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**Walberg, Herbert J. (Ed.) (2007) *Handbook on Restructuring and Substantial School Improvement*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing**

Pp. 136 \$40 ISBN 1593117639

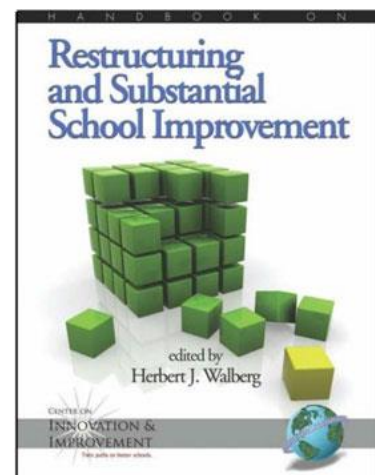
**Reviewed by Venesser M. Pate**  
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As titled, this handbook provides a rich base of information about current trends in turnaround leadership theories in USA and gives a number of helpful suggestions in the form of “promising practises” on how schools can bring about meaningful change. In the words of the editor of this book, the series of articles that compile this handbook, “...provide principles for restructuring and substantially improving schools.”(p. v) The modules have been written by leading experts on restructuring and school improvement and provide guidelines to an audience that includes states, districts, and schools in establishing policies, procedures, and support to successfully restructure schools. The handbook has been written within the context of the U.S. federal *No Child Left Behind* Act (NALB) and has been divided into three sections that provide easy access to particular needs that a reader might have from the handbook.

Section One provides an overview of restructuring and uses early research – *School Restructuring Under No Child Left Behind: What Works When? A Guide for Education Leaders* produced by Public Impact and the Centre for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement and the shape it has taken thus far to define and explain the concept of restructuring within initiatives taken under NALB. It provides a strong voice for the elimination of low-performing schools from a district after going through the five options for school restructuring (pp. 1-2):

- reopen the school as a public charter school;
- replace “all or most of the school staff (which may include the principal) who are relevant to the failure to make adequate yearly progress”;
- contract with an outside “entity, such as a private management company, with a demonstrate record of effectiveness, to operate the public school”;



- turn the “operation of the school over to the State educational agency, if permitted under State law and agreed to by the State” or
- engage in another form of major restructuring that makes fundamental reforms, “such as significant changes in the school’s staffing and governance, to improve student academic achievement in the school and that has substantial promise of enabling the school to make adequate yearly progress.”

Throughout Section One, the authors: Bryan Hassel, Emily Hassel and Lauren Motando Rhim engage in a detailed discussion on who are the schools that should be considered for restructuring, which restructuring options are being currently used by districts and most importantly how is research on restructuring informing current practice. In essence, three broad lessons emerged from this review.



**Herbert J. Walberg**

Firstly, large fast improvements in failing organizations are achieved through the employment of a different set of methods than those used to bring about incremental change over time in organizations that are already working well. Secondly, eradicating chronically low performance in a school cannot be a one-time project; it has to be a strong commitment that is a core part of the school and the district’s improvement effort. And lastly, district and school leaders must possess a focused and persistent approach that is set firmly on children’s learning to eliminate low-performing schools from a district. In addition to this based on cross-organizational literature successful efforts to improve struggling organizations need certain pertinent principles put in place which cover a broad range of activities within the school right from providing good governance through to choosing and managing the right leader and supportive staff; maintaining effective practices and providing an environment that is conducive for leaders to work in the restructuring of the organization. As voiced by the authors of this section, “In successful organizational improvement, leaders find ways to include stakeholders in the process without letting them divert it from success. That process takes a strong unbending will and a compass set determinedly on children’s learning.” (p. 4)

Section Two provides six modules on restructuring. The topic of the handbook’s modules – restructuring with a focus on the district as the impetus for dramatic improvement – is relatively new in the education history of USA. For this reason, the module authors were selected because of them being highly experienced experts in their fields and can therefore judiciously weigh the less than definitive evidence while drawing useful guiding principles from a broad field of cross-organizational research. These six modules may stand alone in providing guidelines in specific areas of school improvement or may involve combinations or be looked upon in whole as a map set out for restructuring within organizations.

Module 1, introduces Kenneth Wong’s literary discussion on the importance of district-wide improvement towards restructuring where establishing partnerships with quality intermediaries and engaging key stakeholders such as civic and community leaders, the church, parents, and teachers in supporting initiatives taken at the district level. Thereby, these synergies provide an overall strength for the community, by the community and to the community. This module also introduces the *diverse service provider model* (pp. 23-25) which involves the contracting of services from external stakeholders through performance contracts with measurable outcomes. Or, in some cases, these external service providers may provide specific programs or manage entire schools. This new hybrid model thus redefines the central office’s operational role to that of an accountability role of the service provider. However Wong clarifies that some considerations that need to be taken at the district level are a careful selection of service providers, provision of appropriate support, sufficient organizational freedom for the new operators to effectively

turnaround the organization through their respective improvement models and the existence of accountability mechanisms in place to monitor the results from these service providers.

