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## A tipping point for Denver Public Schools

By James Coleman and Rosemary Rodriguez  
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Last September, we launched EDUCATE Denver — a coalition of civic leaders who believe that high-quality education and healthy cities go hand-in-hand. In the context of deteriorating academic achievement data, declining enrollment, and a city not focused on student outcomes, we were concerned about kids' readiness to pursue post-secondary paths successfully. We were also worried about the implications for Denver, which was suffering thousands of jobs for which we had no skilled labor; an affordable housing shortage that was destabilizing communities; and increasing violence, among other challenges. It was time to get off the sidelines and start solving for the education our students needed and deserved.

EDUCATE Denver set in motion a broad effort to make sure other civic leaders — the business community; policy makers; foundations; various advocacy organizations, and, of course, the Denver Public Schools Board of Education — understood and embraced our collective responsibility to support students toward positive outcomes. We were determined to center education as the number one priority in this city.

We engaged school board members on issues such as community process and transparency of data — topics that influence our ability to know how well our schools are performing; we defined community expectations for high-quality school district leadership that were endorsed by 18 major business and community organizations; and we surveyed 17 mayoral candidates, who considered how Denver's CEO might support education in this city. These activities, although limited in their reach, were a small start to a conversation Denver needed to have regarding our collective responsibility to improve student outcomes.

And then, the unthinkable happened. Gun violence stole the life of a DPS student and, nearly, two DPS administrators. Grief, fear and questioning reverberated throughout our city. If we could, we would take those moments back. Anyone in this city would take those moments back. But in the wake of that tragedy, the conversation grew. It took on life and expanded across communities. It arrived in meetings and at dinner tables. Denver began talking about DPS in a bigger, more meaningful way.

For eight weeks now, we've seen a city in motion: parents demanding safer learning environments; policymakers working to solve for gun control and affordable housing; teachers calling for flexible school models; mayoral candidates debating education topics and offering up supportive city resources; business organizations looking to partner with schools; and community organizations working to identify better mental health supports for kids. You can feel the momentum building and, finally, a commitment to change.

Malcom Gladwell, in his 2000 best-selling book *The Tipping Point*, describes “that magic moment when an idea, trend, or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire.” The choice to support Denver students in academic achievement, social-emotional development, and life skills acquisition is an intentional social behavior that is catching on in Denver.

But there are limits to what this community can do. Community cannot make policy in the district board room. Community cannot conduct a superintendent evaluation or decide when he deserves a raise. Community cannot set strategic direction for our school district by moving academic policy to the top of the Board's agenda, balancing the budget in the face of under-enrolled schools, or determining how to optimize a portfolio of unique school models to support a diverse set of learners. Yet this is the type of responsible leadership that DPS needs. And so, we ask our Board of Education and we ask our superintendent: Will you seize this moment, with the power of an engaged community on your side, to charge toward the student outcomes you were elected to achieve? Can this be a “tipping point” for Denver Public Schools? It will require courageous, thoughtful, and strategic consideration of the following:

- How will you move students toward better academic results?
- How will you cultivate social-emotional strength in our children?
- How will you prepare DPS students for success in life?
- How will you sustain safe schools?

## How will you provide families with transparent feedback regarding student progress?

- How will you orchestrate respectful community engagement?
- How will you manage the organization — operationally and financially — with prudence?

Over the course of the past school year, there was very little board conversation about these key questions. Yet DPS students and families need to know. Their futures — and the future vitality of Denver — hinge on our ability to prepare them for the road ahead. And this is our moment. With an election pending, a community ready to cast their votes for good leaders, and nearly 90,000 life trajectories on the line, we hope the board and superintendent lean in with Denver to “tip” DPS toward success.

James Coleman, who represents Denver’s state Senate District 33 in Colorado’s General Assembly, and Rosemary Rodriguez, who served on the Denver Public Schools Board of Education 2013-2017, are co-chairs of EDUCATE Denver. EDUCATE Denver, which advocates for DPS students, is a civic coalition of over 35 leaders in business, philanthropy, public policy, faith-based and community organizations who understand that high-quality education and a thriving city go hand in hand.

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