

## Portrait of a Turnaround Leader in a High Needs District

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### **Abstract:**

Using portraiture methodology involving interview, observation, and artifact data, this study portrays a turnaround leader, Dr. Susan Gray, in a high needs, rural district in the Southeast. In three years, Gray led Lincoln Elementary from nearly being reconstituted to being an awardwinning school. Gray has subsequently been assigned other leadership roles that required a change agent. The study narrates Gray's professional arc, highlighting her drive, ability to build relational trust, unapologetic disruption of deficit thinking, mission-orientation, and high expectations to guide the turnaround process. The paper concludes with implications for practice and research related to leadership preparation and school turnaround.

**Keywords:** school turnaround | school leadership | school reform | portraiture | turnaround principal

### **Article:**

## **PURPOSE**

Since the passage of *No Child Left Behind* in 2002, “turnaround” has become a significant focus of school reform efforts in the United States. As opposed to incremental and continuous improvement, school turnaround refers to the rapid and significant improvement in the achievement of persistently low achieving schools. School turnaround has been a cornerstone of the Obama administration’s approach to education reform, spurred by a large Title 1 School Improvement Grant program. States have further stimulated efforts at rapid school improvement through state-specific turnaround-focused funding and initiatives.

Concurrent with governmental efforts to stimulate school turnaround, the concept has also received significant attention in recent years in the work of policy centers (e.g., Mass Insight, 2010; Public Impact, 2007), education foundations (e.g., Portin et al., 2009), and research consortia (e.g., de la Torre et al., 2012; Herman et al, 2008). Well-known educational researchers have also provided insight into turnaround as a school reform strategy (e.g., Fullan, 2006; Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010; Murphy & Meyers, 2008).

Although a few case studies have been published that describe successful school turnaround efforts (e.g., Johnson, 2012), overall empirical literature has been able to document only limited and short-term success for school turnarounds (Aladjem et al., 2010; Birman, Aladjem, & Orland, 2010; de la Torre, Allensworth, Jagesic, Sebastian, & Salmonowicz, 2012; Stuit, 2010). For example, Birman and colleagues (2010) found that out of over 1000 turnaround-designated schools, less than 25% were able to significantly improve their achievement in one year and only 1% of the original 1000 were able to sustain significant improvement over 2 years. Given the seeming intractability of low-achievement, quality school leadership would appear to be a significant factor in turning around persistently low-achieving schools. Indeed, federal education policy privileges the importance of principal leadership, with all of the approved turnaround models, in one fashion or another, requiring replacement of the principal to qualify for turnaround funding (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). While some literature exists that argues for various principal leadership practices in turnaround schools (e.g., Duke, 2004; McLester, 2011; Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2012; Steiner & Barrett, 2012), these reports are primarily non-empirical. Given the limited empirical research on turnaround principals and the substantial significance attached in turnaround policy to their work, our study uses a qualitative portraiture approach to provide insight into the work of one successful turnaround leader, Dr. Susan Gray.<sup>1</sup>

## **FEDERAL AND STATE POLICY CONTEXT**

In August 2009, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan made turnaround a cornerstone of the Obama administration’s approach to education reform when he announced a \$3.5 billion federal Title I School Improvement Grant (SIG) program to “turn around” the persistently lowestperforming schools (US DOE, 2009). In order to apply for the grant funding, a school district was required to commit to one of four strategies for turning around district schools which qualified as persistently low achieving. The options included:

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<sup>1</sup> All proper nouns in this manuscript are pseudonyms.

- Turnaround Model: replacing the principal, at least 50% of the staff, and implementing a new instructional program;
- Restart Model: closing the school and restarting it as a charter school;
- School Closure: closing the school and redistributing its students to other schools;
- Transformational Model: transforming the school by replacing the principal and implementing comprehensive reforms.

Simultaneous with the federal emphasis on school turnaround there were also formal efforts directed toward rapid school improvement at the state level. In North Carolina, for example, the state's Department of Public Instruction, used funds from a Race to the Top grant awarded to the state to support the turnaround work of the bottom 5% of elementary, middle and high schools.

