

# Fixing Failing Schools

## Try, Try Again

(How to Triple The Number of Fixed Failing Schools *Without* Getting Any Better at Fixing Schools)

August 2009



# The Frogs in the Well: A Fable



**Two frogs fell into a well** with slippery sides. Five feet down, they could not reach the top – the only way to freedom – in one leap.

**The first frog, named Eager**, jumped as far as he could, landing two feet higher. He could not tell how far he'd come. The nicks and scratches on the well walls were not the clearest markers. He looked down and felt fear. He looked up and felt hopeless. Feeling a slipping sensation, he redoubled his effort to hold on where he was. He perished the next day, clinging to the well wall.

**The second frog, named Determined**, jumped as far as he could, landing just below his friend. He looked down and felt fear. He looked up and felt determined, because he knew that clinging to the side of the well would not make him free. Feeling a slipping sensation, he resisted the urge to cling harder and instead jumped again. He was out in less than a minute, having taken four jumps. In vain, Determined called through the night to his friend, who thought as he was dying that Determined must certainly be an unusually good jumper.

# Fixing Failing Schools

Audacious national goal: fix 5,000 in five years

But wait . . .

- School fix efforts to date have low success rates
- Even in wealthy, non-education sectors:
  - “start-ups” succeed only 20 - 25% of time
  - *even* previously successful entrepreneurs only 34%
  - bad-to-great turnaround efforts and “major change” succeed about 30% of the time

Sources: Start-up success rate data from Gompers et al., *Performance Persistence in Entrepreneurship* (Harvard Business School Working Paper 09-028, 2008); major change success rate estimate from Beer and Nohria, *Breaking the Code of Change* (HBS Press, 2000).

# The Big Problem

- What if 20 – 30% is our *best* hope for the failing school fix rate? *It almost certainly is.*
- And what if a 10% fix rate is likely in some locales that face extraordinary change challenges?

## Then What?

- What if our nation could achieve success in 2,500 to 4,000+ of those 5000 schools in five years, rather than the likely 500 to 1500, *without getting any better at fixing schools?*

# The Answer: Try, Try Again

- **Most change efforts in education await 5+ years of continued failure before retry (with a new leader, fresh start/charter, etc.) – even in schools where very few children are learning**
- **Indeed, NCLB codifies 6 years of continued failure without major change effort as acceptable**

**Moving retry-after-failure timing to 1 – 2 years would *double to quadruple* the 5-year success rate – *without getting any better at fixing failing schools***

