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## Failing Schools Get Tough Love

BY BARBARA MARTINEZ

When Christie Barron first started teaching fourth grade at Public School 85 in the Bronx, she was full of hope.

"I came in really idealistic," said Ms. Barron, who began four years ago.

But not much learning happened. Children threw chairs and overturned tables. A softball lobbed by a student whizzed dangerously close to her head. She often called security.

"I didn't feel safe, and I didn't feel the students were safe," she said. She finally asked her principal, Ted Husted, to support her application to the Peace Corps.

Mr. Husted felt helpless when dealing with behavioral issues and often blamed the teachers. Then he met psychiatrist Pamela Cantor.

Dr. Cantor had been in private practice in Manhattan when George Soros asked her to work with war-traumatized children in his Open Society Institute schools in Eastern Europe in the late 1990s. She also served as a consultant to the Justice Department after the Columbine shootings and worked on a study of the mental-health impact of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York City children.

She came to believe that a troubled school needs a multipronged fix and founded the nonprofit Turnaround for Children, taking no salary.

Whether failing schools can be improved or must be shut down is at the core of a debate burning across the country and in New York City.

The city Department of Education proposed shutting down more than 20 failing schools next year, arguing that the schools did not sufficiently improve after resources were spent trying. The United Federation of Teachers sued to stop the closures, saying that the schools didn't get adequate support. A court ruled against the union Thursday.

Since 2002, Turnaround has worked with more than 60 schools. But it isn't an easy process. Under the three-year program, teachers must agree to some often uncomfortable scrutiny and changes.

Principals and teachers have to undergo extensive professional training to learn techniques they weren't taught in education schools. After Turnaround's first year in Mr. Husted's school, 27 of the 147 teachers left.

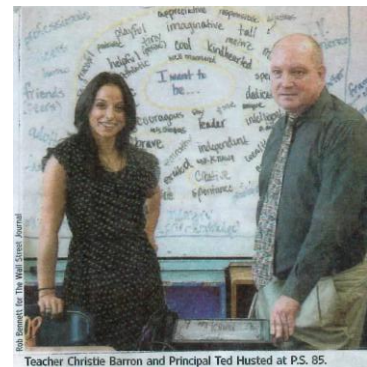
Mr. Husted said that prior to his arrival, P.S. 85 had always struggled, though it wasn't on a DOE closure list. He applied for Dr. Cantor's program.

Dr. Cantor said she first deals with the most disruptive children, the small percentage who "are capable of taking a school filled with vulnerable children and sending it completely off-track."

The school must agree to hire a full-time social worker who is

trained and supervised by Turnaround. A team is created to help the most challenging students. In the Bronx, there are slightly more than 6,000 mental health slots at clinics for an estimated 80,000 poor children who need them, Dr. Cantor said.

The social worker cuts through wait lists at clinics. In some cases,



Teacher Christie Barron and Principal Ted Husted at P.S. 85.

Turnaround has contracts to speed services.

But Turnaround also trains educators to handle behavior issues and teach children who are often two to four years behind grade level and dealing with stressful home lives.

It costs about \$500 per child a year to implement Turnaround's model in a high-poverty school, or \$200,000 per school annually.

Dr. Cantor said that through 2009, elementary schools that worked with Turnaround saw math proficiency rise to 82% from 49%, while English proficiency grew to

57% from 47%. There are no longer-term data available to show whether the gains stick once the group leaves though Dr. Cantor said there is anecdotal evidence from schools that the trends persist.

David Osher, vice president at the American Institutes for Research, studies how children learn under different conditions. He said Turnaround has a successful approach. Efforts that focus strictly on teacher training or curriculum but don't deal with children's underlying emotional needs tend to fail, he said. Because of that narrow focus on the classroom, "we are realizing poor results in turning failing schools around," he said.

This year, Turnaround will move into New Jersey and Washington, D.C. The group's budget is \$11 million, and most of the funds come from donors.

Today, at P.S. 85, student work once again adorns the hallways. Teachers had stopped putting them up a few years ago because students ripped them down. Only 54 children were suspended this school year, compared with 123 in the 2008-09 school year.

Test scores have also increased. English proficiency scores went to 49% from 36% in one year, while math rose to 75% from 65%. A bigger test will come next year, when Turnaround is scheduled to leave, and Mr. Husted must continue the progress on his own.