## **THE SCHOOL TURNAROUND LITERATURE AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Although there has recently been significant attention in the education literature to school turnaround, much of this literature is in the form of reports, articles, and books drawn from secondary sources, rather than directly from empirical studies. For example, Fullan's (2006) book on turnaround leadership is essentially a general treatise on change (albeit, rapid change) and is based on extant literature. Murphy and Meyers (2008) rely heavily on business and private sector research in their book on effective turnaround practices. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has also shown interest in school turnaround and commissioned education think tank Mass Insight to develop a framework for turning around schools. The resulting report, *The Turnaround Challenge* (Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007) is considered by many (including U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan) to be a seminal source on turnaround practice, even though it is based entirely on secondary sources. Anrig (2015) synthesizes emerging evidence from the SIG initiative and identifies five practices that successful SIG turnaround schools have in common: data-based, collaborative focus on classroom instruction; systematic emphasis on safe and orderly schools; expanded instructional and tutoring time; strengthening school connections to service providers, community groups, and parents; and limiting reliance on external consultants to initiating change. The scant empirical research available on turnaround was emphasized by Herman, et al. (2008). Herman and colleagues did an analysis of existing empirical research on turnaround schools and bluntly begin their report by describing the empirical research as "sparse" (p. 4).

Turnaround literature largely privileges the role of the principal as key and focuses on practices that will help turnaround principals be effective in their work. For example, the Mass Insight report (Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007) cites the importance of principals making "mission-driven decisions," exercising "resource ingenuity," and being "flexible and inventive in responding to constant unrest" (p. 9). As is true for the empirical research on turnaround schools, there is limited empirical research that documents the practices, attributes, and dispositions of successful turnaround principals. In a rare empirical study, Finnegan and Stewart (2009), studied 10 low-performing Chicago elementary schools and found that principals who were able to turn these schools around kept the focus on the school's vision, developed a commitment to collective goals, targeted resources to support teacher development, established collaborative structures and norms, expressed confidence in teachers' ability to succeed in turning the school around, buffered teachers from the harmful aspects of turnaround policy (e.g., fear of losing their jobs),

and centralized decision making (with some distribution of leadership to other administrators in the school). Duke and Salmonowicz (2010) provided an in-depth description and analysis of the key decisions made by a first year turnaround principal. Baeza (2010), studied the first 90 days of a middle school turnaround principal's tenure and found that

the principal's most significant accomplishments included gaining credibility and trust; securing early wins; maintaining high visibility; creating a culture of change; building relationships and coalitions; assuming the role of instructional leader; making strategic decisions; establishing a vision for the school; and implementing a collaborative problem-solving approach.

Successful principal leadership in a turnaround school may not be as simple, however, as implementing prescriptive sets of practices such as those cited above. Cai (2011), for example, suggests that a principal's emotional intelligence may also be key, and Leithwood (2005) cites the importance of a leader's values and emotions. Perhaps most significantly, the widely accepted ISLLC national school leadership standards speak to the importance of principals' "dispositions" (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2014).

Based on our review of the literature, we conceptualize successful turnaround leadership as requiring a nexus of leadership practices (e.g., Caulkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007; Stewart, 2009; Baeza, 2010), emotional intelligence (Cai, 2011), and dispositions (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2014), as illustrated in Figure 1. This conceptual framework is reflected in our interview protocol and initial analysis (i.e., a priori codes).



*Figure 1. Successful turnaround leadership as a nexus of practices, emotional intelligence, and dispositions.*

## **METHODS**

Portraiture served as the methodological approach for this study. Originally developed by Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot, portraiture crosses methodological boundaries by combining rigorous empiricism with artistic expression to capture complexity, nuance, fluidity, hues, and context (Hill, 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005; Lawrence Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Newton, 2005). Portraitists, in contrast to researchers who listen *to* a story, listen *for* a story:

The aesthetic whole of the portrait is framed by the portraitist's "overarching vision." . . . In order to achieve this rendering of an intelligent whole, the portraitist must thoughtfully delineate and organize the separate parts, and then weave them together in a pattern so carefully unified that the conjoining seams are invisible. (Davis, 1997, p. 261-262)

In other words, portraitists weave together data to illustrate the coherent whole, while also honoring nuance and complexity. Criteria for rigorous portraiture include evocative resonance and authenticity (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005; Lawrence Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). In illuminating the unique, the portrait reveals embedded transferable themes (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005).

