... you become very close to all of this: the ... the adults, the staff, the bus drivers, the custodians, those kids, and you think about them, and you worry about them. And ... and you ... you want to help. You want to ... you so much want to help make it better for everybody, and you know that you just ... you can't. I mean, you really don't have anybody to ... to share all this with.

MICHAEL MCCLELLAN

Leader ... leadership, regardless of the, uh, arena, is a lonely profession. Ultimately, when you close the door, the decisions, you have to make. And so, uh, you have to find some source external to what you do to find your peace, so to speak. But I never look at it as failure. One of the reasons that, um, we have involved ourselves in this process, or engage in this process, is because failure has been institutionalized, but in terms of attitude and behavior that a whole ... it has been institutionalized in a sense that a whole group of children, for whatever reason and circumstances over which they have had no choice, have been indicted to get less than the best that we can offer. And so, teachers think these children...

CATHERINE THOMAS ... that it's okay ...

MICHAEL MCCLELLAN Yeah ...and, not only ... uh, yeah, and it's not only institutionalized at the classroom level, it's institutionalized above that; sometimes at State level, is that because of a particular set of circumstances, a particular group of people are not going to be successful. And so, when you believe that, then you're not going to do anything on their behalf to say, yes, everyone can rise above, we can give you the best we have to give all of our children. And once the institutional ... um, once failure becomes institutionalized, then people are doomed. You have to institutionalize success and say - I know it's a cliché - but all children can be successful. Well, after you say that, what are you willing to do on behalf of those children? Are you willing to ensure that each child has the best teacher we can find ... Are you going to provide all the resources that those particular schools need? And so we on one side, we say, 'Oh yes, we have all these noble goals,' but in the practical sense, we don't do very much to ensure that we reach them.

JOHN MERROW Do you ever think the real issue is poverty that ... that this society just asks schools to solve every damn problem we have...

MICHAEL MCCLELLAN Yes. The schools over time and ... since I've been in Administration, the ... the position of the Principal has become so complex because the issues that affect the community come into the schoolhouse. And so, now we're asked to counsel, provide breakfast, lunch, provide meaningful healthcare, counsel people that are having addictions; find outside agencies to help (Inaudible) ... and so the school, and the children, come to us with many, many problems.

JOHN MERROW Toughest ... toughest job in America.

CATHERINE THOMAS And we ... and we have the same resources to do ... to compound these complex issues that we had 20 years ago.

JOHN MERROW Is it impossible ... is there a school... that cannot be turned around?

MICHAEL MCCLELLAN No.

JAYE H.-COLEMAN No.

CATHERINE THOMAS No.

JAYE H.-COLEMAN Yes - you can turn around any school. It never ... actually, no.

CATHERINE THOMAS Absolutely, absolutely.

JOHN TULENKO

DESPITE MAKING THREE-YEAR COMMITMENTS, ALREADY MORE THAN HALF OF THE 21 TURNAROUND SPECIALISTS HIRED SINCE 2004 HAVE EITHER CHANGED SCHOOLS OR LEFT THE PROGRAM, INCLUDING MICHAEL MCCLELLAN, CATHERINE THOMAS, AND PARKE LAND, THE PRINCIPAL WHOSE WORK WE REPORTED ON FOR THE NEWSHOUR.

MICHAEL LEFT AFTER HIS FIRST YEAR ON THE JOB, LEAVING BEHIND DECLINING TEST SCORES IN MATH AND A SCHOOL FAILING TO MEET FEDERAL STANDARDS FOR IMPROVEMENT. HE ATTRIBUTES HIS DEPARTURE TO AN UNSUPPORTIVE FORMER SUPERINTENDENT AND A LACK OF UNDERSTANDING OF THE SPECIALIST PROGRAM IN HIS DIVISION.

CATHERINE LEFT ON A MUCH HIGHER NOTE AFTER HER SECOND YEAR, INCREASING TEST SCORES SUBSTANTIALLY IN BOTH READING AND MATH. SHE FEELS SHE HAS SUCCESSFULLY 'TURNED AROUND' HER FAILING SCHOOL AND NOW WORKS AS A CONSULTANT FOR A NON-PROFIT GROUP THAT HELPS PRINCIPALS TURN THEIR SCHOOLS AROUND.

JAYE HARRISON-COLEMAN SPENT TWO YEARS AT HER SCHOOL, RAISING ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS, BUT APPARENTLY NOT FAST ENOUGH. HER SCHOOL CLOSED DOWN IN JUNE, MARKING THE FIRST TIME A VIRGINIA DIVISION HAS CLOSED DOWN A SCHOOL UNDER THE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND LAW. SHE IS NOW TRYING TO 'TURN AROUND' CRADOCK MIDDLE SCHOOL.

IF YOU MISSED OUR NEWHOUR SERIES ON THE TURNAROUND SPECIALIST PROGRAM, PLEASE VISIT OUR WEBSITE AT PBS.ORG/MERROW. THAT'S M-E-R-R-O-W. I'M JOHN TULENKO. THANKS FOR LISTENING.

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