
RESEARCH BRIEF

Brought to you by McGill's NEXTschool Research Team

School Change

SCHOOL CHANGE

The concept of school change is not new; systemic reforms have been called for and attempted since the beginning of public education.¹

The pressure on education systems to deliver high-quality education continues to increase and drive the need for reform.² As such, OECD countries adopted no fewer than 450 educational reforms between 2008 and 2014.³

Given this long and ongoing history, the face of school change is vast and wide ranging, from classroom innovations to large-scale reforms seeking system-wide change in educational goals, priorities, and structures.⁴

RESEARCH ON SCHOOL CHANGE

More recently, research on school change has moved from finding and installing good practices to a process focused implementation suited to each local context.⁵ Research findings on school change should be used less something to be applied to a school and more of a means of planning, implementation strategies and monitoring progress.⁶

It is not as simple as applying strategies and research knowledge to schools since each reform effort is formed in and by their specific historical and cultural context.⁷ Therefore, school change cannot be isolated from its sociopolitical context and understanding and adapting to these environments can be quite complex.

HOW DO WE CHANGE SCHOOLS?

Since school change is a complex task and unique to each context, success will be different for every school and will probably not occur as planned.⁸

Planning for school change must therefore be flexible and adapt to the environment as it proceeds.⁹

School change should also be closely connected to the people doing the change, allowing individuals to start from where they are.¹⁰ School change initiatives often underestimate the amount of change they ask of teachers and teachers are often left struggling to teach students to learn in ways they have never experienced themselves.¹¹ Providing teachers adequate support, in the form of

time, professional development and other resources, is of primary importance since school change asks them to “learn, think, and form their identities in different ways...in short, asking them to be different people”.¹²

How school change unfolds ultimately depends on how those involved or affected make the necessary changes in their beliefs, attitudes, practices, and assumptions¹³ as they relate to an identified need linked to their context.

Emphasis is therefore on the people involved in change in a specified moment of time. It is likely that during a teacher's career they will have experienced rounds of reform and that those experiences will shape how they approach another.¹⁴

1 Tyack & Cuban, 1995
2 Viennet & Pont, 2017
3 OECD, 2015
4 Starr et al., 2019

5 Firestone & Corbett, 1987; Miles, 1993
6 Fullan, 2015
7 Lundahl, 2007

8 Fullan, 2011
9 Hannay, 1992
10 Hannay, 1992
11 Hubbard & Datnow, 2020

12 Elmore, 2016, p. 531
13 Fullan, 2015; Miles, 1986; Schein, 2010
14 Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR SCHOOL CHANGE

Given that school change is linked to context, the following recommendations are not a list of things to do in order to be successful. Instead the following list is merely a starting point for discussion about what school change agents may want to consider when planning, implementing and monitoring school change in their schools.

- 1 A **principals' support** for a reform initiative is a near prerequisite for its success.¹
- 2 An **active advocate and/or a strong school leadership team** who understands the plan for change should be present.²
- 3 **Vice principals** play a key leadership role.³
- 4 **Staff involvement in planning and decision-making** related to the change initiative in-creases support.⁴
- 5 **Expanded teacher leadership opportunities** help further school change initiatives.⁵

- 6 Establishing a **position in a reform that includes the ability to move across hierarchies (school, school board, ministry of education)** can be important for advancing school change initiatives.⁶
- 7 **Strong relationships amongst school change agents** increases the likelihood of success.⁷
- 8 **Interdepartmental support, leadership, and interdependence** through the development of a **team** is important.⁸ Teams also can result in less territoriality and more openness in formal communication.⁹

1 Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Dinham et al., 2011; Spillane, 1996; Useem et al., 1997

2 Fullan, 1990a; Jackson & Andrews, 2000; Miles, 1986; Thompson, Gregg & Niska, 2004

3 Bond, 1995; Hargreaves et al., 1993; Little, 1990; Wilson & Corcoran, 1988

4 Bond, 1995; Covin & Kilmann, 1990; Datnow et al., 1998; Desimone, 2000; Hale & Moorman 2003; Miles, 1986; Miller, Johnson & Grau, 1994; Useem et al., 1997

