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# Turning around at-risk schools: what effective principals do

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## **Introduction**

At-risk schools are defined by the Department of Education in the state of Selangor, Malaysia as schools with serious disciplinary problems and low academic achievement. In 2003, the Selangor Department of Education identified 22 schools in this category (Selangor State Department of Education, 2003). Some have shown remarkable improvements and have turned around the situation from being 'at-risk' to 'excellent'.

Two such schools near Kuala Lumpur, identified as turned around at-risk schools, became the subjects of our study. They were chosen on the basis of having been considered at-risk due to their very low academic achievement and high number of disciplinary problems and having now emerged as strong competitors to other schools in academic and co-curricular activities. The two schools have since won many awards including the Excellent School Award, mainly because their principals dared to dream what seemed impossible and led the schools towards achieving it.

Principals play an important role in molding schools, showing priority and focus, initiating collaborations and innovations. They shape the school culture by becoming effective role models themselves. They are responsible for improving the climate of the school, changing the way others think, behaving and defining their priorities. Effective principals do things in their own unique ways. This paper aims at describing and discussing what principals in these schools did to change the climate of their schools into a positive one that enabled them to turn around their at-risk schools to schools deemed as excellent.

## **What is School Climate?**

According to Minneapolis Public Schools (2008), school climate is the 'sum of values, cultures, safety practices and organizational structures in a school that cause it to function and react in particular ways.' This includes 'how students, staff and community interact and what approaches are used to solve school problems'. School climate thus is reflected by the way students, teachers and the community feel about the school, how they react, what they believe and how

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they interact with each other. At-risk schools have many disengaged students who are disruptive and uninterested in learning. To reverse these trends, risk prevention efforts need to be focused on improving the school climate with the aim of enhancing students' attachment and sense of belonging to the school and their engagement with learning (Wehle, 1988). School climate can be discerned based on four aspects of school environment Tableman, (2004), namely the physical environment, the social environment, the affective environment and the academic environment. An analysis of the change in school climate of both schools in this study will concentrate on these aspects of the school environment.

### **Methodology**

This paper is based on a qualitative study of two selected turn-around at-risk schools, one in the State of Selangor and the other in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Both had been listed as at-risk by the education department, but are now considered as exemplary due to their accomplishments in various endeavors. Former principals, present teachers and students from both schools were interviewed to discern the changes and programs introduced that led to the turn around, specifically those that led to improvements in the climate of the school. Methods of data collection include interviews, document content analysis and observation. Semi-structured questions were developed prior to data collection to guide researchers during the interview with respondents.

### **Background of Schools**

#### *School One*

Perimbun High School, is a multi-ethnic school with all the major ethnic groups proportionately represented in it: Malays, Chinese and Indians. The school is located in a working and lower middle class suburban area near the city of Kuala Lumpur. It is a big double session school with 3,000 students. Before the turn around, the school was labeled by the police as a 'gang school'; parents often requested their children to be transferred to other schools, and teachers dreaded to be posted there. The students had low self esteem, often fought with one another and police involvement was common.

The former principal was posted to the school in 1998 and stayed for a decade. After careful observation of the culture of the school and in-depth analysis of its

needs, efforts at improvements started from 2000 onwards. In 2005, the turn-around was completed and changes became entrenched in the school culture. Disciplinary problems are now minimal. Since 2005, the school received approximately 46 awards both at district and state levels, mainly for excellence in sports, co-curricular activities and school management. The highest achievement was coming second for the Excellent School Award at the national level in 2004, which is awarded to schools which show overall excellence in all aspects: the school environment, co-curricular activities, academic progress of the students and in the effectiveness of school management. At the state level the school came first in the urban secondary school category. In the same year, it received the School Safety award at the national level and in 2008 the school was shortlisted for the Excellence in Co- Curriculum award at the national level. The achievements of the school are indeed impressive.

#### *School Two*

Jinjang High School is situated in a predominantly Chinese working class urban area. It has more than 2,500 students. Before the turn-around, the school was labeled as a D and E students' school, with a very high dropout and truancy rate. Students were not interested in their studies and many went out to work to support their families. Serious disciplinary problems with no significant achievement in any area were noted. Criminal cases were common among students in this school.