## **Context**

This portraiture study is focused on turnaround leader Dr. Susan Gray. Gray's entire administrative career has taken place in Rothborne County Schools in North Carolina. Rothborne, comprised of more than 25 schools and serving approximately 15,000 students, is categorized as a rural fringe district (NCES, 2015). Approximately 63% of Rothborne students are white; 20% are African American; 11% are Latino; and 6% fall into another racial category. Additionally, about 59% of Rothborne students qualify for free/reduced lunch. Rothborne is designated as a Tier 1 (lowest of 3) county by the North Carolina Department of Commerce, categorizing it as a *highly economically distressed* county.

Gray moved to Rothborne from out of state and served as a third grade teacher and administrative intern at Deerfield Elementary for one year before becoming the assistant principal at the school. After two years in that role, she became principal of Hill Elementary. She served there for three years before being tapped by the superintendent to head the turnaround effort at Lincoln Elementary. By the end of her second year at Lincoln Elementary, the school had made Adequate Yearly Progress in both reading and math, and by the end of her third year, the school had exited school improvement status. For the purposes of this study, these accomplishments designate her as a successful turnaround leader. Gray then became principal of Rothborne Middle, a high-achieving school, but one that was mired in complacency. After only one year at Rothborne Middle, Gray moved to central office as the Elementary and Title I Director. Her charge in this position was to conjoin two previously separate departments and serve as director of the unified entity. After two years in that role, she ascended to the role of Director of the Department for Students with Exceptionalities. In this role, the superintendent tasked her with bringing order to the department, achieving compliance with state exceptional children's guidelines, and increasing the graduation rate of students with disabilities. Recently she was again promoted and now serves as an Assistant Superintendent of Student Services in the district.

## **Data Sources**

Our research team conducted interviews of 21 colleagues who currently work—or have worked in the past—with Gray, including teachers and assistant principals who served with her; school leaders who succeeded her; external consultants who worked in her building; district leaders who work with her; and the district superintendent who serves as her supervisor. Interviews were generally 45-75 minutes in duration. Additionally, we conducted several interviews of Gray, each of which were two or more hours in duration; we observed her in practice on several occasions; and, in order to establish internal and historical context (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), we examined artifacts related to her leadership (e.g., agendas of meetings she facilitated; student achievement and growth data; etc.).

This report is based on microanalytic, line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2004;Stringer, 2009) and interpretation of twelve interviews and our observation field notes. The twelve focus interviews were selected using two criteria: 1) As a collection (see Table 1), they triangulate data from informants based on (a) the role of the interview participants relative to Gray (e.g., people she has supervised; her supervisor; and people external to the district) and (b) the context from which they know her (i.e., which of the roles she served when each worked with her); and 2) As researchers, we selected interviews that yielded particularly rich data, because of the candor, level of detailed description, and richness of examples provided by the interviewee.

**Table 1**  
*Participant Matrix*

	Association with Gray					Relationship to Gray			
	Deerfield	Hill	Lincoln	Rothborne Middle	Central Office	Teacher/AP under Gray	Supervised by Gray in Central Office	Supervisor of Gray	External to District
Whitfield	✓				✓	✓	✓		
Anderson	✓		✓			✓			
Simmons		✓				✓			
White	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	
TCC (Surry & Wise)			✓	✓					✓
Hocking				✓		✓			
Horn					✓		✓		
Walker			✓			✓			
Teppe			✓			✓			
Atwell					✓		✓		
Gray									

## Analysis

As a research team, we each conducted about half of the interviews. Prior to microanalytic coding, we identified a priori codes based on our conceptual framework (e.g., collaboration, emotional intelligence, and high expectations). We also identified additional codes prior to our microanalysis, based on reflective memos (Maxwell, 2013; Saldaña, 2009).

