

Sustaining Change: The Answers Are Blowing in the Wind

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Research offers policymakers and school and district leaders many guidelines on how to enact sustainable change.

How much do we know about initiating, implementing, and sustaining educational change? How long has such knowledge existed? If we asked groups of teachers, principals, district office leaders, state education officials, national legislators, parents, corporations, and local business communities, how might each group respond to these questions? How might answers vary across groups? How sophisticated would their knowledge be?

The reality is that for more than two decades we have amassed an extensive body of knowledge about sustaining educational change. Whether or not we choose to heed them, the answers are blowing in the wind, as composer and musician Bob Dylan wrote in 1962, when he questioned our inability to act in the Vietnam War era. Dylan asked, "How many times must a man look up before he sees the sky? . . . The answer is blowing in the wind."

How Many Times?

Thirty-eight years after Dylan's disturbing questions, we are engaged in an equally important social problem—the struggle to find ways to implement and sustain educational changes and make a significant difference in the lives of children. And the questions that educators might ask are similar to Dylan's in their ethical implications. For example, *how many times* can we continue to enact policies that fly in the face of years of research on change?

How many times, when the future of millions of children is at stake, can we continue not to act on all that we know about facilitating sustainable change? This knowledge needs to be widely understood by all stakeholders in public education.

Lessons About Managing Change

Develop a Reform-Support Infrastructure

Sustaining reform at the school level requires district-level leadership and a reform-support infrastructure (Ucelli, 1999). Developing this infrastructure often means reorganizing district policies, practices, communication mechanisms, support structures, norms, and incentives, along with redeploying district resources. Districts must identify and change dysfunctional structures and practices so that reform can proceed unencumbered by such factors as low trust, competing priorities, turf issues, and a lack of a clear, sustained focus.

A creative communication networking system—including frequent stakeholder meetings, focus groups, face-to-face dialogue, small-group information sharing, ongoing oral and written updates, and parent and community meetings—is crucial to this infrastructure. A two-way information flow is the lifeblood of successful reform. Without a high level of information sharing among individuals, schools, and districts, and without a network of support for schools both within the district and throughout the broader community, change will not be sustained (Louis, 1989; Fullan, 1993, 1999; Mizell, 1999; Ucelli, 1999).

We need multiple two-way communication channels between the community and the district, between the schools and the central office, between departments within the central office, across schools and school principals, and among teachers within and between schools. The seeds of change are nourished in a climate of respectful and open dialogue.

Ucelli (1999) identifies the key elements of a supportive infrastructure at the district level: a widely shared vision; multiple channels of communication; a good system for human resource development and deployment; the ability to adapt innovations to fit local needs; and formative evaluation, reflection, and action research that capture the lessons of implementation.

Reflecting on the Rockefeller Foundation's attempts to support sustainable change over the past decade, Ucelli (1999) notes that the Foundation has recently turned its efforts toward helping districts create new infrastructures that support reform. From many years of experience in funding large-scale change projects, the Rockefeller Foundation concludes that schools cannot develop and sustain positive instructional change without a strong district.

Nurture Professional Communities

As district leaders build an infrastructure to support reform, they need to remember that they are in the business of culture building. Research and practice over the last decade have demonstrated that a positive school and district culture is essential. Changing structures is necessary but not sufficient for sustainable change. Changing the professional culture is key.

In *The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change* (1982), Sarason warns that school reform programs are destined to fail if school and district leaders don't examine whether the culture of the school *and* of the district support the desired reform. School and district leaders need to ask, What is it about the culture, policies, and practices of our district that will support a given reform, and what will impede progress?

The crucial factors in sustaining change are those interventions that make an impact on the cultural norms of schools and districts (Little, 1982; Saphier & King, 1985; Rosenholtz, 1989; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993; Fullan 1991, 1993, 1999). Sarason (1990)

notes that it is almost impossible to create and sustain productive learning conditions for students when these conditions do not exist for teachers.