Three previous principals were recognized as the agents of change. The first principal focused on disciplinary problems and managed to increase students' attendance rate. The second principal worked at increasing the students' academic achievement. The third principal (who is the respondent for this research) completed the turning around process. He served the school from 2003 to 2007. During his tenure the school's reputation increased tremendously, the students have high self-esteem and are very proud of the school. The school received various awards for sports, co-curriculum and school management activities as well as individual students' awards both at the national and international level. In 2007, the school received seven awards at the district and state levels.

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## Findings: How the turn-around was effected

The findings are discussed, based on the four aspects of school environment according to Tableman (2004): the affective, physical, social and academic environments.

### Affective Environment

#### 1. *Specifying the priorities of the school*

At-risk schools face the problem of disengaged students in a school environment which is not very conducive for learning. From the interviews, we have found that the principals focused on the needs and welfare of their students in their effort to improve the affective climate of their schools. The priorities of the school development programs were specified and communicated clearly to all teachers and students. These priorities were aimed at the enhancement of students' attachment to their school, engagement to learning and increasing their sense of belonging to their school. It is hoped that with a positive and caring climate of the school, these objectives can be realized.

#### 2. *Re-branding the school*

A re-branding exercise is aimed at building a positive psychological climate which promotes a sense of belonging and self-esteem amongst students, teachers and other members of the school. Both school principals have been very adept at instilling into their students and teachers the feeling of pride and belonging to their school and high aspirations. The principal of School One said that the first thing she did was to embark on the exercise of re-branding the school to change the image of the school from a negative to a more positive and vibrant one. The ex-principal of School Two also embarked on the re-branding process in his own unique way.

##### a. Using mottos and slogans

The motto and slogans chosen for School One are symbolic, short and easy to pronounce and remember. Students in this school are multi-racial and cannot understand and pronounce difficult and lengthy words in the national language, which is the medium of instruction in school. The school motto for School One is *Always Ahead for Excellence* and the slogans for co-curriculum activities, *Embers, the Spirit of Champions* and for everyday activities, *Always Create History*, are simple and catchy. The principal takes great pains to explain the meaning of the slogans and show how simple it is for students to uphold the messages in the slogans.

##### b. Corporate color of the school

School One chose red as the school's corporate color. As explained by the principal to her students, the color red symbolizes bravery and success. The red blazers and red t-shirts for sports give a sense of identity, pride and belonging among students towards their school. School colors are not common among ordinary schools; only residential and premier schools are known to have their own school colors.

##### c. Programs/activities

School Two also conducted re-branding activities to change the school's image. Realizing the importance of changing mindsets and perceptions of students, teachers and parents, the principals came up with various ideas and plans. One of the programs introduced was *Morning Glory*, where all the students gathered in groups every morning and were asked to come up with slogans reflecting their abilities and strengths. Students interviewed gave an account of how they sang and shouted out the slogans among themselves which resulted in considerable energy and positive feelings, affirming to them that they were very capable people who could achieve anything if they put their minds to it.

##### d. Form Six

The introduction of Form Six classes for pre-university preparation has had a positive effect on the psychological climate of both schools. Pre-university classes signify that students of these schools are able to pursue their studies beyond Form Five as well as psychologically boosting the morale and academic aspirations of other students. Before the introduction of Form Six classes in these schools, students who completed their Form Five level had to go to other schools to pursue pre-university classes. One of the teachers interviewed in School Two was actually from the first batch of Form Six students of that school. She recalled how they became the pride of the school and the Form Six graduation was an unforgettable event, grand and full of emotion.

### 3. *Everyone counts*

School culture is built on the shared values, norms and beliefs of members of the school community and shapes the social environment of the school. A caring school culture helps build positive relationships, a sense of belonging and positive self concept amongst members of the school. The role of the principals in shaping a caring school culture is pivotal in pursuing a sense of belonging amongst students in the school as

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well as confidence in their self worth. Here are only some of the examples found from respondents' anecdotes.

**a. The aspirant gymnast**

One of the most outstanding characteristics of the principals of both schools is the extent to which they were willing to reach out to help everyone discover and realize their potentials. In an interview with the ex-principal of School Two, he narrated how he helped change one of his boys from someone who had no interest in himself, let alone the school, to someone with a more positive attitude. He took the boy to witness an inter-state sports tournament for all Malaysian schools in another state. The astonished boy followed him and enjoyed the privilege of traveling with the principal of the school. This boy who is likely to have never been anywhere further than his home and school compound soon found a whole new, exciting world as he witnessed all sorts of events during the tournament. On his way back, the principal noticed that he seemed to take a particular interest in gymnastics and arranged for the setting up of a gymnasts' club in the school and invited a coach to train interested students. Though he did not go very far in gymnastics, the boy, upon discovering how important he was to the principal, changed his attitude towards himself and the school.

