

The Tipping Point School Turnaround Strategy

We are all, at heart, gradualists, our expectations set by the steady passage of time. The world of the Tipping Point is a place where the unexpected becomes expected, where radical change is more than possibility. It is—contrary to all our expectations—a certainty.

– Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point*

Ken Futernick, Director of WestEd's Tipping Point School Turnaround Center, has developed a unique school turnaround strategy that is based on a theory of change found in Malcolm Gladwell's book, The Tipping Point. In *Excellence Loves Company*, Dr. Futernick argues that chronically failing schools can be turned around only if they undergo bold, systemic change to reverse deeply imbedded patterns of dysfunction. Failing schools tend to regress unless they reach a tipping point, which explains why providing *some* help has amounted to offering *no* help for many of them. A tipping point turnaround theory suggests that whatever is done for failing schools, it must be sufficient for them to reach a threshold that can sustain success.

Key components of a comprehensive tipping point turnaround strategy include:

- A collaborative and trusting team environment
- Time for planning, collaboration, and professional development
- Strong instructional and operational leadership
- Local decision-making authority
- Relevant, engaging, standards-based instruction
- Community and family involvement
- High-quality instruction through intensive support and evaluation
- A physical environment that is clean, safe, and conducive to learning
- External, sustained, on-site local support to manage the turnaround
- Reciprocal accountability (see below)
- Attracting and retaining high-quality educators (see below)

Reciprocal Accountability

Accountability has played a central role in school reform policy. The federal No Child Left Behind statute imposes increasingly serious sanctions (including reconstitution of the staff) for failing schools that do not improve. Most forms of school accountability, like the one imposed in NCLB, operate in one direction only. That is, agencies set expectations and sanctions for schools without articulating the expectations to which that agency (or others) must also be held accountable for the school to succeed. At the district and school level this translates to people below being accountable to people above.

The Tipping Point strategy employs the concept of “reciprocal accountability” which holds that all stakeholders must be held accountable to high and clearly-defined expectations. This approach has been implemented successfully in Los Angeles at Manual Arts High School, a Tipping Point partner school. Shortly after being hired, the school’s new school principal announced to the school community that “accountability starts at the top.” He distributed a document listing 10 expectations to which he and his administrative team could be held accountable. He also announced that the union leaders on campus were developing a set of expectations for teachers. MLA Partner Schools and WestEd, organizations that are managing the school and its turnaround effort, are doing the same.

This approach to accountability has helped to make certain that all stakeholders receive the support they need to meet their respective expectations. At Manual Arts High School, this approach has been the single most important contributor to the dramatically improved climate at the school and, for the first time in many years, the willingness of staff to work as a team in our turnaround effort.

High quality educators through “social epidemics”

The author, Jim Collins, says companies that go from good to great start by getting the right people on the bus. To jumpstart and sustain school turnarounds, Futernick’s strategy is designed to spark what Gladwell calls “social epidemics” to attract good teachers to schools that have been difficult to staff. A key condition, which emerged from a study Futernick conducted on teacher retention, is the opportunity for educators to work in team environment where they are surrounded by other high-quality educators who share a similar vision. If social epidemics can generate an adequate pool of good teachers, and if the systemic changes described above are adopted, Futernick contends that low-performing schools can be jolted out of their disequilibrium, reach a tipping point, and become successful schools for all students.

The Tipping Point turnaround strategy is described in greater detail in a document titled, “Excellence Loves Company: A Tipping Point Turnaround Strategy for California’s Low-performing Schools.” This document (which will be updated soon) can be downloaded from: <http://www.wested.org/tippingpoint/downloads/excellence.pdf>

To learn more about the implementation of the tipping point approach at Manual Arts High School in Los Angeles, find the link at www.wested.org/tippingpoint.