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Real Change Is Real Hard: The Challenge of Transforming School Systems

Since 1983 when the National Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation at Risk*, school systems have been the target of calls for change. Proposed reforms have ranged from large-scale efforts focused on accountability and high-stakes testing to more targeted issues such as inclusion, vouchers, technology, and differentiated instruction.

Whether the changes that have been implemented can be judged as truly transformational or as large-scale tinkering remains to be seen. Nevertheless, since school systems have been and will continue to be the object of change efforts, this article offers food for thought for school business officials and other education leaders who want to implement transformational change designed to improve school efficiency and provide a quality education for all children.

Models of Change

There is no lack of change models in the area of education reform. Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) discuss the three-I model's phases: initiation, implementation, and institutionalization. Lewin (1947) also identifies three phases of the change process: unfreezing, changing, and refreezing.

Kotter (1996) writes about eight stages: establishing a sense of urgency, creating a guiding coalition, developing a compelling vision and strategy, communicating the change vision widely, empowering constituents for broad-based action on the vision, generating short-term wins, consolidating gains and producing more change, and anchoring new approaches in the organizational culture.

These models, along with those of Beckhard and Harris's map of the change process (1987) and Hersey and Blanchard's levels of change (1972), offer a variety of factors that school



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leaders should consider as they contemplate creating change within their school district.

From my perspective as a school superintendent who was involved in a variety of systemic changes, all these models share commonsense points that are worth considering. Although certainly not new or previously unheard of, the following guidance, drawn in part from these models, was helpful as I oversaw change efforts in four different school districts.

Considerations When Making Changes

Any changes should improve and be consistent with a school system's overall mission and long-range plan. Change for the sake of change is counterproductive, not only because of the financial costs associated with such moves but also because of the effect that unnecessary change can have on personnel.

There are two old adages: "Real change is real hard" and "The more things change, the more they stay the same." These opposing thoughts can be reconciled if everyone involved in making changes clearly understands and supports the benefits of the change.

People often resist change because it moves them out of their comfort zone and into unfamiliar territory, creating a sense of loss, frustration, and anxiety. To maximize the chances for success, education leaders must emphasize and demonstrate the advantages of the proposed change.

Significant change usually meets with some form of resistance. Leaders can deflect some of that resistance by involving those most directly affected by the change from the inception of the concepts to the actual start-up and through the implementation. Involvement fosters ownership, increases motivation to succeed, and may well decrease resistance to the change.

Thorough planning is essential and challenges are inevitable. Recall the five Ps axiom: prior planning prevents poor performance. Thorough planning for change, the awareness that there will be unanticipated problems, and a problem-solving attitude are all important in any change process. Change without at least a few problems probably means little change happened. Education leaders must be flexible and courageous in dealing with the challenges and issues spawned by significant change.

Before launching new programs or change efforts, district leaders should ensure that they have adequate resources for implementing and institutionalizing the change. Change is resource hungry. It is discouraging for personnel to start a new program and then learn that they cannot complete or maintain it due to insufficient resources.

As members of leadership teams, then, school business officials must plan and budget carefully to ensure that adequate resources are available for the duration of a change process.

Good programs often fail because leaders do not provide sufficient staff training and development. Education leaders should ensure that all staff members understand and have adequate training in any new programs that arise from changes in the school and school district.



Devote sufficient thought to formative and summative evaluation of the reform. Formative evaluation is important because it can help leaders identify any midcourse corrections necessary in the implementation phase. A summative evaluation process should be in place before starting the change effort so leaders can assess the process and the outcomes.

Recognize and celebrate positive steps made during the change process even if the successes are small at first. Recognition and celebration reinforce the positive aspects of the change and can motivate both those who are implementing the change and those who are affected by it.

School leaders, including school business officials, must keep the projects visible to staff. A program or change should be the topic of discussion at board meetings, in newsletters, and at staff meetings. Changes should never surprise anyone.

Conclusion

As most school business officials know, no approach to change is foolproof. The process involves detailed planning, communication, gathering of support, awareness that there will be problems, flexibility, a problem-solving attitude, and courage. There will usually be pitfalls, false steps, unanticipated consequences, and temporary setbacks.

Nevertheless, if a change is well planned, is thoroughly communicated, clearly represents an improvement over the status quo, has ample resources and opportunities for training staff, has preestablished evaluation systems, and is in sync with the mission and goals of the school system, the chances of success increase dramatically. ■

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