

Turning Around Urban Schools

"[A history of poor academic performance] is such a strong negative force [that] the only way to stop it in its tracks and then reverse it is by applying a much larger force in the opposite direction."

—Mike Feinberg, founder of the KIPP schools

Some of America's urban schools have become chronic underachievers. These schools, despite the best efforts of countless teachers and often-heroic administrators, have acquired long histories of ineffectiveness. To name just a few of the problems they face:

- Too few resources;
- The demands of daily living for parents in poverty;
- Community inattentiveness to the plight of their children;
- Bureaucratic restrictions on school-level innovation;
- Lack of accountability up and down the system;
- Inflexible work rules;
- Outmoded beliefs that academics are meant for only the top tier of students;
- Tired and discouraged educators letting schools slip into adult-centered institutions; and
- The accumulation of strategies that are no longer effective.

To turn around such schools, according to the U.S. Department of Education, the principal must:

- Gain control of the learning environment and culture of the school so that students come to believe that school is about them and their future;
- Concentrate the school's resources on giving students a curriculum that challenges their minds, engages their imaginations, and builds on their prior knowledge and experiences;
- Not allow any teaching that is less than highly effective;
- Relentlessly improve teachers' professional skills through programs that are rigorously aligned with the school's curriculum content and instructional program of the school; and
- Completely reform the school's way of doing business, top to bottom, through a coherent, systematic, and effective vision.



Rooting Out Bad Habits

One of the most difficult tasks for those attempting to reverse years of frustration is to find the energy, the will, and the correct strategies to root out the old ways that are no longer effective. When years of accumulated bad educational habits are counterproductive, for many schools it's time to call in the turnaround principal, an educator who is willing to ask the

difficult questions and build new, effective habits to replace yesterday's no longer effective habits.

When they go into a school to reverse years of habit, experts like Richard Coleman of the Achievable Dream Academy in Newport News, Virginia, set out to restructure every aspect of the school's culture. Their goal is to create a school where children truly believe that even though they may begin their lives in poverty, they need not spend their lives there.

"We've got to challenge our students' belief systems about themselves. We also need to challenge our teachers' belief systems about our students," says Coleman.

At places like the Achievable Dream Academy, rituals of belonging, strategies of instruction, and expectations of responsibility and success become the very oxygen that supports students and staff alike. Similarly, the principals at KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) schools set out to apply the forces of respect, equal expectations,

effective strategies, and incredible amounts of hard work in order to reverse the cycle of urban frustration.

As Richard Coleman puts it, "We have to make it happen with our kids every day. We ask 'Are you prepared to do everything that you have to do to reverse the status quo?'" Uprooting ideas and habits that are no longer effective demands that we apply what Mike Feinberg of the KIPP schools calls "a much larger force in the opposite direction." That is the mission of the turnaround principal, a specialist in visions and hard work. ■

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This article was adapted from The Urban Principal's Toolkit, a resource created by the Educational Research Service for NAESP. For more information or to order the Toolkit, call NAESP's National Principals Resource Center at 800-386-2377 or visit www.naesp.org/nprcl.