We analyzed the first interview collaboratively, using a priori codes and identifying emergent codes (e.g., task v. people orientation, competence, intimidating), a process that took eight hours

over four sessions. After this, we independently coded interviews conducted by the other so that we both had intimate familiarity with all of the data. After sharing our microanalyses, we met to review our analyses and interpret the data, attending closely to analytic memos and analytic networks (conceptual maps) that we developed during the microanalysis phase (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

## **RESULTS/FINDINGS**

### **Stature**

Susan Gray is a tiny, white woman in her fifties with a compelling voice touched by a slight Southern accent. Gray's voice compels attention not by its tenor or volume but by the passion she injects in it. She leans slightly forward when she speaks and the strength of her eye contact and brisk matter-of-factness oblige attention. She smiles easily and often. She is forever well coiffed and professionally attired in a suit. Her jewelry is tasteful and understated. Her nails sport a French manicure. Gray is "always professional. Always dresses the part. Has that outward appearance because you never see her sloppy." When not in sight, she is recognizable by the staccato "*click clack* of her heels and the *jingle* of her keys as she bustles down the hall— always on a mission." When she speaks, she gesticulates with her hands in front of her torso. Her energy is palpable.

While Gray is physically diminutive, her presence is enormous: When we were at Hill Elementary, and we had a crazy parent . . . and she came in the school and--storming through, wanting to attack a teacher [laughter]. Susan and the [assistant principal] somehow got this woman in the office and this woman was trying to come across the desk at Susan . . . She is like -- I don't know -- the little Chihuahua and this lady was huge and very, very mad, and Dr. Gray stands up to her and was not intimidated by her in the least . . . you have just this little woman with so much power.

### **Intimidating**

Indeed, Gray is often described as somewhat intimidating. Gray has high and clear expectations, and this is part of what makes her intimidating:

When she walked in the room, you knew what was expected and you were working with children. You never sat down. I probably did not sit down for the first 5 or 6 years – I would not even. I was afraid to be even standing close to my desk and if I wanted to go over and look at some of my plans, I would go over and look quick and get back – get away. So you just knew what was expected all of the time. . . I mean it was intense. It was very intense and I have people that walk in the building and talk about how intense the instruction is still at this time.

The perception people have of Gray as intimidating appears to come from the intersection of her strong competence, her high expectations for herself and faculty/staff, and her intense commitment to the mission. Each of these is detailed in the following sections.

## Competence

Gray's competence manifests itself through various threads that are interwoven: She is knowledgeable and growth-minded; mission-focused; strategic and tactical; and clutch.

**Knowledge and growth mindset.** Gray is the type of person who you can drop into “any kind of situation and just toss her in and she would be successful no matter what.” Gray has the confidence and aplomb to handle any situation. She is a scholar of her work, and once she is in a situation, she will further develop her expertise:

Because no matter where you put her, even if she didn't know about where you put her, she would know it by the time she got the position. If we had a group on zebras, Susan would come the next day and by the next day she would know everything there was to know about a zebra. Because that's just how she is.

Gray expects this growth mindset of others as well:

She never stops. She will send us emails at 2:00 in the morning of an article that she has read that we will discuss. Like she is always educating herself. She will text us from her kid's soccer game with things she has found.

To Gray, everyone is in a constant state of development, and as a leader she nurtures that growth. Additionally, Gray feels that a leader herself should constantly be growing. She explains one of her career transitions as follows,

After I realized we made AYP...I was at that place where I don't know if I want to stay here any longer....I need a different venue now, I don't know what that is yet, but I need a new challenge...I need something new to do and to be.

Gray leverages her knowledge and expertise to plan, enact, and monitor strategies to fulfill her mission to effect positive change in whatever position she is in.

