

# THE TIPPING POINT IN SCHOOL CULTURE

Two districts figure out how to reach the moment  
when change spreads from isolated pockets

BY JEFF NELSEN AND BOB HILL

In his national best seller *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell introduces the concept of organizational change as an epidemic.

Once changes or innovations reach the tipping point, they spread throughout an organization and become entrenched as part of the culture, becoming “just the way we do things around here.” We see the tipping point at play with systemic improvement in two urban school districts with which we have worked. Their experiences may help other districts accomplish similar success.

#### Whole Districts

Springfield, Ill., and Chula Vista, Calif., have spent the past five years collaborating in a three-way partnership with the Ball

Foundation and a group of external consultants who provided training in leadership capacity development directly connected to improving classroom instruction.

In each district, the initial emphasis of the work involved a small number of schools and the central-office leaders serving those schools. Although only a few schools were added to the program each year, after only three years, each district had reached the tipping point, and the growth and improvements seen in the original schools had spread across the districts. “It became clear,” says Lowell Billings, superintendent of the 27,000-student Chula Vista Elementary School District, “that success was not predicated on what school staff did, but rather on what they did together.”

What follows is a description of what

we learned about the successful process of addressing whole-district systemic improvement without involving the whole district in intensive, costly training and support.

### Entry Phase

When an organization reaches the tipping point, it signifies a change in culture within the organization. What was formerly a new idea, approach or practice is now just “the way we do things around here.” The fact so many good ideas never become common practice testifies to the great difficulty in accomplishing this type of culture shift. The way a new initiative is introduced has a powerful impact on whether it lasts.

Here are a few things to consider as you seek to scale up a reform in your district.

► **GIVE SCHOOLS AN OPTION TO PARTICIPATE.** Leadership teams from five schools and all of the central-office staff

in Chula Vista were chosen to participate in the training and coaching. The groups’ initial selection and subsequent work was guided by clear expectations. From the beginning, it was made apparent this initiative would not be an isolated program, but rather something that would eventually have an impact on the entire district.

After some encouragement by the superintendent and foundation leaders, the first cohort of five schools in Chula Vista started through self-selection. The Springfield district, with its 15,000 students, joined the process a year later after studying the gains made by Chula Vista. A few low-performing schools were strongly encouraged to participate with some personally invited by the superintendent while others volunteered. It is important to note that there was a mix of high- and low-performing schools, and none were ordered to participate.

► **PROVIDE TRAINING AND COACHING IN COLLABORATIVE INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP.** In his article “Change the Terms for Teacher Learning,” in the Summer 2007 issue of *Journal of Staff Development*, Michael Fullan says student learning “depends on teachers learning all the time. We must make professional learning an everyday experience for all educators.” This is not the culture of most schools, however, and to shift the existing structures and practices toward this new culture requires explicit direction and support.

Each cohort of school staff and the central-office team received three years of structured training and coaching to build instructional leadership capacity with a team of five to 10 teachers and the principal, known as the instructional leadership team. The training included five to eight full-day sessions per year with on-site coach-

ing and walkthrough visits in between. The training centered on concepts for understanding and tools for implementing a research-based framework.

Central-office teams received direct training and coaching to help them focus on the efforts of the instructional leadership team. The coaching of principals, teachers and district-level staff was key to the success of the partnership. Examples of early progress included principals and teachers experiencing professional learning together and devising creative solutions for finding time for collaboration and grade-level team meetings.

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► **COMMUNICATE OPENLY.** Stakeholder groups, such as teacher union leaders, school boards and parent leadership groups, were kept apprised of the training and its implications for practice. Springfield held direct training sessions for both parents and the school board. In both districts, the union president participated in the training, which led to increased communication and support for the initiative

► **CELEBRATE SHORT-TERM TRIUMPHS.** In his book *Leading Change*, Harvard Business School Professor John Kotter lists a failure to celebrate short-term wins as one of the eight errors regularly committed by organizations in transformation. In our work in these school districts, we ask schools to think about what these short-term successes might be and then help them craft a communication plan to celebrate them.

Reinforcing success is one of the best ways to reward teachers and leaders for their work and engage reluctant participants. It also has a powerful impact on schools that are watching. Each district had more volunteers for the second cohort

than they could accommodate.

Some short-term wins that generated increased enthusiasm for the work were as simple as:

- having the instructional leadership team share a success from their school with other school and district leaders at a training session or district event (evaluations regarding these stories consistently receive high ratings);

- having the team collect data on student learning and report areas of improvement throughout the year; and

- selecting key messages about the work and using them frequently with staff, students and families. In Springfield, many messages began appearing in the local newspaper as well.

### Expansion Phase

Success in the entry phase can actually create difficulty during expansion. There is a tendency to think that because the first group is well on its way, the focus can shift to a new group. There is also a tendency to make the new group too large in order to include everyone interested in participating.

Here are some things to consider when you expand the work in your district.

► **ROLL OUT THE WORK GRADUALLY.** After the initial cohort of schools has been established, expansion plans need to be purposeful and deliberate. When possible, the concept of this being by invitation or self-selected participation leads to better buy-in and ultimately stronger implementation.

Each cohort should limit the number of participating schools. Controlling the number of schools ensures a gradual roll-out. Billings, the superintendent in Chula Vista, emphasizes that “adherence to the framework is a school-by-school process. There is never a rote procedure.”