Research over the past 15 years also reinforces the fact that context matters. In their 1993 study, *Contexts That Matter for Teaching and Learning*, McLaughlin and Talbert found that the cultural norms that characterize the context in which teachers work heavily influence teachers' sense of efficacy with students. Studies have demonstrated that schools and districts with strong professional learning communities enable teachers to respond more successfully to the needs of students and to sustain positive change. These studies also confirm that schools and districts with weak professional learning communities are instructionally ineffective with students (Little, 1982; Rosenholtz, 1989; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). More than almost any other factor, the sense of a professional community in schools enhances student achievement.

Reduce Turnover

District leaders need to attend to the toll that staff turnover takes on the sustainability of change (Berman & McLaughlin, 1977; Fullan, 1991; Mizell, 1999). A 1977 RAND Corporation study of 293 federally funded projects found that principal and staff turnover was one of the most significant factors associated with abandoning newly implemented changes. The researchers note,

The principal was the key to both implementation and continuation. . . . Often, because of turnover in the original cadre of project teachers, projects would have been dropped without active efforts by the principal to bring on [and orient] new staff. It was extremely difficult for teachers to go on using project methods and materials without the principal's explicit support. (Berman & McLaughlin, 1977, p. 188)

Twenty-two years later, Mizell (1999) reflected on lessons learned by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation from more than 10 years of funding change projects to increase student achievement in urban middle schools:

Even in schools and school systems that were serious about increasing student achievement, we have seen time and again that reform is jeopardized by the coming and going of school board members, superintendents, principals, and teachers. . . . School reform can't survive in this context. Even quality staff development will not have as profound an effect as it could have if it occurred in a more stable environment.

Use Facilitators to Build Capacity

Because of the complexity of implementing and sustaining large-scale change initiatives, district and school administrators cannot do it alone. Numerous studies have found that in addition to teacher leadership, external and internal facilitators or change agents play a crucial role—and are necessary at both the school and the district level—for supporting schools and districts as they navigate the labyrinth of change (Louis & Sieber, 1979; Huberman & Miles, 1984; Miles, Saxl, & Lieberman, 1988, 1989). Designated change facilitators provide support, technical assistance, and clarity about new change projects. Many studies found that the presence of a facilitator contributed to internal capacity building and to a greater sense of personal mastery, confidence, and ownership in school staff.

In *Improving the Urban High School*, Louis and Miles (1990) write that a schoolwide change program may need at least a half-time person, along with a network of coordinating roles and groups, to be successful. An assigned coordinator and a multirole steering group, in addition to external and internally appointed change facilitators, are essential to coordinated reform.

Lessons About Professional Development

Policymakers need to recognize that just because they enact a policy, a law, or a regulation, they cannot assume that educators have the knowledge, skills, flexibility, commitment, and time to implement the policy in the way it was envisioned:

The fact that we have much more policy than we do substantive reform is indicative of the lack of capacity of frontline educators to implement reform effectively. (Mizell, 1999)

Educators need policy that is less sweeping, and policymakers need to understand how much change practitioners can handle and learn at one time, as well as the level of support and professional development they need for successful implementation (Mizell, 1999).

Carter (2000) notes that although politicians demand more accountability from teachers, they seldom address ways to improve—and fund—teacher education and professional development. This is largely because

the effects of improved teacher education and professional development are not readily measured or even quickly apparent during a politician's term in office. Unfortunately . . . many elected officials decide that long-term solutions of this nature might be good policy but bad politics. (P. 3)

Provide Abundant Staff Development

Policymakers need to be aware that

current forms of staff development in the majority of schools and districts are not designed to provide the ongoing, interactive, cumulative learning necessary for developing the new knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are the prerequisites to implementing and sustaining change. (Fullan, 1991, p. 85)

The failure to realize the need for staff development both at the beginning of a reform initiative *and* during the implementation phase is a common problem. Elmore (1992) notes that

one cannot expect teachers, by themselves, to carry the burden of changing their practice and the structure within which it occurs. (P. 46)

In addition, policymakers need to understand and plan for the reality that during the early years of a reform initiative, an "implementation dip" is likely to occur (Fullan, 1991). When teachers transfer the knowledge and skills that they learned in training into their classrooms, things often get worse before they get better. The amount of social and technical support that teachers receive during this phase can mean the difference between

failure and success (Joyce & Showers, 1988). Legislative mandates must account for these factors, or change will occur on paper only—not in minds, hearts, and practice.