**Mission Focused, Strategic, Tactical:** The “Little General”. Superintendent White referred to Gray as the “Little General”, a moniker also given to her by some of her peers. Throughout interviews, participants regularly used military language to describe Gray. She is seen as someone who has a strong and unwavering sense of mission, who can set strategy to accomplish that mission, and who can make tactical arrangements to enact the strategy. Much like a general standing atop a vantage point surveying the battlefield below,

She looked at her school, and she put her plan in place, and she told us where we are and what we are going to do, and this is what we are going to do to get here. She made that happen.

An assistant principal who worked with Gray explained, “Once she makes a decision and she knows what she wants to do, she has a lot of follow-through, and she is a delegator. She



delegates, and she brings the troops in with her.” This tunnel vision, while not unproblematic, is part of what makes Gray *clutch*.

**Clutch.** Gray is at her best when the circumstances are most intense and challenging. Like pottery fired in a kiln, Gray is made stronger by the heat. Gray’s *clutchness* is a function not only of her toughness in the face of adversity but also of her preparedness and organization. In difficult moments that require Gray to be clutch, she maintains her unwavering and—perhaps myopic—focus on the mission. While at Lincoln—a school deep in school improvement status and on the verge of being reconstituted—a crisis occurred on a morning during state testing. As is the case on any state testing day, it was “crazy town” with counselors counting and distributing testing materials and teachers preparing for test administration. One of the teachers was absent and unaccounted for, which was highly uncharacteristic for this teacher. A teacher’s assistant (TA) placed a call to the teacher’s home. Her husband picked up the phone and stammered:

“Umm, Kara is not going to be coming to school today.” The TA says, “Oh my goodness is she sick, no problem, we will put her in a make-up session.” He said, “No, I woke up and Kara was dead this morning.” So immediately the TA starts to cry, and we had this huge issue that’s beginning to now become an issue in another class—it’s beginning to spread. Gray was somewhere and heard a commotion and was on it in a New York minute because we don’t want any “Woop.” And she went and contained it. And it was awesome to see her contain that. She went to the teacher, she went to the TA, she said, “You will pull it together. This is awful. This is horrible. You will pull it together because we have a test today and these children and these teachers need us—so you’ll say nothing else.” So it had gone on to yet another classroom, so she went next door and said the same thing. “We’ll do our grieving later on but right now we have to be professional, and we need to get through this and get done.” And I was—because we were all a mess—because [Kara] was a dear, precious person to us—and Susan was able as a leader to keep herself together so that we could follow suit. She kept us all strong.

### **Commitment to Mission**

As researchers and former principals, we talked about how we might have handled the passing of Kara and wondered about Gray’s decision to attend immediately to the task of testing (and the larger mission of serving students) and only subsequently attending to people’s need to digest and mourn the loss of their colleague. Throughout the interviews, participants framed Gray as being first and foremost task-oriented and secondarily people-oriented. In juxtaposing Gray to her predecessor at Hill, Whitfield explained:

The person that had been there previously is warm and fuzzy. She knows everybody, knows everybody’s families and would see you in the hall and ask you what you did last weekend. Dr. Gray was more business, and she is kind of straight to the point. She is not goofing around and talking in the hallway. And going from this touchy feely person to this more straight line business person was hard for most of the staff because most of the staff had been there 20 some years. And they are like a family, and it was hard for a lot of people because of that personality difference.

Perceptively, Superintendent White predicted: “If you ask her [Gray], she would say that she is charismatic and she is a people person, but I would say that is not her inherent trait. She works really, really hard at being a people person.” When asked whether she sees herself as task-oriented or people-oriented, without hesitation Gray replied:

I think I’m still people-oriented more than task-. Yeah . . . I had to be fair. I had to be compassionate enough to be willing to hear what [teachers] had to say. Now I didn’t always – and I’ll be honest with you – I’m not always being like, “Oh well, it’s all right.” I’m still like, “Okay, I understand that you’re not feeling well, and you’ll go home, but tomorrow you’ll come back.”

