

Longevity of Innovative Schools: An Outline of Change Forces and Strategies for Sustainability

The Alliance facilitators have been studying the writings of education researchers Andy Hargreaves and his co-workers, who have probed the histories and experiences of numerous schools, school leaders, and teachers in the United States and Canada. They developed the following analysis, as a result of their in-depth research. We may well want to add, extend, or rethink some of his ideas. But they appear to reflect the experiences that many of us have faced, as we've worked to create stronger and more meaningful schools.

Major Change Forces that Tend to Undermine Meaningful Reforms

- **Successive Waves of Policy Reform.** Cycles of district, state or nation-wide reforms that are imposed on schools and teachers, and that often contradict previous policies and programs that are working effectively in innovative schools.
- **Frequent Leadership Changes and Lack of Leadership Succession Planning.** Effective, charismatic leaders are often followed by weaker successors who do not understand the programs they've inherited. Schools usually fail to plan and anticipate this. Districts rotate principals too frequently and arbitrarily.
- **Changes in Teacher Demographics.** Successive generations of teachers enter the field with differing perspectives and experiences. Older teachers often become burned out or defensive, recalling the "good old days" of their own, lost reform efforts, while younger teachers may lack connection with significant reform efforts in the past. Schools lack structures for older teachers to share their wisdom.
- **Shifts in Student and Community Demographics.** Innovative schools often develop to serve particular needs of the surrounding communities. When neighborhoods change (in whatever way), particular programs may no longer be appropriate for, or supported by, the new population.
- **Changing Relationships Among Schools.** Innovative schools experience pressure from more traditional buildings. They often "steal" away good teachers, interested students, and active parents. While it is often hoped that the innovators will influence the traditional schools, it usually works the other way: the tensions exert pressure on the innovative schools and push them back toward a mediocre norm.

Strategies for Promoting Sustainability

- **Depth – Developing Teaching that Insures Deep Learning for Students.** This insures that students will be successful and that the school will be recognized for it. It includes a

moral sense of the importance of caring and citizenship within a community. We're not out to sustain just anything, but are seeking learning that matters.

- **Length – A Good School Leader Helps the School Plan for His/Her Own Succession.** This is especially challenging, since it's not unlike planning for your own death. It often involves preparing new leaders from within the school. Leadership changes offer an opportunity to evaluate what to preserve and what to change – and this needs to involve the whole school. Good leaders need to stay in place long enough to build a solid, lasting structure. Some are too overloaded and burn out too soon. And schools must build the political support necessary to resist bureaucracies' tendency to rotate leaders in and out of positions too quickly for them to become effective, and irrespective of their philosophies.
- **Breadth – Creating and Sustaining a Strong School Means Distributing Leadership.** This is important not just for succession and preparing new leaders, but also for the essential health of the effort. No matter how strong the leader, he or she cannot do it alone or understand all the ins and outs of a program. Leadership is always distributed one way or another, though frequently this occurs in unhealthy ways. Teacher leadership does not just mean congeniality, however. Group protection of problematic programs can undermine a school; so distributed leadership calls for teachers to be self-critical as well as mutually supportive.
- **Justice – Innovative Schools Must Support and Work With their Surrounding Community.** Innovative schools should not grow at the expense of others, but should find strategies for mutual support. They should work with the community and not become isolated from it.
- **Diversity – Teachers and Students with a Variety of Backgrounds and Views Should be Helped to Learn from One Another.** Standardization and lock-step alignment weaken organizations. Members of the school community with differing points of view can be helped to listen and learn from one another.
- **Resourcefulness – Innovative Efforts Should Not Burn People Out.** Effective programs take care of the people who carry them out. They provide recognition and offer opportunities for renewal. And they require skillful organizing, relationship-building in the community, and carefully conceived political action, when necessary, to protect programs.
- **Conservation – Change Efforts Should Draw on Effective Ideas and Structures from the Past.** Good schools depend on institutional memory, and honors and makes use of the wisdom of previous generations of teachers, rather than dismissing them.

Based on ideas from *Sustainable Leadership*, by Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink (forthcoming); "Educational Change Over Time? The Sustainability and Non-Sustainability of Three Decades of Secondary School Change and Continuity," by Andy Hargreaves and Ivor Goodson; and "The Sustainability of Innovative Schools as Learning Organizations and Professional Learning Communities During Standardized Reform," (report to the Spencer Foundation, 2004), by Andy Hargreaves and Corrie Giles.