Sustaining Innovation
Part 2 and 3: Strategies and Examples

Despite very challenging economic and community circumstances, many schools are able to sustain innovative programs and operations even after initial funding has been withdrawn. Using a combination of careful planning, broad-based input, and out-of-the-box thinking, schools have sustained their most effective initiatives, and even expanded them. Reallocating existing resources, generating new (and sometimes unorthodox) revenue streams, and institutionalizing innovative practices are the most effective ways to sustain meaningful and desirable change even in the face of harsh fiscal realities. This brief examines the strategies used by these successful schools and provides examples of leadership in action. It also provides useful resources to help school leaders think through their local challenges and how to sustain the most effective parts of their programs.

The giant of all studies on innovation and sustainability was conducted by Paul Berman and Milbrey McLaughlin for the Rand Corporation in 1978. Despite its age, their synopsis of the problems with sustaining innovation first reported more than 30 years ago could have been written today:

1. 'No class of existing educational treatments has been found that consistently leads to improved student outcomes (when variations in the institutional setting and nonschool factors are taken into account).

2. "Successful" projects have difficulty sustaining their success over a number of years.

3. "Successful" projects are not disseminated automatically or easily, and their "replication" in new sites usually falls short of their performance in the original sites.'

Put briefly, Berman and McLaughlin concluded that while launching an innovation is difficult enough, sustaining it and scaling it up to other sites and schools presents a challenge of monumental proportions. Of course this comes as little surprise to school leaders who face this challenge every day.

Despite the age of the report (commonly known as the Rand Study) it offers excellent guidance on creating and sustaining innovations in schools.

<u>What Doesn't Matter</u>

The Rand Study claims that the educational methods proposed in the innovation, the cost of the innovation or the scope of implementation had little to do with the eventual adoption or sustainability of the initiative. Truly innovative methods, expensive programs, and ambitious and demanding initiatives were just as likely to succeed (or not) as less innovative approaches, cheaper programs, and more modest initiatives.

<u>What Does Matter</u>

Evidently, the way the innovation is implemented is the key factor in whether it succeeds and endures. According to the Rand Study, "Implementation strategies are the local decisions and choices, explicit or implicit, on how to put the innovation into practice. We found that these strategies could spell the difference between success or failure almost

independently of the type of innovation or educational method involved; moreover, they could determine whether teachers would assimilate and continue using project methods or allow them to fall into disuse. The following strategies were frequently *ineffective* because they were not consonant with the conditions of school district life or with the dominant motivations and needs of the teachers" p. vii).

- Outside consultants
- Packaged management or implementation packages
- One-shot pre-implementation training
- Pay for training
- Formal evaluation
- Comprehensive projects (focused on more than one major goal at a time)

What Works
Certain implementation strategies do work to create, sustain and actually scale up innovation.

- Concrete, teacher-specific and extended training
- Classroom assistance from project or district staff
- Teacher observation of similar projects in other classrooms, schools, or districts
- Regular project meetings that focused in practical problems
- Teacher participation in project decisions
- Local materials development
- Principal participation in training

School Climate and Culture
This is one of the most powerful variables in sustaining change. In the Rand Study, the authors identified three key elements that were most significant: (1) the quality of the working relationship among teachers, (2) active support by principals, and (3) the effectiveness of project directors.

The importance of the principal cannot be overstated. While the principal doesn't have to be the one who shows "how to do it" (that's the role of the project directors), he or she must be active, visible and supportive of the initiative. Principal participation bestows a stamp of legitimacy on the project, and helps sustain the initiative after the initial funding runs out. A laissez-faire attitude toward the innovation on the part of the principal virtually assures a stunted implementation and an abbreviated life span.

Williamson and Johnston (2005) identified three important ways that leaders make their commitments public:

- **Show up.** Committed leaders show up and participate in meetings, training, and other events connected with the innovation.
- **Spend money**. Resources may be limited, and external funding may be involved, but leaders demonstrate their commitment to a project by spending even small amounts of their discretionary resources to support it.
- **Talk about it**. Never miss the chance to talk up the innovation – at parent events, faculty meetings, and in the community. Showcase the kids and staff who are most involved and active.