Our assessment is that Gray’s task-orientation is driven by her commitment to her mission and could more accurately be called a “mission-orientation” (see Discussion section for elaboration). She, however, recognizes the importance of being people-oriented and so intentionally goes to lengths to be so. She shared with her department at central office that her New Year’s resolution is to put down her technology when someone comes to speak with her and to focus 100% on that person. During a break in a meeting Gray facilitated of about 15 secondary student support personnel, Gray interacted with a fellow central office administrator, Lila. She smiled and grasped Lila’s arm with both hands and leaned in. Then she milled about the room, talking to various attendees. People smiled back at her and seemed eager to interact with her. She touched one assistant principal on the arm as she spoke. They laughed and seemed to joke. Then she moved around the room, engaging in dialogue with another attendee who had been working on her computer. Again the individual seemed interested in talking to Gray. With each interaction, Gray was 100% focused on the person or people with whom she was speaking, always making strong eye contact. People with whom she speaks seem to soak in everything that she has to say. Their total focus on her and engagement with her communicate their obvious respect for her.

### **High Expectations**

Gray has clear and high expectations for herself and for those with whom she works, in terms of pedagogy, rigor, differentiation, data use, and professionalism:

It was exhausting. She was just exhausting because the expectations were so high, but then again and I have heard so many people say it since she was gone: You just knew what was expected and you just – there was no question about it. You knew what was expected, and you just did your job . . . you just knew that she did not expect more from you than she was going to do herself.

Gray’s high and clear expectations are paired with a willingness to do what it takes for people to meet them:

Everybody in the building knows exactly what was expected from them . . . And I have just heard so many other teachers say that she has been their favorite principal, but, and she was very strict . . . And she was not one who came and nit-picked at all. She might come in while you were teaching, leave you a note, check your work, and walk out. She

was very hands-on. . . We have these Thursday folders that go home with the children's work in it from the prior week, and I know that she walked in one day, and I was stuffing my own folders and organizing the papers and I knew that, you know that kind of clerical work was not supposed to be done during the day while you had children in the room. But it happened when there were no assistants and there was just no other time to get it done, and she said, "You go on and keep teaching," and she went and stuffed my folders for me.

Gray is willing to provide the support and resources needed for people to meet her expectations, and she is willing to do what it takes to support people. For Gray, it is all about the students. Students are her mission, and she privileges what is best for students over adults. However, this does not mean that she neglects building strong relationships with adults, as is illustrated in the following section.

### **Relational Trust**

Regardless of whether Gray is more task- or people-oriented, or more student- than adult-focused, she does build strong, trusting relationships with adults in her work settings. One study participant who served as an Assistant Principal under Gray reflected:

And there were times when she would say to me, she'd say, "How did that go?" and I would honestly tell her, "Well this is what I think..." and she trusted me enough to look at me and listen to me--believe what I was telling her because, like I said, I depended on her, and she depended on me. I had faith in her, and she had faith in me. And we built a good relationship, we really did . . . She had respect for me, and I felt that respect. And like I said, I felt like we had a friendship as well. We had a good working relationship and that carried over.

Gray, the intimidating, task-oriented, mission-driven "little general" is not only respected, but people have genuine affection for her. She is complex--intimidating and personable, tough and caring, driven and direct but trustworthy and wise. She is respected as a leader and valued as an advisor and confidant:

She was tough, but if you had a problem you could walk into her office and say, "Do you have a minute," and she would close the door and you could sit down and cry, scream -- whatever you needed to do. She would sit there and listen, give you advice on how to handle it. Give you resources, whatever you needed to fix whatever the problem was. I don't know of anybody that went to her that ever left from her and felt that she had never helped them. Even though she was very strict and structured you knew you could talk to her, and you knew it would never go beyond her office.

Gray serves in the capacity her people need her to, whether as confidant or mentor. She is seen as trustworthy and valued, even as she is seen as the Little General:

She is not ooey-gooney-- But she is the one that will give the directive with that little love and caring. So that they know, this is expected, but I love you, and I care for you, and I want you to do well.

Several of our study participants used the term “emotional intelligence” to describe how Susan built relational trust. One teacher observed, “She has strong emotional intelligence. Soft skills. She’s so *confident in who she is*, we believed in her, whatever she had to say, because she had this calmness. She’s grounded. She was *firm*, but *fair*.” Gray’s ability to develop strong relational trust and to combine a sense of caring with high and clear expectations is one of the keys to her success in disrupting deficit thinking.

