

Diagnosing School Decline

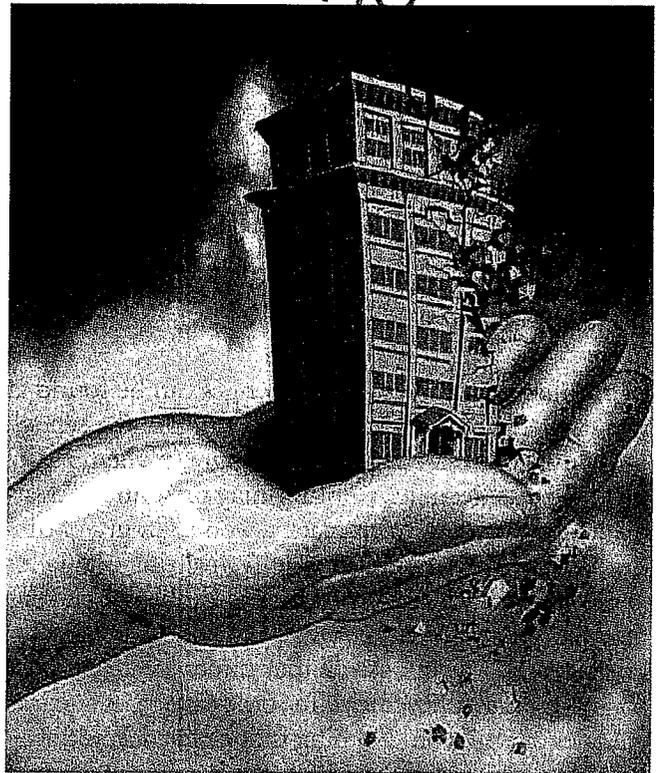
■ One of the most important strategies for stopping school decline is recognizing its signs early on and promptly applying appropriate interventions. Mr. Duke identifies 11 indicators of school decline so that educators can realize when there is a problem and act as quickly as possible to nip it in the bud.

BY DANIEL L. DUKE

WHEN WE run a fever, we suspect that something is wrong with our bodies — a virus perhaps or a bacterial infection. The elevated temperature is a symptom of a deeper problem, though left untreated it can become a cause for additional problems. Such is the case with scores on standardized tests. Test scores start to drop, that may be an indication of deeper problems. Left unaddressed, declining test scores can become the cause of other problems, both for individual students and for entire schools.

Researchers know a great deal about how to improve schools, but they have spent less time trying to understand what causes schools to decline in the first place.¹ One probable reason for the scarcity of research is the reluctance of declining schools to place themselves under the microscope. Here I argue that knowing the possible causes of school decline, especially an initial drop in performance, is critical for educators who want to intervene early. Failing to nip student achievement problems in the bud can set into motion a dangerous downward spiral in which every downturn triggers new problems and accelerates the school's rate of decline.²

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Of course, some low-performing schools do not experience *decline*, because they have never performed well. My focus here is on schools that once were characterized by adequate or even good performance but have begun to slip. A number of these schools have participated over the past four years in the University of Virginia's School Turnaround Specialist Program (STSP). This unique outreach program combines the talents of experienced educators and faculty members from the Curry School of Education and the Darden Graduate School of Business Administration. The goal is to train principals to be school turnaround specialists and to support them in their efforts to reverse a downward trend in school performance.

As research director for the STSP, I have spent the past four years working with a team of researchers to understand the circumstances that confront these school turnaround specialists and to discover how they deal with them. This knowledge, combined with what we know from previous investigations of school decline, has led us to identify a number of potential indicators of school decline. By attending to these indicators when they first surface, educators are more likely to prevent a school from slipping into a self-perpetuating downward spiral.

The approach I take here may best be characterized as a challenge-and-response analysis. Schools face challenges from time to time. Among the challenges associated with school decline, I want to focus on four that are common: serious budget cuts, new state and federal mandates, the loss of key personnel, and an influx of at-risk students.³ Strictly speaking, these challenges do not cause schools to decline, but decline is a consequence of failing to address these challenges effectively. In medicine, specialists in iatrogenic medicine study medical problems created or exacerbated by improper medical practice. Education needs an equivalent enterprise devoted to examining the academic problems created or exacerbated by inadequate educational practice.

Problems in addressing challenges can be found at three levels of the individual, the group, and the school. Individual teachers may fail to recognize when particular students need help, or they may prescribe a "treatment" that actually makes matters worse. Groups of educators may invest more energy in diverting blame for poor performance than in correcting problems, thereby delaying much-needed reforms. School leaders may fail to recognize systemic issues that undermine a school's ability to raise achievement. In some cases, these failures are ones of omission. Nothing is done to address a challenge. In other cases, the problem is a failure of commission. Actions are taken, but they are inadequate or inappropriate.

