

Practical Leadership

Improving the Schools of Today

Inventing the Schools of Tomorrow

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

Sustaining Innovation

Part I: Foundations of Sustainability

Part 1 of 3

This *Research into Practice Brief* is the first in a series of three on how schools can sustain productive innovations and practices. It is designed specifically for GEAR UP schools that are planning to continue their initiatives after the initial funding period comes to an end. The three Research Briefs deal with (1) theoretical and research foundations of sustainability, (2) strategies to promote sustainability, and (3) sustainable initiatives in GEAR UP schools.

In A Nutshell

Many innovations disappear when initial funding runs out, leadership changes, or school and community demographics change. Others continue to grow and prosper. Sustainability occurs when innovations are embedded in the culture and daily life of the school, when teachers and school staff share values and commitments that support innovation, and when leaders play an active role in promoting the innovation both in the school and the community. More than 50 years of research has created a substantial body of theoretical and research literature that helps school leaders understand the nature of sustainability and how it occurs in schools. In trying to understand sustainability, “there’s nothing as practical as a good theory.”

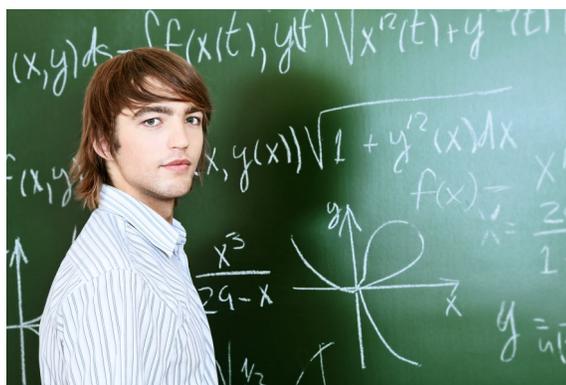
Why do some educational innovations fail while others take root and flourish in schools? This question has puzzled educators and researchers for nearly half a century, but the vast body of research on the subject yields some clues that can guide school leaders in sustaining positive innovations in their schools.

Sustainability Defined

The classic definition of sustainability comes from the Brundtland Commission’s (1987) report of the World Council on Development and the Environment. It is development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” The key principles of sustainable improvement are that such improvement (1) focuses on what matters, (2) makes improvement last and spread, and (3) achieves its ends without doing harm to others around it (Hargreaves & Fink, 2004, 2006).

Against the Odds?

Are school innovations doomed to fail? According to Seymour B. Sarason, the answer is “yes” -- as long as reformers fail to confront the social, institutional, and organizational obstacles that have repeatedly kept reform efforts from succeeding. In his book, grimly titled *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform* (1990), Sarason illustrates how long-standing educational structures, coupled with the need of various groups to defend their power and influence, stifle reform efforts. He writes, “Schools have been intractable to change and the attainment of goals set by reformers. A major failure has been the inability of reformers to confront this intractability. As a result, each new wave of reform learns nothing from earlier efforts and comes up with recommendations that have failed in the past.”



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The Complexity of Sustainable Innovation

According to Andy Hargreaves and Ivor Goodson (2006), school change processes are embedded in an interrelated set of longer term change forces that extend beyond the district, and even the educational system itself, to wider change movements in society as a whole. They say that “networks of influence involving urban development patterns, the changing economy, school district politics, race relations, superintendent succession, business pressures, and reform movements affect change initiatives and processes” in both individual schools and the school district. (p.6) Add financial pressures and legislative activism to this mix, and it can quickly become a hopeless morass.



Hargreaves and Goodson add, “Most change theory and practice in educational administration has only a forward arrow. In rational terms, this mission is remarkable, for what else is change about if it is not about time, about the movement from one state to another. Indeed, many politically driven reform efforts and the change theories on which they are based either ignore the past or stigmatize it as something to be left behind, or swept aside.” (p. 7). The past is treated as a problem to be solved – a way to justify political mandates to direct the future.