# The Compelling Numbers

## Definitions:

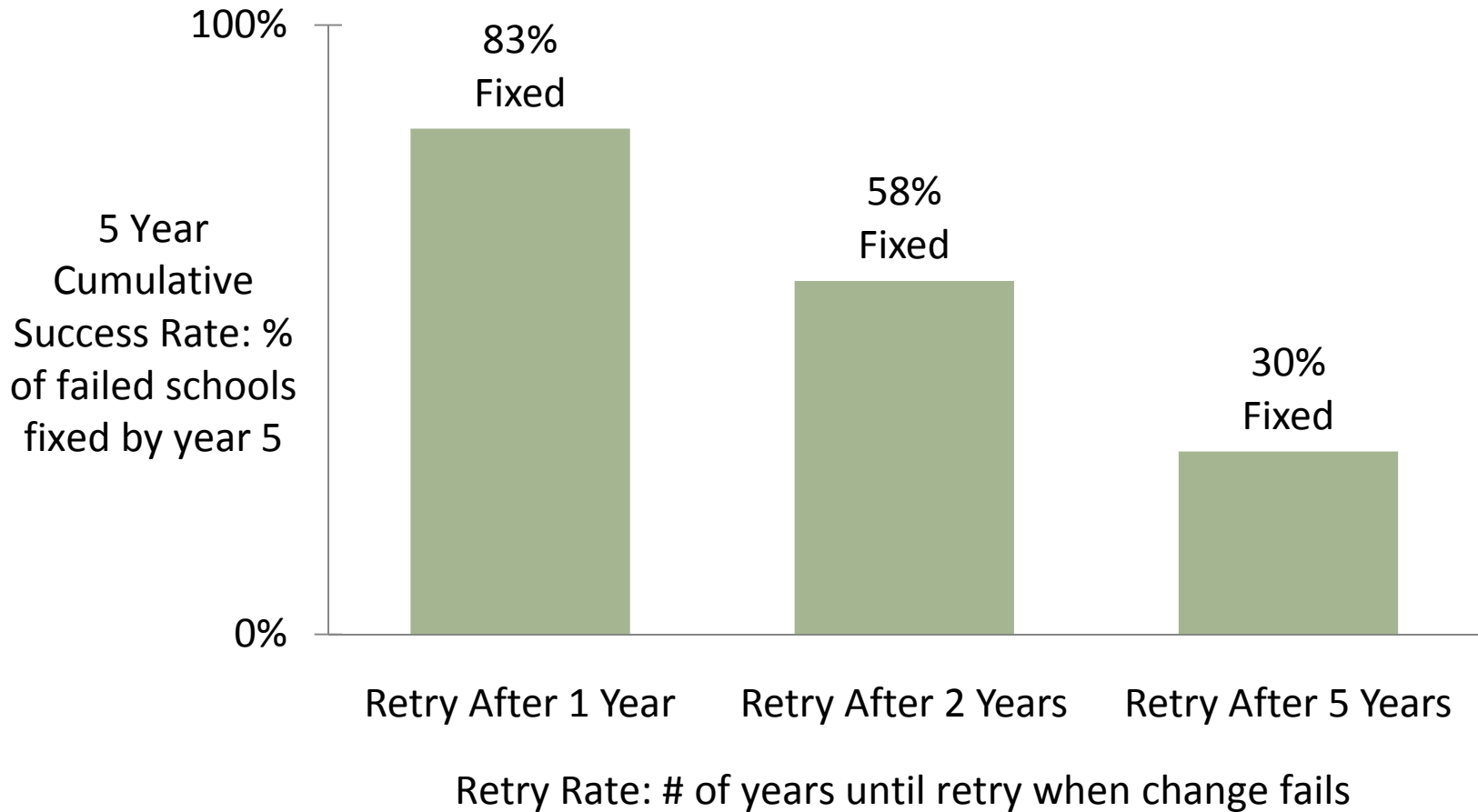
Success Rates	Retry Rate
<p><i>Success Rate:</i> The % of still-failing schools fixed in each round of change effort.</p> <p><i>Cumulative Success Rate:</i> The total % of formerly-failing schools fixed at a future point in time, e.g., in 5 years.</p>	<p>The average number of years that pass before failed fix efforts are replaced with a new major change effort (new leader or provider)</p>

If we assume a generous 30% Success Rate in 5,000 schools, moving from 5- to 2-year Retry Rate **nearly doubles** the # of failing schools successful within five years.