### **Disrupting Deficit Thinking and Centering Students**

The first thing that Gray did as Lincoln principal was to interview all faculty and staff:

When I went into the school that summer, I interviewed every single individual – every bus driver, every cafeteria worker, every individual—and said, “What is wrong with Lincoln? Tell me what is going on here,” and I would say 65 – 70% told me it was because we had poor kids and they just couldn’t do it. And so that was my mantra, “Yes they will do it, yes you will do it, and we will do it together.”

Gray worked to disrupt the culture of deficit thinking by faculty and staff and to replace it with a culture of high expectations—for adults and students. This disruption of deficit thinking, in conjunction with high expectations and centering student learning as the mission, are cornerstones of Gray as a turnaround leader and change agent.

### **Summary**

In summary, Gray is a force of nature not in terms of bluster or grandiosity but in her consistency, tenacity, and focus. Rather than a lightning bolt or tornado, she is a steady wind in a desert that in surprisingly little time substantially rewrites the landscape, shifting dunes, building hills, filling dips such that the topography is virtually unrecognizable from what it was. She re-contours the landscape wherever she is assigned, and the changes she leaves in place endure long past her tenure in any role.

### **DISCUSSION**

Throughout the data, participants focused much more on who Gray is as a leader and less on what she does (i.e., her leadership practices). As such, the findings focused more on the *who* of Gray’s leadership than the *what*. This portrait of Susan Gray builds upon existing literature on turnaround principals and reinforces the notion (see Figure 1) that successful turnaround leadership requires a nexus of leadership practices, dispositions, and emotional intelligence and emphasizes the importance of the latter two. The portrait expands and refines the conceptual framework in several ways. First, the original framework included the importance of the turnaround principal cultivating high expectations. Concomitant with this is the importance of explicitly calling out and disrupting deficit thinking (Delpit, 2012). Second, Gray illustrates the

power of being mission-driven *and developing strategies* to support the mission *and tactics* to enact the strategies. Third, this portrait illustrates the importance of turnaround principals exhibiting uncompromising respect and developing strong relational trust (Cranston, 2011; Kochanek, 2005), which Gray did by getting “in the trenches” with teachers to effect change. Perhaps most significantly, we found that to understand leadership practice in successful turnaround schools, it is not only important to understand *what the principal does*, but also who the principal is as a person and how this impacts others in the school community and influences the effectiveness of the leader’s practices.

Principals have been positioned in turnaround policy as linchpins who initiate change and keep the wheels of turnaround moving forward. Clearly, this emphasis reinforces the longstanding tradition of the “superprincipal” who is equal parts savior and superhero (see e.g., Copland, 2001; Edmonds, 1979; Peck, West, & Reitzug, 2013). A study such as this one that focuses on a single principal—particularly one that focuses on who the principal is as a person-- would appear, at first blush, to reinforce such notions. The shortcoming of such notions is, of course, that very few individuals in any line of work are endowed with superhero-like abilities. Peck and colleagues (2013) note, “As Superman, Spiderman and Wonder Woman would tell you, only a select few can be imbued with extraordinary powers. Expecting every school leader to possess such super abilities is simply a debilitating fantasy” (p. 64). While Susan Gray appears to harbor some extraordinary leadership skills and abilities, our intent in this report is not to canonize her as a superhero, but rather, to demystify what to some might appear to be her “superpowers”.

Susan Gray is not a flashy, highly charismatic leader. Other than her petite size, she would be indistinguishable, at first glance, from thousands of other principals and school administrators. She is, in a sense, an ordinary leader with deeply-held values and a strong work ethic. She is respectful, straightforward, intense, tough, caring, competent, and always prepared. She expects much from those with whom she works. She thinks linearly and aligns mission, strategies, and tactics. These are ordinary qualities, not “superpowers”. What is extraordinary, however, is the intensity with which she exercises these “powers” and the responsiveness she engenders in people.