Here I want to identify 11 early indicators of school decline that are associated with inadequate and inappropriate responses to the aforementioned quartet of challenges.⁴ I should note that these challenges sometimes travel in packs. New mandates, for example, may cause some veteran educators to retire or seek other employment. An influx of at-risk students without an increase in funding may have the effect of reducing resources.

Undifferentiated assistance. One indicator of school decline is the absence of systematic efforts to identify learning problems and knowledge deficits of struggling students who have not been placed on an IEP (individualized education program). Instead of providing assistance that targets each student's specific issues, the school assigns all students judged to be in academic difficulty to a common supplementary program or intervention. Help takes the form of repetition and extended practice. Some students, however, may require assistance that targets particular learning problems, such as problems with decoding, comprehension, sequencing, and information processing. Repetition and extended practice are of little benefit to these students.

Another problem with generic interventions is that students may be compelled to cover material that they already understand, as well as material that they do not understand. Valuable time is wasted, and the risk of students' becoming bored increases. Furthermore, if students receive assistance at the same time that their classmates are moving ahead in the curriculum, the initial problem is compounded because the struggling students fall further behind.

Inadequate monitoring of progress. One reason why assistance may be undifferentiated is the absence of efforts to systematically monitor student progress in learning required content. All states, in order to comply with their own accountability mandates as well as the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, test students annually on state curriculum standards. Teachers are provided with pacing guides in many school systems to ensure that they cover all of the curriculum requirements for which their students are responsible. In an effort to cover this content, however, some teachers feel that they cannot take time to carefully assess student progress on a regular basis. As a consequence, students may go weeks or even months without grasping key concepts and skills. In certain subjects, such as mathematics, the result can be disastrous.

Schools that have successfully combated decline often discover efficient ways to monitor student progress and provide differentiated assistance. Training in classroom assessment and the use of periodic benchmark testing aligned to state curriculum standards enable teachers to spot student deficits and provide timely and targeted assistance. Waiting until students take end-of-year standardized tests to identify learning deficits is a sure prescription for performance problems.

Unadjusted daily schedule. Another reason that students may not receive timely and targeted assistance is the inflexibility of the daily school schedule. In order to address content-related problems and skill deficits, teachers need to work with students during times other than regular class periods. It is typically of little value for students to receive help while their classmates are moving forward with new material. Low-performing schools that have turned around often modify the daily schedule in ways that provide struggling students with extended learning time. Sometimes these schools offer double-block classes in core subjects like language arts and mathematics so that low-achieving students can receive an additional period of instruction during the regular school day. In other cases, the school day is lengthened on certain days to provide students who need help with supplementary instruction.

A modified schedule also makes it possible for teach-



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s working as a team to meet during the regular school y. Meetings allow for collaborative planning, curriculum alignment, professional development, and discussions of students experiencing problems. Schedules at do not facilitate teacher collaboration increase the relihood of communication and coordination problems, thereby contributing to school decline.

Alignment problems. In the wake of pressure for great-accountability, states have adopted curriculum standards and standardized tests based on these standards. uents stand the best chance of mastering the standards and performing well on the state tests when their achers align class content with state standards and sts. A decline in student achievement may reflect the t that teachers are neglecting required content.

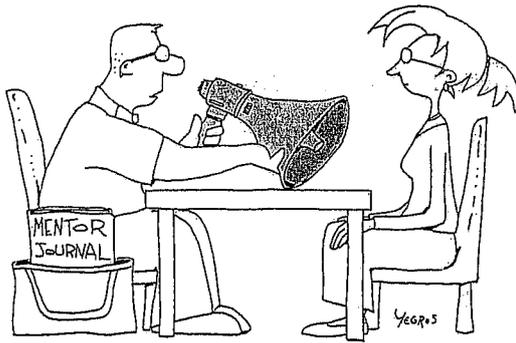
One indicator of instructional neglect can be found an analysis of student answers on standardized tests. sults on state tests often can be broken down by specific curriculum standards. When student errors are rantly distributed, the problem may be traceable to variations in how individual students prepared for the tests. hen lots of students miss the same questions, however, the fault probably lies with alignment problems d teachers' failure to cover or adequately explain :tain subject matter.