# The Compelling Numbers

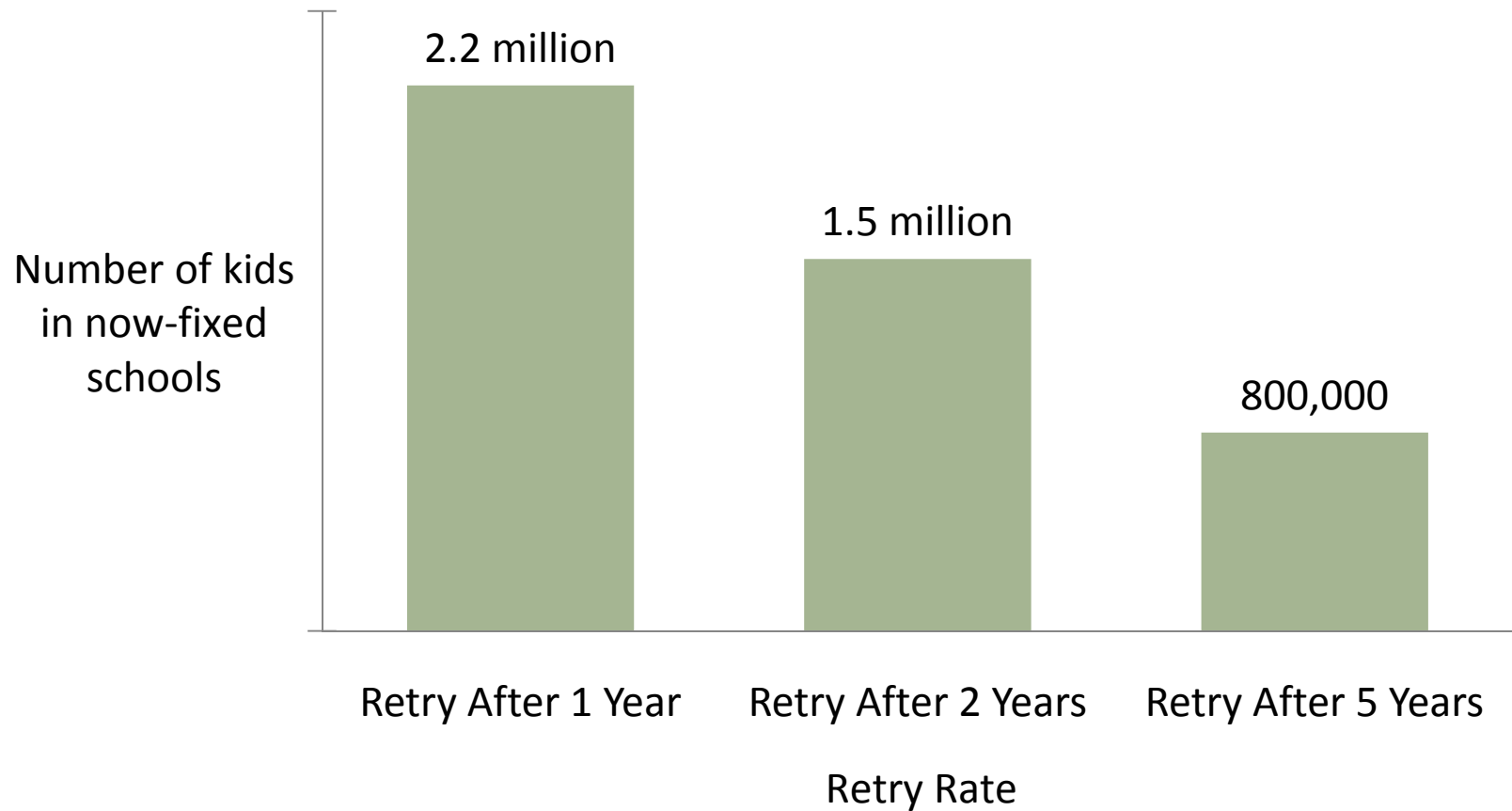
- At lower Success Rates, 10-20%, the effect of faster Retry Rates is even greater, *doubling to quadrupling* the Cumulative Success Rate – and the total number of schools fixed – in five years.

# Faster Retry Rate Payoff is Huge



Notes: 1) Assumes 30% of schools fixed with each round of effort. 2) For two-year Retry Rate, the Year 5 Cumulative Success Rate is average of years 4 and 6.

# How Many Kids No Longer Assigned to Failing Schools After 5 Years?



Notes: 1) Assumes 30% of schools fixed with each round of effort. 2) For two-year Retry Rate, the Year 5 Cumulative Success Rate is average of years 4 and 6. 3) Assumes 535 children per school, on average.