The intensity and responsiveness evident in Gray’s practice can be explained by examining the relationship between task-orientation and people-orientation in her work. As previously mentioned, we believe she is not so much task-oriented as she is mission-oriented. Almost all of our participants spoke about how “driven” she is in her work. We believe what drives her is her mission – a three-dimensional mission that encompasses utilitarian, pragmatic, and self-actualizing components. Her mission is, first of all, utilitarian, concerned with satisfying external expectations others have of her (e.g., reaching school test score goals). Secondly, there is a pragmatic component to her mission, which encompasses being viewed as successful in order to have opportunities that will allow her to advance her career. The third, self-actualizing component of her mission is focused on helping students, staff, and self, grow toward their potential. We believe Gray’s multi-dimensional mission fuels her work with an intensity that a simpler mission would not be able to provide.

In querying our interview participants about whether they perceived Gray to be more task- or people-oriented, most responded that she was both--but somewhat more task-oriented. When we

asked Gray this same question, she responded that she is more people-oriented. We believe both she and our other participants are right. Gray values people above all else and this is evidenced in the complete respect she shows for others. Additionally, she has an astute (and perhaps, intrinsic,) understanding of people, what motivates them, and their need for commitment to a cause beyond themselves. Thus, people are what drive her mission. For these reasons, she may view herself as being more people- than task-oriented. However, her people orientation may not extend to the type of socializing behaviors that are often associated with such an orientation (and perhaps a gendered notion of leadership). Valuing and respecting people and being concerned with their growth does not require being “ooey gooey” or “warm and fuzzy”. Indeed, time spent conversing about non-professional matters may detract from time spent facilitating growth and dilute focus on the mission. Thus, Gray does not spend excessive amounts of time discussing non-professional matters. Those who work with her, however, may interpret this as her being more concerned with tasks than with them. For Gray, it is not tasks toward which she is oriented; it is mission, with that mission driven by an orientation toward, and a valuing of, people and their growth. Nonetheless, although those who work with her may not believe that she is primarily people-oriented, they feel strongly connected to Gray and speak glowingly of their relationship with her. This is understandable when one considers that Gray, in addition to treating them with complete respect, has helped them internalize that they are key players in working for a cause beyond themselves. Ultimately, it seems, being valued and having meaning in one’s work are more important than social friendships.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

In summary, we believe there are several key takeaways for leaders striving to turn around schools or other educational units.

1. You do not have to be a superhero to be a successful turnaround leader; you do, however, need to be intensively mission-driven.
2. The mission that drives you needs to serve you practically *and* be self-actualizing. Simply raising test scores or working to further your career can be soul-deadening; conversely, working for growth and maximizing potential may be fulfilling but insufficient in meeting turnaround expectations.
3. In your interactions with others, it is important to stay focused on the mission. When the mission is difficult, extraneous social interactions may be counterproductive.
4. It is imperative to respect and embrace everyone’s intrinsic worth--always.
5. Hold high expectations—they are an outward manifestation of your respect and valuing of others. Concomitant with high expectations is a commitment to providing the support needed to help people meet those expectations.
6. Be driven--have your personal work be an outward manifestation of your high expectations for yourself.
7. Disrupt complacency--challenge deficit thinking, expect high performance from low performers, and higher performance from already high performers.

Future research on turnaround leadership should attend not only to school turnaround but turnaround at the central office level as well. Also, researchers should attend to turnaround leaders’ dispositions and emotional intelligence in concert with their practices, especially as the

former two may mediate stakeholders' responses to the latter. In other words, we need to view practices not in isolation but rather as part of a larger, integrated view of turnaround leadership.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the term "successful turnaround leader" is usually applied to a principal of a chronically failing school that is experiencing transformation. Susan Gray certainly meets this definition for her work at Lincoln Elementary. However, more broadly, she is a successful turnaround leader who is able to bring about substantive and speedy change in various educational settings, including in her most recent role as the head of a central office department. In this sense, we expand and trouble the more narrow use of the term "turnaround" leader and argue that the analysis offered here has implications for turnaround leaders in various settings.

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