Alignment is not just a matter of individual teaching adjustments in content to reflect curricu-

lum standards. Teachers at the same grade level, as well as across grade levels, need to review their content to make certain that 1) students at the same grade level are exposed to the mandated curriculum and 2) students at one grade level learn the content necessary to succeed at the next grade level. When teachers do not meet on a regular basis to review their coverage of curriculum standards and analyze student progress, the prospects for school decline increase.

Ineffective staff development. Some form of staff development is available to teachers in practically every school, but the mere availability of such training is no guarantee of instructional effectiveness. Schools that begin to decline are frequently the recipients of one-shot inservice programs and staff development that is only tangentially related to core academic concerns. When teachers complain about irrelevant workshops and useless staff development, school leaders need to take heed.

The most worthwhile staff development opportunities are often associated with a sustained focus on a key aspect of the required curriculum, such as literacy. Teachers benefit from learning how to use a new textbook, refine classroom assessment skills, improve classroom management, and detect learning problems. Using the same consultant or trainer over an extended period can provide continuity and avoid the confusion



ever handle a classroom situation by raising your voice. e this instead."

l mixed messages that often attend sporadic staff replacement involving multiple providers.

Lost focus. One of the first signs of school decline y be the loss of a clear academic focus. Discussions h school personnel may reveal a lack of clarity re- ding priorities. If everything seems to be a priority, : concentration of time and resources on critical ele- nts of the school program is apt to be inadequate. k of focus makes it difficult to provide effective staff replacement and targeted assistance for struggling stu- ts.

While it may be "politically correct" in public schools act as if all subject matter and all aspects of school- ; were of equal importance, the hard, cold fact is that ne subjects and teaching functions are more impor- t than others when dealing with a drop in student ievement. When we studied declining schools that icipated in our program at the University of Vir- ia, we discovered that every school had substantial mbers of students with reading problems. Improv- ; instruction and assistance in reading needed to be p priority in these schools. Students' success in every er subject, including mathematics, depended on their lity to read and comprehend written material. To re chosen any focus other than reading and literacy uld have made little sense.

Another focus in many low-performing schools must student attendance. It is difficult for students to ster essential content when they are not in school. e lack of a well-coordinated initiative to address dent absenteeism can be another early indicator of ool decline.

Lack of leadership. Leadership is synonymous with us and direction.⁵ Leaders are expected to see that orities are identified and addressed. More than just et of skills or traits, leadership is a perception, a per- tion that one or more individuals grasp what must done in order to achieve the mission at hand.⁶ The it individual to whom people look for leadership in

schools is the principal. Key members of school facul- ties can also play important leadership roles.

Not surprisingly, declining schools frequently are characterized by a lack of leadership. An effective prin- cipal or veteran teacher may have retired or been re- assigned. The replacement is not perceived to have the competence, commitment, or clarity of purpose of the one who departed. Teachers begin to feel adrift with- out a rudder. Where once there was a shared under- standing of what needed to be done, now there is dis- agreement. Confusion displaces consensus.

The critical role of leadership in arresting school de- cline was driven home to me last year when my col- leagues and I searched for examples of low-performing schools where teachers took the initiative and spontane- ously organized themselves to turn their school around. We combed the literature on school turnarounds and even placed an advertisement in *Education Week*. We were unable to locate a single example. It would seem that there is no substitute for capable leaders when it comes to reversing a downward slide in performance.

Hasty hiring. One aspect of the school turnaround process where capable leaders make their impact felt is hiring. Many of our most successful turnaround spe- cialists had to replace staff members during their first year or two. In some cases, individuals left of their own accord. In other instances, principals had to document deficiencies and initiate an employment termination process. When it came to new hires, however, our prin- cipals did not panic, nor did they settle for question- able replacements.

It is tempting for principals in declining schools to approach the hiring process fatalistically. They assume that highly qualified educators are unlikely to want to work in a troubled school. Consequently, they rush to judgment and select individuals about whom they have reservations. Declining schools need topnotch teach- ers if they are to combat falling test scores. Settling for "warm bodies" is likely to compound rather than re- solve academic problems. Successful turnaround spe- cialists find that retaining a long-term substitute and continuing to search for a qualified teacher is prefer- able to hiring someone who is unlikely to make a posi- tive impact on student achievement.

Increased class size. Even highly qualified teachers may have difficulty when class sizes are allowed to increase to the point where it is difficult to maintain order and provide targeted assistance. Large classes are especially problematic when the classes involve critical academic subjects such as reading, language arts, and mathemat- ics. Some states and school systems have mandated max- imum class sizes for early elementary grades, clearly a

sp in the right direction. Few states and school systems, however, have taken similar action with regard to middle and high school courses that enroll large percentages of at-risk students.