# What % of Failing Schools will be Fixed After 5 Years?

		Retry Rate		
		1 Year	2 Year	5 Year
Success Rate	30%	83%	58%	30%
	20%	67%	42%	20%
	10%	41%	23%	10%

Each percentage in the box is the Cumulative Success Rate after five years, given the specified Success Rate and Retry Rate.

Notes: Two-year Retry column figures are the averages of the Cumulative Success Rates for years 4 and 6.

# The Compelling Numbers

- **The number of children who benefit is *vastly understated here*, because a new cohort of children enters these schools every year**
- **Fixing a very large % of failing schools *fast* is critical** – children from fixed schools must have good schools at next level (middle/high)

# Try, Try Again: Why Settle for Less?

- **Knowing this, how can we settle for less?**
- **Today, it is education lore that it takes five years for major change efforts to take effect**
- **That is unacceptable. In other sectors, nobody gets five years** to pull a business out of bankruptcy or five years of venture capital funding for a start-up without evidence of success. If we care as much about our children as our wallets, we must . . .

# Try, Try Again: Four Essential Actions

## #1: Retry *Major* Change

- Failing schools need dramatic change strategies, not incremental
- If tries and retries are incremental, success rates plummet

## #2: Pre-Commit to Rapid Retry Rates (1 – 2 years)

- Expect failure on path to success: failure in 70-90% range, as in other sectors
- Risk misidentifying failure: many providers and staff will get a second chance; the kids will not

# Try, Try Again: Four Essential Actions

## #3: Identify “Leading Indicators”

- Pinpoint school conditions in years 1 and 2 that predict later failure
- But we must act even without perfect indicators
- Research to improve; well-honed field in business/economics

## #4: “Open Spigot” Replacement Pools

- Turnaround leaders and start-fresh operators identified far in advance to retry in 70 to 90% of fix attempts
- Teams planning ahead for 6-18 months, ready to step in where needed (not: hire/contract in June to retry in August)

# Try, Try Again: Benefits

## Immediate

- Far more schools fixed
- Millions more kids launched on a better learning path *fast*

## Longer Term

- Vastly larger success numbers likely to create a “virtuous cycle”:
  - Learning Effect: We can learn far more about “what works” with a solid set of successes and failures to study comparatively
  - Recruiting Effect: Successful people want to work in sectors and organizations where success is possible
- So, we might actually get better at fresh starts and turnarounds-from-within
- Meanwhile, millions of children will not have to wait

# Try, Try Again?

- Knowing these numbers, how can we *not*?

# Ifs, Ands, Buts...

- The math here is simple, the consequence of faster (or slower) Retry Rates is clear.
- But future modeling would also include things like:
  - ✓ Slippage: schools that get better and then retreat (this occurs regardless of retry rate; adds weight to the importance of fast retry)
  - ✓ Diminishing fix rates in local “markets” as talent/provider pools shrink (may be countered with the right strategies )
  - ✓ Improved turnaround and fresh start methods as nation gets beyond anecdotal experience with success
- Huge culture change to confront inevitable high initial failure rates when fixing failing organizations.
- A smaller % of kids in vastly improved schools still will not learn enough: must tackle this problem vigorously and soon.

# Next Steps: What Can You Do?

- **Policy Action.** Integrate *Try, Try Again* thinking into national, state and district policies. Commit to rapid retries in advance.
- **School Action.** Districts, Charter Management Organizations, and other school providers set high Cumulative Success Rate goals, act to shorten average Retry Rates, identify and use leading indicators, and adopt “open spigot” recruiting.
- **Thinking and Research.** Develop knowledge about leading Indicators and “open spigot” recruiting. Model Retry Rate effects. Track actual Retry Rate effects and leading indicators. Develop strategies for children still failing in fixed schools.
- **Philanthropy.** Fund and incent action on all of above.
- **Spread the Word.** Elevate awareness of Retry Rate effects and critical policy and management actions.

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