Unfortunately, ignoring the past, or even treating it as a problem, plays directly into Sarason’s formula for failure (1990): that most explanations of educational change avoid thoughtful engagement with a historical and political perspective. In short, we don’t try to learn why things are the way they are before we set out to change them. (Hargreaves and Goodson, 2006)

Fortunately, this complexity can be organized and understood in order to effect meaningful, sustainable change in schools. Based on extensive research in both U.S. and Canadian schools, Hargreaves and Goodson identify five change forces that affect both the creation and sustainability of innovation in schools.

Waves of Reform originate largely outside of the individual school environment, typically as a result of policy changes at the national, state or district levels. According to Hargreaves and Goodson (February, 2006) teachers embrace or resist these reforms based on their sense of mission, their academic subject orientations and their sense of their school’s identity. “Thus, social-justice-oriented reforms that challenged [traditional practices of] schooling and increased teachers’ curriculum autonomy were more likely to be embraced by teachers during the time they started building their careers in the 1970s, by teachers working in...schools with explicitly innovative identities, and by teachers outside the mainstream, high-status areas of curriculum in guidance, special education, and minority subjects.

Reforms that reinforced the traditional [practices] of schooling and exercised more constraints on teacher autonomy were more typically embraced by teachers who, in generational terms, began their careers later than the mid to late 1970s; by teachers...who felt that they were already meeting required standards; by teachers in the traditional, academic environment...who welcomed the academic emphasis of subject based reforms; and by teachers in mainstream, high-status subjects, especially science and mathematics, whose subject-based commitments, identities, and careers aligned with the substance of the reforms.” (p. 15).

Significantly, teachers experience innovations and reform movements cumulatively, rather than as individual events and initiatives. When teachers consider adopting an innovation, they do so in the context of the other innovations they have been called upon to embrace. Because of the rapid demise of many innovations, or the contradictory nature of simultaneous innovations (e.g., portfolio assessment alongside increased standardized testing), many experienced teachers become exasperated and lose both the energy and will to reinvent themselves and their classrooms yet again.

Leadership Succession is one of the most significant events in the life of a school and is most likely to bring about a sizeable shift in direction of individual schools. When charismatic leaders leave a school, teacher anxiety skyrockets because they wonder if the newcomer will be able to fill the departing leader’s shoes. They may also feel betrayed if that leader takes effective teachers with him or her.

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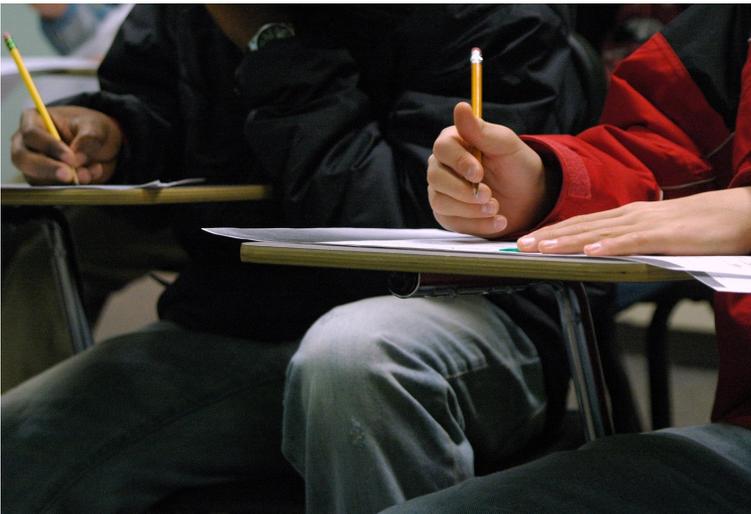
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And if a bureaucratic, rigid leader is replaced by one with a more humane style, they may breathe a collective sigh of relief. In short, leadership succession is almost always an intensely emotional event in the life of a school, one that has tremendous impact on the success and sustainability of innovations and reform.

The most effective leadership succession for sustainability is based on planned continuity -- when an insider is groomed to take over the school's leadership and continue to build upon a predecessor's success. More commonly, though, succession is characterized by "planned discontinuity" in which an outsider is selected specifically to change a school environment, or "unplanned discontinuity" when an outsider is selected because he or she is the only qualified person available after a sudden retirement, resignation or termination. Typically, discontinuity results in the active elimination or neglectful withering of the former leader's innovations and accomplishments. Hargreaves and Goodson (2006) conclude that too much attention is paid to initiating and imposing changes rather than looking back and consolidating existing innovations. As a result, "Few things...succeed less than leadership succession." (p. 19).



