



Book Review of *Inside School Turnarounds* *Will Hartford's reforms be successful?*

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In mid-November, Hartford Superintendent Dr. Steven Adamowski gave me a copy of a new book, written by Laura Pappano, entitled, *Inside School Turnarounds*. It is a detailed look at the work being done in Hartford to change culture, sometimes staff and get better results for the children of the district. It is full of interesting and helpful anecdotes and statistics which can be very helpful to any board or superintendent looking at how to turnaround underperforming schools.

Pappano is a regular contributor to *The New York Times Education Life* section and *The Harvard Education*. She is a former education columnist for *The Boston Globe* and co-author of *Playing With The Boys: Why Separate is Not Equal in Sports* (2008) and author of *The Connection Gap* (2001).

This well-written book could be seen as a sort of companion or follow-up piece to *The Children in Room E4* by Susan Eaton, which described what Hartford students were and still are, facing as they go to public schools. *Inside* describes in detail Dr. Adamowski's and the current Board's attempt to address many of the problems explored in *The Children*. It is a flattering, factual account of what is happening today in Hartford, tied together with an understanding that the results of the systemic changes going on will not be known for years.

According to Pappano, over the last three years, test scores show that students in grades 3-8 have made progress at "twice the national average... It is too soon to know if Hartford has answers [that work in turning around underperforming schools], but the district certainly has compelling ideas."

The book details the changes in relation to building a "portfolio" of schools, with many traditional schools turned into new and redesigned magnet schools, focusing on various possible careers for students,

such as sport and medical sciences, journalism and media, culinary arts, nursing and the one most discussed in the book, law and government. There are charts in the book that the district uses to determine which schools must be turned around based on test scores. The more a school improves its performance, the more autonomy it receives.

Here are some of the points made by Pappano in the book, which is one of several now available on how to turn underperforming schools around:

- A school turnaround is "about rapid and dramatic improvement not just in test scores but also in culture, attitude and student aspirations. It is marked not by orderly implementation but by altering a lot at once and be willing to step in and change –and change again" as circumstances dictate.
- Good teachers are the "game changers" in turnaround schools. As has been widely publicized, especially during the Race to the Top competition, quality of teachers and support of them is a critical key to success.
- Charter school organizations have been reluctant to engage in turnaround work because they are concerned about being bound by union contracts. They feel their schools need to be able to hire, retain, evaluate, reward and/or terminate teachers, choose their own curriculum and determine length of school day. They also often require teachers to do more than in traditional public schools, "such as fielding and making calls and sending emails into the night and on weekends".
- Turnarounds "are about reconsidering all the small pieces that constitute a schoolhouse — from how and what students learn to devising better approaches to engaging them, defining and managing school culture more carefully, rethinking how to hire and reward teachers, managing community and nonprofit partnerships

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more effectively, using data better , and coming up with more common sense approaches to school discipline and academic struggles... while scale matters to policy makers, daily school success is what matters to kids.”

We know that the Hartford Public Schools face many challenges. Even with rising achievement, students remain well behind others. There are union, safety, budget and other issues that hamper school districts (and not just those in our urban centers) that must be addressed.

The book talks little about the board of education except that it has been supportive of the changes that Steve Adamowski has proposed. Certainly the

community and businesses also have bought in.

One certainly gets the feeling from this book that Hartford is on the move. As mentioned above, it will take years to see the results and see if Steve’s vision of the future will be reached. Institutionalization and replication of a changed culture are difficult issues as a school system culture is reformed.

With Steve’s retirement at the end of June, it will be interesting to watch as the next superintendent deals with the issues facing the district.

In the meantime, this a beneficial guide to some of the difficult issues faced by boards and superintendents in our schools. It is well worth the read.