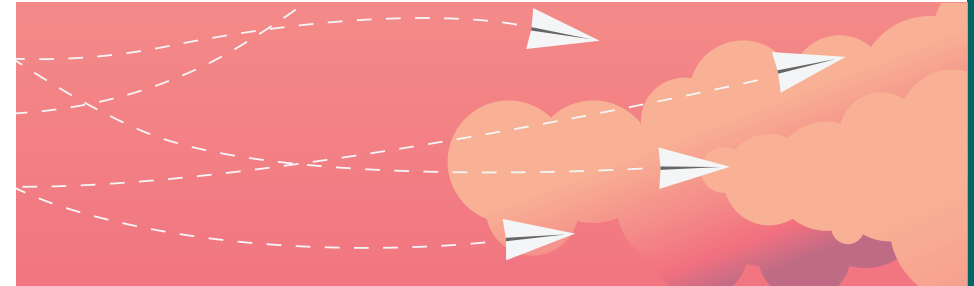
5 Barth, 2001; Birky, Shelton, & Headley, 2006; Bond, 1995; Danielson, 2006; Urlick & Bowers, 2014; Useem et al., 1997

6 Damanpour, 1991; Delaney, Jarley, & Fiorito, 1996; Honig, 2006; Kanter, 1988; Lárusdóttir & O'Connor, 2017

7 Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Donaldson, 2006; Drago-Severson, 2004; DuFour, Eaker, & Dufour, 2005; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995; Noddings, 2015; Schneider & Bryk, 1995a, 1995b; Useem et al., 1997

8 Little, 2002; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Stein & Coburn, 2008; OECD, 2020

9 Bond, 1995



- 10 An adequate bank of local facilitators and in-school advisory teachers for skills training, **community involvement and school/community relationship** was recognized by staff and admin as important throughout the process.¹⁰
- 11 **Time for common planning and reflection** is a major foundational component of successful school change efforts.¹¹
- 12 Policy makers and change agents must acknowledge that **profound educational change will take time**.¹²
- 13 **Flexibility and adaptability** should both be taught and will gradually develop throughout the school change process.¹³
- 14 **Structuring schools into subject departments may inhibit school change success**.¹⁴
- 15 **Leadership and staffing instability is detrimental** to school change.¹⁵
- 16 **Clear responsibility for orchestration/coordination and ongoing communication** (with feedback loops) about the initiative is important.¹⁶
- 17 Reform structures should include **strong and purposeful links to the curriculum**¹⁷, **classroom teaching and learning**¹⁸, and competing or contradictory practices should be eliminated.¹⁹

14 Bruckerhoff, 1991; Fessler & Christensen, 1992; Hanay, 1995; Johnson, 1990; Lieberman, 1990; Little, 1990, 1993; Nias, 2002; Rosenholtz, 1989; Yee, 1986

15 Fullan, 1990a; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Lewis, 1995; Maeroff, 1993; Marshall, 1993; Newman, 1995; Pechman & King, 1993; Pink, 1989; Sebring, Bryk, & Easton, 1995

16 Allen et al., 2007; Bond, 1995; Miles, 1986; Schweiger & Denisi, 1991

17 Castro Superfine, Marshall and Kelso, 2015; Cheung & Wong, 2012; Darling-Hammond et al., 2002; O'Donnell, 2008; Pietarinen, Pyhälä & Soini, 2017

18 Fullan, 1990b; Miles, 1986

19 Desimone, 2002

10 Bond, 1995; Fullan, 1990a; Gillette & Kranyik, 1996; Miles, 1986; Schaps et al., 1997; Watson et al., 1997

11 Donahoe, 1993; Fullan & Miles, 1992; Louis & Miles, 1990; Maeroff, 1993; Purnell & Hill, 1992; Watts & Castle, 1993

12 Burns, Köster & Fuster, 2016; Wedell, 2009

13 Bond, 1995

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