► **EMBED THE WORK IN THE CULTURE.** As each new cohort receives training, the presence of central-office representatives becomes more prominent. Upfront training is now shared by the outside consultants and in-house leadership. The central-office involvement at this level sends a message about the shared nature of the work. Key terminology and expectations become more systemic.

Chula Vista, for example, modified the template for the annual school plan to align with the framework that schools

were using in the cohort work. This helped schools bring coherence to the work being done at the school and district level.

### ► **SCALE THE WORK OF THE INITIAL COHORT WHILE BUILDING CONSISTENCY.**

After the first year, the work with the initial cohort and each succeeding cohort is maintained through workshops, visits to schools and coaching. The leadership role of the first cohort increases. Cohort 1 is brought in to share its experiences and stories with Cohort 2. Cohort 2 does the same with subsequent cohorts. Each cohort moves at a faster pace because of the standard set by each preceding cohort.

In Chula Vista, a team consisting of central-office staff, outside consultants, and teachers and principals planned the training to align it with other initiatives in the district.

► **GO SLOW TO GO FAST.** As tempting as it can be to expand quickly, take the time to be deliberate in how the initiative is implemented. Reflect on what worked with each cohort and customize the trainings to each new group of schools. Again, the pace of implementation moves more quickly with each additional cohort because the central office is aligning its work to the framework.

### Sustaining Phase

From the beginning of the partnership, the goal is to ensure, through training and coaching, that the leadership of the schools and the district develop the capacity to sustain the work long after the consultants depart. This has become the case in both Chula Vista and Springfield, and it hasn’t happened accidentally. Careful planning from the beginning ensured capacity and ownership transferred to district leaders to sustain the initiative.

► **SET CLEAR EXPECTATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION.** Building capacity is a key issue facing districts as they consider reform efforts. What’s vital is tying the school reform ideas learned in workshops and discussed by instructional leadership teams into the everyday life of schools.

In both Chula Vista and Springfield, the professional development had to be deliberately woven into everyday school life, and the most successful way to accomplish this was to ask each instructional leadership team to develop next steps at the school level for their work over a period of four to six weeks.

## “Each school district is a unique organization, and each has a story to tell about tipping points ...”

The subsequent training would start with a session called Connections where schools reflected and reported their successes and experiences. For example, as schools identified their targeted instructional area, goals and best practices, they would bring artifacts that showed what processes they had used with their staff and what products they were creating, and then use a process we called Tellers and Travellers to share their work with other schools in the cohort.

This yielded material to share with other schools and held them accountable. It also was that vital thread tying one training to the next through daily school life. Many schools started using this same strategy to link the work and raise accountability in their grade-level team meetings. Training leaders were deliberate about suggesting possible next steps for the schools and were clear about the questions coaches would ask at schools.

► **SHIFT FROM CENTRAL OFFICE TO CENTRAL SERVICES.** The involvement of central-office staff in this capacity building is critical. District-level staff must be seen as collaborators.

This shift is a three-part process for central services — learning the framework for school reform through ongoing, specifically designed sessions; supporting the schools during the training by sitting with them and being a part of discussions; and visiting and working with schools between sessions to coach, question, push and support.

In Springfield, the district now operates what it calls the focus implementation team, while Chula Vista uses its instructional support services to sustain the use of knowledge introduced to the system by the technical assistance partner. Members of the team receive training on supporting sustainability.

The effort requires a systems approach, says Diane Rutledge, who was superintendent in Springfield from 2002 to 2007 before becoming executive director of the Springfield-based Large Unit District Association for Illinois. “We created a continuum from



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the classroom to the boardroom with everyone pulling in the same direction.”

► **WATCH CLOSELY FOR SIGNS OF TIPPING.** Each school district is a unique organization, and each has a story to tell about tipping points — about the one event that suddenly made it clear there was no turning back, that the whole district was now on board.

In Springfield, a key moment occurred when all the high schools voted to join the training along with some middle and elementary schools. In Chula Vista, it was when the superintendent began the annual administrator retreat by using the gains in student achievement at the cohort schools as the catalyst to engage all schools in implementation. Each sign of the shifting culture is a cause for internal celebration and provides support and direction for moving the work forward.

Superintendents in both places observed how adoption of common terms about school improvement is a powerful indicator of the tip toward a changing culture. Terms such as “instructional focus area,” “targeted learning walks” and “powerful practices” became the language heard in faculty rooms and hallways.

Another indicator the tipping point was reached was when top leadership of the Springfield and Chula Vista districts changed; the work continued to expand and yield measurable improvement. Despite changes in top leadership, Springfield saw dramatic early improvement in the cohort schools, which has since become a 10 percent gain in students at or above proficiency



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districtwide. In school districts similar in student demographics and characteristics, Chula Vista is the only district in California above the 800 mark on the state’s Academic Performance Index.

### **Sustained Collaboration**

Both Chula Vista and Springfield have seen dramatic improvement in student learning across the district. To accomplish this in a single school is challenging. To accomplish this in a cohort of schools is formidable. Yet both districts have made huge progress in this culture shift throughout their entire system as a result of sustained collaboration with a supportive operating foundation and a strong technical-assistance provider. While most of the technical assistance was supported financially by the Ball Foundation for the first three years in each district, continuing work has been picked up by both systems and by individual schools that have formed their own cohorts to continue to deepen the work.

Especially in a time of diminishing resources, beginning with a small number of schools and then reaching the tipping point and moving an entire district in the direction of continuous improvement in teaching and learning is worth the time and effort required to build and sustain such partnerships. ■

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