A declining school is apt to lose some students as parents take advantage of the provisions in NCLB that permit transfers from a low-performing school. Quite often the students who are withdrawn from these schools are high-achieving students, not the struggling students who presumably would most benefit from a change. As a result, the proportion of low-achieving students may climb in a declining school. If this occurs, it is especially important for class sizes to remain as low as possible.

Overreliance on untrained helpers. No declining school wants to be caught without programs to help struggling students. Simply offering assistance programs, however, is no guarantee of success, especially when these programs rely heavily on volunteers, teacher aides, and other individuals who may lack the expertise to recognize learning problems and provide effective help. Schools that have successfully turned around tend to place the responsibility for assisting struggling students into the hands of qualified teachers and specialists. Supplementary programs are evaluated regularly to determine whether they are making a difference in academic achievement. Ineffective programs are either proved or eliminated.

More rules and harsher punishments. Decreases in student achievement often are accompanied by increases in student behavior problems. Such problems rob struggling students of precious instructional time as teachers are compelled to devote more energy to maintaining order and dealing with discipline. Confronted with ongoing behavior problems, declining schools often rely on promulgating more rules and harsher punishments. This prescription can backfire. Teachers may find themselves devoting even more time to enforcing rules and monitoring punishments. Less time is available for instruction, assistance, and building relationships with students. Meanwhile, students chafe under greater restrictions and a more punitive climate. Some rules and punishments may be necessary, but they are no substitute for caring and concern.

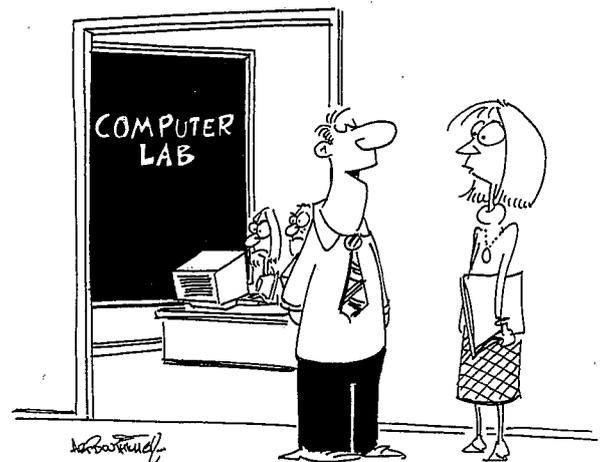
REWARDED IS FOREARMED

The purpose of identifying characteristics of declining schools is to give educators some tangible indicators for which to be on the alert. Early intervention can prevent a precipitous slide. Many of the schools in the School Turnaround Specialist Program have ex-

perienced the benefits of early intervention. A major reason for their success is the fact that principals recognized the initial signs of decline. They also understood what needed to be done to address these concerns.

Of course, the 11 indicators I've identified here do not constitute an exhaustive list. There are no doubt a number of more subtle indicators of decline, including certain shared beliefs and aspects of school culture. For example, I suspect that teachers in declining schools are more likely to give up on struggling students and less likely to hold themselves to high standards of professional practice. These 11 indicators should be regarded as no more than a starting place for diagnosing school decline. Educators can refine and expand this list so that improvements can be made in the early detection and reversal of school decline.

1. Daniel L. Duke, "Understanding School Decline," unpublished manuscript, Partnership for Leaders in Education, Charlottesville, Virginia, 2007; and idem, "What We Know and Don't Know About Improving Low-Performing Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan*, June 2006, pp. 729-34.
2. Daniel L. Duke and Jon S. Cohen, "Do Public Schools Have a Future? A Case Study of Retrenchment and Its Implications," *The Urban Review*, vol. 15, 1983, pp. 89-105.
3. Duke, "Understanding School Decline."
4. The research from which the indicators of school decline are drawn includes the following: Daniel L. Duke, "Keys to Sustaining Successful School Turnarounds," *ERS Spectrum*, Fall 2006, pp. 21-35; idem, "Understanding School Decline"; Daniel L. Duke et al., *Liftoff: Launching the School Turnaround Process in 10 Virginia Schools* (Charlottesville, Va.: Partnership for Leaders in Education, 2005); and Daniel L. Duke et al., "How Comparable Are the Perceived Challenges Facing Principals of Low-Performing Schools?," *International Studies in Educational Administration*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2007, pp. 3-21.
5. Michael Fullan, *Leading in a Culture of Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).
6. Daniel L. Duke, "The Aesthetics of Leadership," *Educational Administration Quarterly*, Winter 1986, pp. 7-27.



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