Student and Community Demographics change for a host of reasons, some of which result from population changes and others from legal, policy or social initiatives. Immigration and migration can rapidly alter the student groups being served – boosting the English Language Learner population and changing dramatically the way families interact with the school. Legal and policy changes, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act or the mainstreaming of students with disabilities, may alter the population being served without any population shifts, and an aging population, a plant closing, or a natural disaster may reduce school populations dramatically.

As a result of these kinds of changes, once-innovative programs may no longer succeed, or new ones may be required to serve a new kind of student population. One of the biggest challenges of the GEAR UP initiative is to promote post-secondary education among students who traditionally have not gone to college – a goal that calls for new approaches and

forms of support that may be quite different from those used with college-going students in the past.

Teacher Generations. Goodson, Moore, and Hargreaves show how understanding change, and how teachers support or resist it, is not simply a matter of teachers' age or even their career stage but also of the generational missions of teaching and the demographic forces that shape them.

Teachers' generational missions crystallize in the early years of their careers. Many experienced teachers recalled their younger, energetic, hopeful, and more idealistic selves in early career as ones that were defined not only by optimism and fun but also by the social justice missions of the period: to make a difference in the world at large as well as in individual children's lives. They remembered their schools as smaller, family-like institutions and their work as being characterized by professional autonomy and the freedom to innovate in ways that enabled them to give their students their best.

At the same time, the 1960s/70s teachers' generation mourned the loss of schools as communal environments free from racial strife, students who came to class ready and able to learn, and stable communities that reflected and supported the values of schooling. Part of this sense of loss was for students and communities who learned better, behaved better, and were easier to teach. These nostalgic reflections on the past were intensified by comparisons against current trends of growing cultural diversity, increasing poverty, and white flight that seemed to make many of today's students too demanding to teach. (Hargreaves and Goodson, 2006).

Thus, an innovation that promises to make schools more like the "golden years" that most teachers remember from their early careers are likely to be embraced; those that intensify the conditions that make their jobs more demanding will almost certainly be resisted. Wise administrators know about the "generational missions" of their teachers and help them understand change in terms of those missions – such as making things better for more kids or making the community a better place – even if the kids look different from the ones they taught in the "golden years."

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School Interrelations refer to the nature of individual schools and the way in which they interact with their environment and other schools. Some schools are established to be “innovative” and special; others are expected to look and act traditionally. And that’s where the simple differentiation ends. Innovative and special purpose schools are compared with their more traditional counterparts, especially if they are in the same district. People ask why School A can engage in a practice (or not) and School B not do so. They are compared on outcomes, appearances, student behavior, teacher effectiveness...the list is practically endless. The result is that schools are driven to look and act more alike than different.

At the same time, standardization of assessment at the state or district level forces schools to behave in similar ways to achieve comparable outcomes. In larger districts, principals and supervisors are charged with helping to standardize curriculum and instructional practice to make sure that the material on the state assessment is covered successfully. In smaller districts, that task usually falls to the principals alone, and, because of the complexity of their roles, may receive less attention than the other challenges facing them. In these cases, an innovation may devolve into something much less effective than it might have been with sustained leader attention.

Structure, Culture and Identity

The five change forces have a compelling influence on the structure, culture, and identity of schools and on efforts to change them over time. Typically, schools with a traditional structure persisted largely intact or with only temporary interruptions throughout repeated waves of reform. Except for changes in bell schedules and the increasing inclusion of special education students as a result of federal mandates, initiatives in interdisciplinary teaching, de-tracking, student internships, and other special programs came and went -- and the changes that remained often involved tinkering with credit requirements rather than fundamentally reorganizing curriculum, teaching, and learning to meet the needs of all students. (p. 29)

Three Kinds of Innovation

Conrad Wai (2011) has identified three types of innovation that can be found in virtually any organization.