Balance Pressure with Support

For more than two decades, research has shown that large-scale education innovations live or die by the amount and quality of assistance that their users receive once they are under way (Berman & McLaughlin, 1977; Huberman & Miles, 1984; Louis & Miles, 1990). Research has also shown that adopted changes will go nowhere unless central office staff and building principals provide specific implementation pressure and support (Huberman & Miles, 1984; Louis & Miles, 1990). Pressure keeps the change process moving. Administrative, organizational, and personal support help educators learn and assimilate new skills and practices—and help them deal with the frustrations involved in moving from old, more comfortable practices to new, more challenging ones.

Policymakers need to understand that pressure without support can lead to resistance and alienation. Conversely, support without pressure can result in maintaining the status quo.

Provide Adult Learning Time

In the report of the National Commission on Time and Learning (1994), *Prisoners of Time*, the authors note that over and over again, we attempt to implement new instructional innovations, yet fail to provide teachers with the time to study, reflect on, and apply new research and to learn new skills. A prime example is the setting of new curriculum standards without providing teachers the time to come together to study them, to develop lessons, to reflect, and to discuss them with their peers.

Elmore & McLaughlin (1998) recommend that professional development be moved into the line accountability structure of local schools and districts. Often, professional development is carried out by a number of different staff members who are not required to coordinate their offerings, reduce competing priorities, or plan together toward achieving common goals. Thus, professional development remains diffuse and unfocused, with a number of well-intentioned staff members competing for limited space and time. And these staff are not in a position to require administrator attendance at professional development sessions.

Yet we know unequivocally that coordinated, well-attended staff development is essential to achieve reform. Fullan (1991) states that

research on implementation has demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt that the process of sustained interaction and staff development are crucial regardless of what the change is concerned with. The more complex the change, the more interaction is required *during* implementation. People can and do change, but it requires social energy. (P. 86)

Reduce Fragmentation and Overload

Policymakers need to take into account the dangerous fallout that comes from innovation and policy overload. When educators feel overwhelmed and fragmented because of policies and mandates, reform stops dead in its tracks. As Fullan (1999) observes, the goal should be policy coherence and coordination, not policy clutter:

Policies are introduced without attention paid to the timelines and strategies of implementation that would be needed for success. The impatient search to address urgent problems makes the system susceptible to "magical" (superficial) solutions. At the same time, there are many urgent problems and frequent changes in government. So solutions get piled upon solutions, creating overload and clutter. Even within the same government, new policies are introduced on top of yet-to-be-implemented previous policies. (Pp. 54–55)

Justifiably, educators respond to this impossible chain of events with "This too shall pass." When teachers do not readily see the connections between various initiatives, or know where priorities lie, they focus on the mandate that makes the most noise. This often turns out to be the state-level testing program.

We Know Enough to Act

The knowledge base from the last two decades may not tell us everything we need to sustain change. But it gives us a jump start. We cannot afford to ignore the research because time and again we hear the mandates: Focus on culture, stick with it for the long haul, frontload support during implementation, build relationships, insert professional development at every opportunity, build reform support infrastructures, train and use change facilitators, strengthen communication, reduce overload and fragmentation, seek coherence, stabilize turnover, remember the implementation dip, restructure the use of teacher time, balance pressure and support.

As Bob Dylan sang so many years ago, the answers *are* blowing in the wind.

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