Michael Fullan (May, 2002) says that leadership for sustainable innovation boils down to three critical focal points: (1) improving relationships, (2) knowledge creation and sharing, and (3) "coherence-making" or helping people make sense and give importance to their work. Strategies for leaders to address these objectives include:

- *Learning in Context*. Create opportunities for people to learn the information and skills they need in their actual work setting, not the relatively sterile atmosphere of a workshop or contrived training session. The best learning comes from peers. Time should be devoted in the normal school routine for teachers to learn from one another.
- *Cultivating leaders at many levels*. Building a cadre of leaders – formal and informal – helps to sustain innovation because of the number of people charged with making it work. It also helps to sustain the innovation after a leadership transition. Fullan (May, 2002) writes, "to a certain extent, a school leader's effectiveness in creating a culture of sustained change will be determined by the leaders he or she leaves behind" (p. 20).

Institutionalizing Innovations

Innovations are sustained when it becomes someone's job to be sure that they continue. Unfortunately, GEAR UP initiatives are difficult to sustain because of the reduction in financial support for specific activities that accompanies the end of the GEAR UP funding cycle. Not much systematic research has been done specifically in GEAR UP schools, but a Tennessee study (Skolits, 2003) concluded that "1 year after the project terminated, teachers and administrators continued to hold favorable attitudes about the activities and interventions. There was…evidence of residual impacts of the program, but few project interventions were actually sustained at a meaningful level a year later. Lack of resources, lack of time, and lack of overall project leadership and staff were reported as barriers to sustaining GEAR UP initiatives."

Still, institutionalization can happen, and when it does, good things continue. In Ohio, specific elements of the state-wide GEAR UP initiative were purposefully linked to other, on-going programs throughout the duration of the GEAR UP funding cycle, helping to assure that these GEAR UP elements were continued beyond the life of the project. GEAR UP Ohio, the Ohio Board of Regents, and the Ohio Department of Education collaborated on projects such as:

- Financial Planning for College – linked to statewide Family Engagement and Personal Finance Education programs.
- Learning About Higher Education Options – linked to state Career Education and Workforce Development projects.
- Post-secondary Engagement – linked to Tech-Education, Early College, Dual Credit, and other similar initiatives.

To the extent possible (because of restrictions posed by other funding agents), the terminology was consistent across programs so that teachers and GEAR UP staff could continue to talk about goals and activities after the official end of the project without introducing a new vocabulary. (GEAR UP Ohio, n.d.)

The Ohio example is unusual because it required a lot of advance planning and collaboration among large, complex agencies. Also, it called for planning for the end of the grant cycle at the very beginning of the grant program — just at the time when all attention is focused on launching the program, not ending it. But other forms of institutionalization can take place at the school or district level on a shorter planning schedule, as the following section illustrates.

Creative Solutions

Johnston and Williamson (2014) advocate four strategies for sustaining school operations and innovations when funding is withdrawn or cut: Reduce, Refine, Restructure and Regenerate.

- Reduce: reduce spending in one area to allocate funds to an innovative project.
- Refine: streamline basic school operations and processes through innovation and the judicious use of technology.
- Restructure: change the way schools do business to reduce resource consumption and still improve student achievement.
- Regenerate: generate new resources and create sustainable operations to assure the long term health of the school despite fluctuations in revenue.

Numerous examples of these strategies and others are provided, but the following serve to illustrate how these approaches are used in GEAR UP schools and others with similar populations and programs.

♦ A Pacific Northwest principal used foundation funding to convert a portion of the campus into a commons area where students can relax during lunch and before and after school. It's located adjacent to a school store selling school supplies and souvenirs. Next to the store an office has been converted into a yogurt shop selling six flavors of frozen yogurt. The first day the yogurt shop opened it made $132. These activities are used to support the college readiness program, including visits to college campuses.