Sustaining innovations often need to develop just to remain compliant with new regulations, conditions or requirements. These incremental innovations can be thought of as variations on a theme. For example, in order to combat declining test scores, a school may provide a double period of math and reading for its most needy students. They aren’t really doing anything different; they’re just doing more of what they usually do.

Breakout innovations are those that significantly up the level of intervention. After school programs, Saturday School for struggling students, mentorships and special interventions increase costs and the level of commitment to the innovation. These usually look attractive to parents and illustrate a deeper commitment to student success.

Disruptive innovations are the sort of big ideas that many have in mind when they think about an innovation. They are called disruptive because they disrupt current behavior, rendering existing solutions obsolete, transforming fundamental processes, and bringing previously marginal clients and practices to the center of attention. In the larger society, the iPod, which radically changed the way we listen to and buy music, is one such innovation. In schools, a radical transformation of instruction – such as fully integrated technology, distance learning, and individual coaching – could be considered disruptive, since they transform the role of teachers and learners in important ways. Ultimately, the innovations replace or transform the older practices almost totally, as the following examples illustrate:

<u>Innovations</u>	<u>Transform or Replace</u>
Cell Phones	Land Lines
Personal Computers	Mainframe and Minis
Discount Retailers	Traditional Department Stores
Retail Walk In Clinics	Traditional Doctor’s Offices

In education, one such transformation currently underway is the very dramatic shift from hard copy to electronic textbooks. As soon as students have access to an iPad or other tablet device, the possibilities for transforming educational materials become virtually limitless. Disruptive innovations create “spin off” innovations, so at the same time tablet devices transform existing materials, they will also spawn the invention of teaching materials that could not be imagined before the table appeared.

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Wai (2011) goes further to identify how these innovations affect performance and outcomes (whether sales or test scores).

- **Sustaining:** Immediately moderate results, then tapering off, often back to original levels.
- **Breakout:** Rapidly strong, then quickly dropping to a lower level, although probably never reaching the starting baseline.
- **Disruptive:** Longer gestation period leading to exponential growth. Having transformed fundamental practices, performance rarely reverts to the starting point.

The New Nature of Leadership

Michael Fullan (n.d.) writes that creating sustainable innovation in schools requires a new kind of leadership that responds to the tremendous complexity of contemporary forces affecting education. “In the 1990s, we learned how to improve literacy and numeracy at the elementary level where the principal is the key player in leading reform and improving student performance. Some school districts have embraced the development and support of the school principal as instructional leader, but despite these good beginnings, the principal as instructional leader is too narrow a concept to carry the weight of the reforms that we need for the future. We need, instead, leaders who can create a fundamental transformation in the learning cultures of schools and the teaching profession itself.”

Summing Up

Hargreaves and Goodson (2006) identify the nature of that complexity and the host of influences leaders must attend to if they are to make sustainable changes. “Sustainability of educational improvement, in its fullest sense, is unlikely to occur without... a strategy that is more historically and politically informed. Truly sustainable improvement for all students that matters, spreads and lasts involves:

- focusing on and exercising leadership to secure deep learning and not just tested achievement for all students;
- developing clearer processes and administrative plans that will ease the problems of accelerated leadership succession;
- engaging with the strengths of teachers’ generational missions rather than treating them with administrative disdain as only negative sources of resistance among a degenerating teaching force; finding ways to make teaching and learning more vivid and real for the increasing number of students in cultural minorities and in poverty;
- not overinvesting in model schools, magnet schools, or discretionary initiatives to the cost of those around them;
- turning schools and districts into more activist professional learning communities;
- retaining standards but refraining from standardization; and
- treating history and experience as strengths to be drawn on rather than obstacles to be overcome in the quest for improvement.” (p. 39)

Future *Research Into Practice* Briefs will focus on the strategies school leaders can use to achieve these necessary conditions in their schools and examples of sustainable innovations in GEAR UP schools and others that share the goals of increased student achievement and access to post-secondary education.



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Practical Leadership, LLC is a consulting firm specializing in leadership development, training and professional development, research and evaluation, student achievement and school success, and positive community relations. In addition, Practical Leadership provides accessible research information and practical tools for school leaders.