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## Sustaining Momentum for School Transformation

by **Diana Laufenberg**, Executive Director and Lead Teacher for Inquiry Schools

If you've been listening to any conversation about education over the past few years, you've heard the buzzwords – change, innovation, and reform. “They” tell you to be innovative, to shift/change your normal and rethink how you do everything. What is old is bad, what is new is good. The rate at which these messages hit your inbox, scroll through social media and populate the pages of publications is dizzying. I know because I've been messaging, posting, and writing about these ideas for the past 5 years. The entire time, I've had one immense concern - sustainability.

Through my work with [Inquiry Schools](#), I observe many districts, schools and teachers having incredibly thoughtful and difficult conversations about moving in new directions. Once that is done, there is often a lag between the excitement of the idea and sustaining the momentum long enough for the change to take hold.

The flux of shifting the systems of a learning organization calls for five factors of sustainability: Permission, Support, Accountability, Community Engagement, and Discipline.

- **Permission** for the people in the community to try something new, make mistakes, reflect and grow,
- **Support** to build skills and capacity in your school community,
- **Accountability** for all school community members that expectations are being implemented/met to satisfaction,
- **Community Engagement** for the changes so one doesn't spend an inordinate amount of time defending but promoting and growing, and
- **Discipline** to hold the line for a 3-5 year chunk of time... any real change will take years to settle in, disrupt old patterns...keep focus.

### Permission

In the midst of a system-wide change, all learning community members need to know they have permission to make change and try new practices without fear of losing their jobs. Michael Fullan defines the *implementation dip* as “a dip in performance and confidence as one encounters an innovation that requires new skills and new understandings” in [Leading in a Culture of Change](#). If your district is evaluated predominantly on test scores and your teachers are rated/paid based on those same scores, it will be difficult for those stakeholders to see your change initiative as anything other than hostile to their livelihood. Making a specific and intentional statement about granting permission for teachers and principals to shift their systems or instruction is an integral first step. Next is realizing the need to give and for people to truly hear that permission throughout the change process. Hearing it at the beginning is one thing, believing it when you're standing on the precipice of change is another. Suggestions include revising the evaluation metric for teachers and principals to reflect the new focus and including the grace for a possible implementation dip. Much like the classroom, leaders who ask for compliance through control structures will never inspire teachers and principals to take the risks to become more creative and innovative. Understanding that an implementation dip is possible and granting specific permission to your schools and teachers to move forward with the shift/change is an important first step in ensuring sustainability for your goals.

Over the past few months in my work with [Cedarburg School District](#), I had the privilege to work with a team of teachers and administrators working to make the transition to a 1:1 student to computer ratio about learning and not just about technology. In the midst of that process, we discovered a common language that spread districtwide to describe and promote instructional practices - *deeper learning*. In an all-district gathering this Fall, I worked alongside the administration to introduce the principles of deeper learning to the all teachers. This message was consistent districtwide. After the event, the district's administration met to discuss the conditions by which this initiative will have the best chance for success. I am excited to return this spring to continue the work and grow this initiative. The first step is making sure everyone knows they have the explicit permission to move in a particular direction. Without explicit and continual permission, teachers will be hesitant of the path forward and they may never fully commit.

## Support

Once teachers and principals have permission, the next step is making certain you have adequate supports in place for new learning and teaching to grow. If permission is the soil, support is the water. Permission without consistent and ongoing access to support to help change develop deep roots will leave it vulnerable to failure. Support can come in many forms and must include different paths as your schools and teachers pursue a shift or change. Assuming the same supports will work across pK-12 without consideration of the needs of different levels of teachers and learners works about as well as offering the same supports to first grade and senior students. Recognizing some teachers in your system may be further along in their understanding and implementation of the shift is important. Creating many different types and levels of support to resonate with all members of the community will show respect for expertise while also giving your folks who are starting this process an appropriate on ramp to find their way. Support needs to come in the form of professional learning as well as coaches who can work within the classroom to model, observe, and provide crucial feedback related to progress, methods, and resources. A budgetary increase for both professional development and coaching positions will be necessary during the implementation phase of this work.

[San Marcos Unified Schools](#) in California has been on a long, intentional path to shift the pedagogy to an inquiry-driven approach. Through the leadership of [Adina Sullivan-Marlow](#), the district has organized cohorts that walk through the shift process together. This includes extra release days for professional development and coaches who observe, model and support the teachers inside the classroom. The support is a critical component of the shift in that it bridges the space between the excitement of a new idea and the (sometimes) challenge of implementing new approaches to teaching and learning in the classroom.