**b. The landscaper**

In another incident, a student who was having problems in his academic performance was referred to the principal. In a fatherly manner, the principal asked the student what his interests were. The student replied that he really loved gardening and landscaping. Subsequently, the principal arranged with the school gardener to work with the student in making the school greener and more beautiful, provided he attended his ordinary lessons. The student found his passion in the hours he spent helping the gardener and had no further qualms about going to school. His work was praised by teachers and fellow students and this really boosted his self-esteem. Just as crucially, the attention given to him by the principal had a significant impact on the boy, who is now the successful owner of a plant nursery.

**c. The Workshop**

The teachers of School Two spoke of how the ex-principal went to great lengths to provide facilities for the students. Realizing that many of the students were interested in skills such as repairing cars and motorcycles, the school provided a workshop for the

students to learn and practice their skills. The inclusion of this facility encouraged the students to come to school. As one of the ex-principals said, 'I don't believe in forcing all students to excel in their studies. There are some students who are just not academically inclined, and we should try and find their strengths and talents and work on them'. Forcing students to do something they dislike and/or are not good at reduces their motivation and interest. Their inability to excel academically will lower their self-esteem, which in turn affects their academic performance, thus creating a vicious circle. At least if they find that they are actually good at something and are being praised or looked up to as a result, they will develop positive feelings towards the school and teachers, and may actually try to follow and master the lessons in the classroom.

**d. 'The Circle of Eight'**

In this program the principal had eight students in his room for every session (eight being an auspicious number in the Chinese culture). In each session, he would casually talk with the students, asking them about their ambitions, future plans, worries, problems, etc. Then he would tell stories of successful people and sometimes even share his life experience, including how he met his girlfriend. In this way, he created a personal bond with most of the students in the school and was able to directly instill in them essential values. The students also regarded him as someone they could turn to for advice.

**e. Birthday cards**

The principal of School Two sent personally signed birthday cards to each of the 100 teachers and 2,000 students in his school, driving his message of 'everyone counts' home to his students and teachers.

**B. The Physical Environment**

**1. Changing the physical environment of the school**

The physical environment of the school was the first change to be implemented. The principals believed that the physical aspects of the school are important and contribute to a conducive environment for learning. The principal of School One wanted her students to feel that their school was no different from other schools: what other schools have they too must have.

A new entrance to the school, new rooms and the planting of trees and gardens were all brought about through the concerted creative efforts of parents,

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teachers and students. The principal worked on the strengths of the parents. She observed that although the parents were not wealthy or professionals, they were keen to help. Through fundraising events held both by the Parents Teacher Association and also the students, money was collected to help improve facilities and beautify the school.

One of the first things that the ex-principal of School Two decided to tackle was the rundown state of the school building and surrounding areas. The principal recalled that when he was trying to examine the school field on his first day, the students warned him not to go too close as there were many snakes in the very tall and unkempt grass. True enough, the workers who were called to trim and clean the school field found no fewer than 12 snakes. He also immediately replaced all the broken windows. One of the teachers interviewed recalled how the principal remarked in horror when he saw that the school office had only grills and no door. He also noticed that many of the less academically inclined students had skills in drawing, painting and landscaping. He got them to help beautify the school and these students, seeing the transformation of the school at their own hands, beamed with pride. Formerly disengaged or worse, they became part of the taskforce protecting and caring for the school's physical appearance.

The quest to improve the physical environment of the schools also allowed students to be embraced into the culture of caring by increasing their sense of belonging to the school. Programs such as *'My School, My Home'* were introduced in School Two. According to the former principals interviewed, many of the students lacked motivation to study because of the poor condition of their homes. They had no proper place to study and the noise and lack of comfort at home made them spend most of their time wandering about outside until bedtime. In acknowledgement of this problem, the principal arranged for the school to become a comfortable place for the students to spend their time reading, studying or doing activities of interest to them such as gardening, landscaping and painting. The program received such an unexpectedly enthusiastic response from some of the students that he had to literally make some students go home late in the evening, so reluctant were they to leave.