♦ Principal Richard B., who grew up in the impoverished Houston neighborhood his school serves, worked with teacher leaders to identify strategies to turn around poor attendance and achievement rates. He talked with students and discovered that most students leaving during the day were actually going to work so that they could help support their family. He worked with departments to provide collaborative time to work on improving instruction and developing common assessments. He got the district to agree to an extended school day so that students could begin as early as 7 am and then leave for work. Others could arrive later in the morning after fulfilling child-care obligations and take classes until 5 pm. Grant money supported many of these activities, but high success rates kept the district committed to his work.

♦ At a Pacific Coast high school, both test scores and graduation rates needed improvement, so the principal launched a proficiency-based learning model in core classes. He identified indicators of success and monitored them religiously. They adopted a four-day week schedule and students not meeting proficiency were required to attend on Friday mornings. Friday afternoon was used for their own professional learning. This disciplined focus has resulted in improved test scores, improved graduation rates and high college acceptance rates.

♦ Having a bias for action, a middle school principal made school data public so that it became an item of discussion in both formal and informal meetings with teacher leaders and the staff. Rather than make accusations or threats, he challenged his staff to improve the data. Together they identified the training and other resources they needed. They identified benchmarks they would monitor and they worked together to monitor gains, identify needed improvements, and refine the plan. To date, the school has shown major improvement on every indicator.

♦ In an Oregon logging community, the principal recognized the need, despite cuts, to find ways to strengthen and enhance their instructional program. She worked with her leadership team to adopt both reading and writing across the curriculum and secured funding from a small state grant and local sources to support a modest professional development program using regional experts. Freshman and Sophomore students loop with the same teacher for both years. During that time they focus on essential literacy skills. Juniors and Seniors focus on college and career readiness as well as interventions for those needing additional support. Funding was secured from local businesses for a summer reading program. Every rising 9th and 10th grader receives a high interest paperback book that they are expected to read during the summer. Their language arts teachers use that book at the beginning of the school year to immediately focus students on reading and writing.

A Comprehensive Approach

Hadley Junior High School, a 6-8 grade school of about 1200 students in Illinois, needed to be more efficient, reduce costs, and increase student success. Math teachers desired more instructional time to implement a new curriculum. Reading and Language Arts teachers wanted long instructional blocks taught by a single teacher rather than separate classes. The exploratory classes were dated and modeled after classes in the 1960's.

To address the issues the district launched *Hadley New Horizons,* a planning team that included teachers, administrators, and parents. They were to examine the issues and recommend program modifications. One absolute: there would be no additional resources provided for the program. They had to consider the reallocation of resources from one function to another, even abandoning some programs and activities if appropriate.

First, they changed the schedule. After hearing from every content area the planning team recommended reorganizing the day into 15-minute scheduling blocks (27 in all) while not lengthening the school day. The 15-minute increments were chosen to provide flexibility in scheduling. Content areas received varied instructional minutes based on their needs. Language Arts became a 90-minute uninterrupted block. Mathematics classes increased to 60 minutes, while Science and Social Studies classes remained at 45 minutes. Physical Education and Exploratory classes were also 45 minutes, and lunch was 30 minutes. There are few times during the day when the entire student body is passing between classes, minimizing noise and making hallways far less hectic. Lunches begin every 15 minutes during the middle of the day, reducing congestion and noise in the lunchroom.

Overall, the plan increased instructional time in core subjects, provided students with greater choice in exploratory courses, and constrained costs. Perhaps most importantly, the plan was implemented with broad staff and parent support because of the commitment to a collaborative planning model.

The Bottom Line

There is no magic "sustainability bullet." Sustaining innovation takes planning, creative thinking, and an openness to new ways of doing things in schools. It's a blend of art and science that is best accomplished by broad-based participation and strong leadership. Check out the resources below for more information on how to approach the challenges of sustaining change in lean economic times.

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Practical Leadership

Improving the Schools of Today

Inventing the Schools of Tomorrow

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

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