## Accountability

*Accountability* is one of the most important words in education. We want all stakeholders accountable in a thriving system. But, what does that mean in a time of shift and change? If your evaluation criteria for principals and teachers do not resonate with the shift and change, confusion and frustration result. A pedagogical shift to project-based learning with an accountability measure around standardized tests and silent classrooms will run into trouble. A system shift to competency-based teaching and grading held accountable by carnegie units and traditional courses will hit a wall. If you want the shift and change to take hold, you will give permission and provide support. You must also consider how your accountability measures communicate a unified message. In such cases, the state accountability system can often be an outlier that often feels anathema to innovation. It is important to thoughtfully plan for conversations related to how this shift may impact such accountability measures.

[Henry County Schools](#) in Georgia has been navigating an ambitious full-district transformation for the past 4 years. The 50 schools in the district have been approaching the transformation in cohorts. Throughout this process, the project managers and district administrators visit schools to check in on progress toward the stated goals of the plan. To further this goal, Project Manager [Karen Perry](#) established a rubric which allows schools to self assess progress as well as asking outside observers to provide earnest feedback about the progress so far and the work ahead. While they cannot change the teacher evaluation tool, as it is state mandated, the district has done considerable work to crosswalk the personalized learning goals to teacher evaluation.

## Community Engagement

School is one of the most ingrained habits in American society. Even after graduation, most people have opinions of what school is or should be. These community members often also have strong feelings about what school should not be. Starting a robust, consistent, and varied approach to reaching out to the community with ideas for shift and change will increase your initiative's chances of success. Changes to school start time, bell schedules, grading policies are some of the most controversial changes to school as it relates to external stakeholders. Scheduling regular opportunities to speak with and listen to community organizations, parent groups, business, and philanthropic and faith leaders can go a long way toward positively communicating the change you are proposing as well as the reasons, rationale, and research that back it up. Failing to do this step with diligence puts your school staff out of step with the community and forces many of them into uncomfortable and unnecessarily tense conversations in the produce aisle or in the bleachers at the softball game.

In very Northern Vermont, [Enosburg High School](#) began the 2017-18 school year without grades for the 2021 graduating class. There will be no GPA, no class rank, and no carnegie units. Students will be assessed on their proficiency related to [38 state-defined graduation proficiencies](#). The school spent three years considering how to create the positive conditions for this change. Integral in this process was community engagement. The school held many parent meetings and published materials on their website. In one of the conversations, the team brainstormed all of the entities outside the school that would be affected by this shift and assigned staff members to proactively approach these community groups to discuss possibilities. Things like good student discounts on car insurance and passes to the local ski hill (previously based on GPA) would need new qualifiers. Rather than wait to have frustrated families in the office, school leaders

proactively reached out to the community to address the impacts of the changes and prevent problems. Community partners can be incredibly supportive to these efforts, and failing to enlist them in your efforts often dilutes your overall impact.

## Discipline

*Discipline* has one predominant meaning in a school setting, but I would like to skip down in the list to focus on another meaning. Let's think about discipline as an "orderly or prescribed conduct or pattern of behavior." Our current educational landscape is full of all kinds of shiny, new ideas (oftentimes old ideas in shiny new packages). Having the institutional discipline to hold strong with your shift/change requires a minimum of a 3 year commitment to this path. Depending on your district or school size, these changes can take up to 5 years to find the self-sustaining momentum that moves this from a shift to the norm. Leaders must check themselves to resist chasing shiny new ideas that may undercut the shift and change they are pursuing. Create a strategic plan and empower those in your district/school to help hold leadership accountable. Making that strategic plan a frequent talking point with staff and the community is another important step toward making this shift/change a sustainable and solid path forward.

Working with the [Science Leadership Academy](#) (SLA) in Philadelphia I learned this particular lesson of sustaining momentum. SLA is based on core values, three basic rules, a common rubric/unit planner, and grade-wide essential questions. These features expanded as the school developed, but after the start-up phase it was important to make sure all new endeavors were congruent with the mission, vision and core values. At times there were new and exciting opportunities, but they did not fit with the established focus of the school. In those moments, it was critical to be able to evaluate the fit with the focus. Decide who you are and then hold onto that mission and vision for at least 3-5 years.

Transforming one of the most staid systems in all of America is no small endeavor. As you think through possible innovations, shifts, and changes you would like to bring to your community, consider the conditions that solidify the new approach and the long-term sustainability. Changing habits around school requires permission, support, accountability, community engagement, and discipline. If one of these conditions is missing or underrepresented in your efforts, the overall efficacy of your efforts will be lessened. Enlist help, build a team with resilient skills, and prepare to feel excited and uncomfortable as the process unfolds. We all know the real struggles that persist around making school transformation stick, but the other side of those struggles can truly transform learning for your students. It is the work worth doing.

***Diana Laufenberg is a keynote speaker at the [2017 SLATE Convention](#) taking place December 4-6, 2017 at the Kalahari Resort in the Wisconsin Dells. This year's convention is open for registration.***

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