## *2. Maintaining the physical environment of the school*

When teachers of School Two were asked to comment on the most noticeable difference between their

school and others, they pinpointed the clean walls with no graffiti, not even in the toilets. This is a school located in an area where gangs are common and vandalism is rampant, but the administrators managed to not only transform the aesthetic nature of the school, but also to encourage students to care and maintain their new surroundings. The school appointed selected students to be part of a special taskforce, rather like prefects, but their role was to look after the school. Students who might never dream of becoming prefects are now recognized as important to the school, their contributions acknowledged by the principal, teachers and other students. This has increased these students' self-esteem and sense of belonging to the school. They have become willing to not only sacrifice their time and energy for the school, but to protect and care for an environment that has given them so many positive experiences.

## C. The Social Environment

### *1. Celebrating Success*

Principals of these schools always look for opportunities to celebrate the success of their students, however small they may be. School One has the 'Perimbun Clap' where students acknowledge the victories of their peers and their school. Cheerleaders and special victory claps are not common in Malaysian schools and this Perimbun Clap is often heard in the school assembly, a place where everyone gathers once a week primarily to celebrate students' successes in getting awards or winning competitions. The principal wanted achievements, however small they may be, to be acknowledged by students, principal and teachers in a ceremony of mutual respect.

An ex student of School One who is now a university undergraduate commented that prizes won and certificates of acknowledgement given by the school during the assemblies in front of everyone increase the self concept of these students. She commented 'Who does not want to be praised in front of everyone?'

An example of celebrating success in School Two is with regard to students' school attendance. The principal deemed full attendance as an outstanding achievement worth recognizing. Students who managed to come to school without missing a single day throughout the year are given a Certificate for Full Attendance in the award ceremony at the end of the year. This certificate proved to be a potent motivator.

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## *2. Parental involvement*

Realizing that parents play a vital role in their children's education, the principals of both schools continuously encourage them to become involved. As is the norm for most at-risk students, parents generally were not very enthusiastic about participating in school activities and the principals had to face an uphill task to get their involvement. As mentioned before, principals of both schools believe that re-branding has played an important role in changing the parents' perspectives and attitudes towards the school. When they noticed that this is not just an ordinary school, they started to take the principals more seriously.

In the School Two, the principal organized dinner functions in which he invited respected figures including politicians to officiate, participate and give donations. He then highlighted all the students' achievements to the attending parents and asked for their support. Funds were raised and journalists were called to give coverage. On one occasion, the school managed to collect RM100,000.00 (\$28,540) which was used to provide facilities for the students. When the parents saw what the school was capable of doing, they started to pay more attention to their children's learning and cooperated with the school. For example, the school requires parents of students who are absent without authorisation to come to the school for discussions. Although it is normally very difficult to get parents to come and discuss their children's absence from school, the school somehow managed to get very encouraging responses from the parents.

## *3. Inter-Ethnic Connections*

In a multi-cultural school such as School One, mutual respect among all students is important. Co-curricular activities were the main avenues for fostering positive relationships between the different ethnic groups. Parents and students helped each other out, notwithstanding their ethnic backgrounds. The students were encouraged by their principal to attend social events of their friends from different ethnic groups to expose them to and educate them in the rich and diverse ethnicities and cultures in Malaysia.

In School Two, fights sometimes occurred between students of different ethnic backgrounds. The principal recalled how once he resolved a small fight amongst the gangs in the school which had been triggered by name calling between different racial groups. The informal head of one of the gangs was a student he knew very well. He just called the student

and said, 'V...What is it with your boys?' The student said, 'Don't worry, sir. I will settle this'. The trust and acknowledgement that the principal had with the students is an indication that he had utilized his leadership towards resolving issues, and the gangs stopped their fighting. This is an example of how some students with leadership abilities and a talent to influence others can either use it positively or negatively depending on the environment.

## **D. The Academic Environment**

Principals of both schools did everything that is normally done to boost the academic achievements of their students. Extra classes and programs aimed at increasing students' achievements in important examination subjects were provided in the hope that the positive changes in the physical and social climate of the school would foster the willingness to learn amongst the weak and recalcitrant students. Nevertheless, respondents from both schools recognized the fact that that it is not an easy task to help everyone excel academically. The academic success of both schools as a whole is average. However, marked improvements in the academic achievement of individual students were noted.