Module 2 has Gordon Cawelti and Nancy Protheroe go one step lower in the restructuring process and examine the role of the school board and the central office within district-wide improvement initiatives. As Cawelti and Protheroe puts it, “A key element is strong leadership by a superintendent and school board willing and able to publicly recognize challenges, develop a plan for reform, and build support for needed changes. Both equity and excellence must be addressed, with the focus of reform efforts clearly centred on instruction.” (p. 29) However, they have clearly expressed that while districts may lead the process through “no excuses” goals and through initiatives that move all schools towards these goals; there is an equal balance of responsibility to be placed with principals and teachers in carrying out the initiatives to reach the set goals. The authors therefore stress that the role in this liaison would be for an active engagement of districts in areas such as curriculum, professional development, monitoring and evaluation and finally the allocation (and if need reallocation) of adequate resources to meet the needs of individual students and the intervention programs designed for them. Finally, active engagement of parents and the wider community will, according to the research studied by the authors, make or break the efforts of serious change and must therefore continue to be given proactive roles with routes for open communication in this process.

Module 3 identifies that in selecting an NCLB restructuring option, it is imperative to employ data, use evidence-based practices and be knowledgeable about the change process. According to Perlman, “Successful restructuring under NCLB requires dramatic change in a short period of time; an understanding of the change process can smooth the way. It will be necessary to carefully assess each school’s strengths and needs and to use the resulting data to select an appropriate restructuring option and craft a plan that includes strategic allocation of available resources and reliance on evidence-based improvement models. Collaborative support from the district is essential for school restructuring to succeed.” (p. 45) The principles outlined by Perlman in this module emphasise on the uniqueness of each school and its strengths and weaknesses while working out its strategic improvement process. The module also provides helpful guidance on the restructuring options being discussed and provides links to tools that practitioners can access to learn more about the options and use to build upon pre-existing knowledge bases. In its entirety, based on cross-industry findings, Perlman stresses the importance of governance, planning and committing to continuous improvement after a school’s performance becomes satisfactory. In other words, the need for a continuously learning organization is critical in restructuring and turnaround situations.

In Module 4, Joseph Murphy provides a closer look at leadership and in particular *learning-focused leaders* who successfully concentrate on the core business of schooling i.e. student learning and leads all other dimensions of schooling to support the core. *Learning-focused leadership* is committed to develop mission and goals for the organization, manage the education production function, promote an academic learning climate and develop a supportive work environment for the people that work within such organizations. According to Murphy, these leaders work ceaselessly to promote the school’s mission and agenda. They are careful monitors of the process who address shortcomings or failures instead of shying away from it. So, while these leaders are engaged in developing a positive climate through the setting of high expectations, they will become personally engaged in the change process, and will also ensure that there are incentives for staff and students to excel – typically essential ingredients in a restructuring process.

Herb Walberg focuses in Module 5 on the changing and monitoring of instruction. In his words, “Improvement in achievement takes place most directly at the classroom level. For substantial improvement in achievement, the focus should be at this level and emphasize effective instruction and assessment aligned with state educational standards.” (p. 77) Walberg touches base in this module with formative assessments, summative assessments, frequency of assessments, monitoring and observations of teaching practices as caches whereby restructuring at the

classroom level can and should take place. Walberg stresses on the need and importance to be able to identify poor teaching from good teaching and to make changes so that the end result is effective student learning. He also stresses that this endeavour of improved instruction must be inclusive of parental support as a lot of learning is supplemented outside the classroom learning environment and within the student's homes and communities. Three core principles are condensed in the concluding section of this module, "means must be aligned with end goals; resources must be allocated to monitor and focus practice toward the goal of proficiency for all students; and parents are critical partners to success so schools should strive to support and improve the *curriculum of the home*."

The last of the modules in Section Two includes Module 6, which describes how the process of continual improvement in the restructuring school can happen. This module is a good follow-up to Module 5 in that after an improvement cycle for instruction has been established, it should then move out and become a whole school focus of continual improvement through regular and continual monitoring of its progress through the relevant stakeholders within various school processes. Also as a basic reiteration of what previous modules have stated, Sam Redding goes on to show how dependent the whole process is on having the right leader for the job who is able to set tangible and attainable goals that involves the whole school to envision and engage in its long-term improvement of student learning. As Redding puts it, "A restructuring plan, even restructuring itself, does not ensure substantial and sustained improvement in teaching and learning. Systems must be put in place to tend to the day-to-day work in the school.... Thus instructional planning, teaching and learning, assessment of student learning, and professional development become parts of a system of continuous improvement that is able to sustain the early gains that restructuring is intended to produce." (p. 102)

Section Three titled *Indicators of Successful Restructuring* provides three stages of checklists of indicators that help in providing tools for restructuring. Stage I focuses on the district context and the initial development of a restructuring plan; Stage II provides checklists used at the school level for aligning curriculum with instruction and assessment; and Section III gives tools hand for classroom observation and teacher interviewing in order to monitor classroom processes and plan towards a focused and meaningful professional development.

In summary, this handbook is relevant for schools embarking or in the midst of restructuring as it provides simple coherent principles in each of the three sections that can be adopted, modified or redesigned to use within individual school organizations. It provides a whole array of down-to-earth practical principles, additional resources and web links or tools that can be downloaded and used within a restructuring process. For researchers in the field of restructuring and improvement, the *Handbook* provides good schematic representations that can be used as researchers design, experiment, explore, or engage in active research within this field.

### **About the Reviewer**

VenesserM. Pate is an experienced Primary and Secondary teacher for over sixteen years in Australia and overseas. She is currently teaching at the secondary level and completing a Doctorate of Education degree from Monash University, Melbourne, Australia. Her research interests include Leadership and management in education, continual improvement systems in education, curriculum studies, and effective classroom instruction.

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