The schools try to help their students by understanding their needs. The principal and the teachers of School Two studied the background of the students and noticed that their main weakness is in language, as they come from middle and working class Chinese families. As the main language and medium of instruction in the school are Bahasa Malaysia and English, many programs were introduced to improve their mastery of both languages. One of them involves compulsory newspaper reading during assembly. The students sit in groups of four or five and are required to read the daily paper. This introduces the students to the culture of reading, which most of them have no experience of at home. As it is a regular program, the students soon develop the habit of sitting quietly and reading during other times. Another intervention involves students being banned from speaking their mother tongue on certain English or Bahasa Malaysia days. This means that they must try to communicate in these two languages, and not in their mother tongue, no matter how hard it is. Those breaking the rule will be fined. Words of the day were introduced to increase students' vocabulary. One of the ex-principals, concerned at the communication skills of parents, went to the extent of insisting that the parents of Chinese students speak in Mandarin (the accepted

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formal Chinese language) instead of other Chinese dialects when speaking to him. Parents who cannot speak Mandarin have to use their children as translators. This move was intended to instill in the parents the importance of internationally and nationally accepted languages in official matters.

### E. Special Strategies: Driving the Message Across

Principals of both schools have interesting ways of getting their messages across. Here, we take incidents from teachers' as well as principals' examples to illustrate how principals' behavior projects their values and actions and encourages others to embrace their values and hopes for the school.

#### 1. *The Broken Flamingo's Neck (making a big fuss about a seemingly small thing)*

This story was narrated by teachers of School Two. Teachers and students were surprised by the principals' reaction to a small flamingo statue whose neck was broken. They could not understand why the principal created so much fuss over such a petty matter. The principal repeatedly showed his frustration during assemblies and meetings, as if the flamingo's neck was something of the utmost importance to him. After that incident, students and teachers were very careful not to invoke the principal's wrath and took pains to take care of everything in their school, however small. Here are some examples of how the principals of both schools convey their message by playing their roles as shapers of school culture, by playing the roles of poets, story tellers, and potters, to inspire good values on their teachers and students alike.

##### a. The School Assembly

Normally school assemblies are held by schools to disseminate information, make announcements and give advice to students. Assemblies are not very popular with teachers or students: they feel that it is a waste of time and a platform for principals and teachers to nag and mete out punishment. Assemblies are thus routines that are taken for granted in most schools. The principal of School One, however, is very particular about her school assembly. At her first assembly at the school, she reprimanded both the students and teachers for not taking the assembly seriously and talking while others were speaking.

The principal of School One has insisted that the assembly be a special event, a formal gathering to

acknowledge and celebrate students' success. Announcement of victories in competitions, prize giving ceremonies accompanied with the Perimbun Clap of victory give meaning and excitement to the gathering

##### b. The 'Winds of Change'

At School Two, the teachers recall the 'wind of change' when the ex-principal came to the school. One teacher said 'I can feel the difference. He made his missions very clear to the teachers and students during the staff meetings and school assembly.....on discipline and so on ... then he would make his rounds ... you would notice 'the wind' when he is approaching – because of the sudden silence ... People respect him, because he shows respect to everybody ... he is very diplomatic'. She also compared this situation with her previous school where things were rather 'chaotic' as teachers and students did their own things. 'There was no sense of togetherness....but here everybody strives towards achieving the school's mission that was made very clear by the principal'.

For example, one of the ex-principal's main missions was changing people's perceptions about the school. Instead of being a dumping ground for students who could not get into other schools, he was adamant about making the school the pride of the community. One of the teachers recalled his words: 'When our students go for (job) interviews, I want the interviewer to be impressed just by the fact that this student is from Jinjang High School ... like students from VI' (VI or Victoria Institution is a prestigious high school in Malaysia, renowned for producing well-rounded excellent students). This ambition was communicated clearly to all teachers and students and seeing the principal's passion towards making it a reality, the teachers and students work tirelessly with him to this end.

##### c. Posing for the Photographer

The principal of School One was very particular about her students' appearance and behavior. She insisted that students should carry themselves with proper decorum to gain the respect of others and were even taught to pose properly for the school photo sessions. Her professional and inviting office, too, reflected her emphasis on appearance.

##### d. The School Walls

Meaningful messages and slogans grace the school walls, staircases and spaces under the staircases. With these, the principal of School One hoped to remind

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students and teachers constantly of the school's vision and missions. She said that these messages on the wall would also make guests and parents appreciate the serious work the students and teachers are doing and have put in the school.

## *2. Planting the Bougainvillea*

Principals of both schools go to great lengths in giving explanations to students about things that matter to the school. They give meaningful and simple explanations about the school motto and slogans to enable students to see the significance of these words and simple ways to act on it. Even teachers are not spared. The Principal of School One related how she described in detail the proper way to plant the Bougainvillea to a teacher to demonstrate how to convey meaning in her classroom teaching. The principal emphasized that if you want to plant the Bougainvillea, you have to follow all the procedures correctly. These principals took pains to explain the significance of the following to their students;

a. The Name of the School (Principal of School One) Rimbun means 'shelter': the school gives you shelter in all aspects of your stay. Rimbun also signifies the safe haven provided by the school for the students to rest, learn and/or play. Every room or activity area in the school is named after trees.

### b. The School Motto

*'Always Ahead for Excellence'*

You need to be ahead and be the first in everything, the first to come to school in the morning, the first to enter your classroom, the first to submit assignments.

### c. The Slogans

*'Embers, the Spirit of Champions'*

The Principal explained that unlike flames, embers are lasting.

*'Always Create History'* 'Create history for yourself. If you have never come early to school, come early; if you have never passed a subject, pass a subject; if you have never won a competition, win one. You need to create small victories for yourselves'.

## *4. The Fake Teleconferencing*

This is a classic example of the way the principal of School One drives the message of care and 'nothing is impossible' across to her students and teachers. In School One, senior students (form five students who

will be leaving school) are given a chance to attend their graduation night held in various places annually. Graduation nights for these students is not a norm in Malaysian schools. The principal explained that most of her students will not be graduating from university, so this graduation night is a valuable experience for them. The first ever graduation night was held at the school itself. Subsequently they were held at a private college, at a university and later at five star hotels. Lately, these festive nights are being held at the Putra World Trade Centre. The PTA donated the materials and teachers sewed the robes.

These students prepared themselves for this occasion a year in advance. In order to be eligible to attend the graduation night they must show good discipline, academic and attendance records. A few years ago, the principal was not able to attend the graduation night as she had to go abroad. The students were disappointed after all the preparations that they have made. The principal however promised that she would talk to them that night via a teleconference call from abroad. That night, when the teleconference was announced, the students, teachers and guests waited excitedly. The principal came on air, complete with the usual crackling sound and not very clear image. Everybody was happy, though what they did not know was that the teleconference was a fake. The principal, with the help of teachers, one who has an English style apartment, pre-recorded the message, complete with the crackling sound and answered expected questions prior to her departure to England. The great lengths the principal went to please the students with some drama and excitement shows her level of commitment to them.

## **Conclusion**

Turning around an at-risk school into an excellent one is not an easy task. It is not an exaggeration to call it an uphill battle, especially in a centralized and exam oriented system of education. Students who are not academically inclined feel marginalized in school. As teacher educators, we often visit high schools to supervise our student teachers. The conditions of some schools are appalling: broken doors and windows, missing chairs and ceiling fans, graffiti on the walls, etc. Disengaged students roam the corridors, making noise in the classrooms and generally distracting others and disrupting the teaching and learning process. But when we found these turn-around schools, we became convinced that improving even difficult schools is not an impossible task. When

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the principal of School One was asked to identify the most important attribute of a turned-around school, she said it is the sense of togetherness amongst its members. When members of the school understand the 'whys' and the 'hows' of change and work together to achieve it, nothing is impossible.

In addition, it takes brave, creative and persistent principals who sometimes go against set policies and common practices to turn around their at-risk schools for the better. It is not easy to make schools interesting for students and to make everyone count in a system where having excellent examination results is the only thing that matters. Effective at-risk school principals recognize that they will lose their children to the streets if these children experience only failure in school, so they endeavour to give their students an experience of success by encouraging them to excel in what they can do best, which incorporates non-academic endeavors. Principals of both schools recognize the fact that it is the students who count and their needs that matter. School improvement programs, however well planned, will fail if they are not sensitive to students' needs. Despite the average performance of these schools in public examinations, they have succeeded in getting the attention of the Ministry of Education and the respect of parents and have collected numerous awards specifically in sports and co-curricular activities. Their skills in management are also recognized. The schools' assembly in School One has become the benchmark for assemblies in other schools in the district.

The success of these principals in turning around their schools from an at-risk to an excellent school shows that the task is not an impossible one. Making all schools excellent, however difficult, should be the rule and not an exception to the rule.

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