

The Challenge of Change

by [Grace Sammon](#)

Before you dive into one more article on whole school reform, organizational change, restructuring, redesigning, and reinventing your school, take a deep breath. Congratulate yourself for being a school leader who has been entrusted with the mission of leading your school and community through a time of unprecedented change in the culture of American education. Ever since 1983, and the ground breaking “A Nation At Risk” report that focused on the poor performance of American students in international comparisons, and the continued gaps between poor and minority students and white students, our educational system has been in a state critical transformation.

The result has been a national discussion around vouchers and schools of choice, coupled with Federal and State initiatives focused on school-to-careers, and the birth of the skills standards movement. As a nation we are looking at massive changes in the ways schools and communities think about education through such initiatives as the redesign of Title I funds, the creation of the Workforce Investment Act, and the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSR D) program. Now, add to the discussion the increasing demands and opportunities presented by a rapidly changing, technological driven society, the concerns around the psychosocial needs of today’s youth, and the challenge by the employer community for schools to be accountable for developing individuals who perform successfully in the work place. The result is a call for our educational leadership to design schools for a purpose that, according to Willard Daggett, President of the International Center for Leadership in Education, they were never intended to do. Namely, leave no child behind, hold all children to high academic standards, and prepare them for life in a competitive, global marketplace. To be a school leader today is to be faced with the challenge of changing your entire school climate to reap and sustain these results. And your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to effectively lead your teachers, parents, community partners, and students through a sustainable change process.

Before you begin to turn your school upside down with a change effort, survey your landscape, assess your strengths, and, as Dr. Nettie Legters from Johns Hopkins University’s Center for the Social Organization of Schools would encourage, ‘celebrate your progress’. Undoubtedly, you are doing positive and effective things in your school. Engage all your community stakeholders in this process. Invite parents, students, union leaders, faith-based groups, business, central administration, and post-secondary institutions to the table. Schools can no longer pretend to create school partnerships, they must establish true alliances in order to reap the results required by this new demand in American education. By involving all stakeholders in the survey process you lay the framework for building a team. You also establish a baseline for what is working within your school and who is helping to make it work. In your celebration of the positives you narrow the field of what truly needs to be changed and validate existing positive practices. In seeking the positives you will also undoubtedly identify areas of concern such as student attendance, student engagement, lack of resources, staff morale, test scores, college acceptance rates, teacher retention, or parent involvement.

Armed with data from your own site you must define your challenge, set clear, realistic and measurable goals and determine what resources are available for you to make the internal changes necessary in your school to reach them. In truth, we are all limited to the resources of

time, staffing and funding, but to allow perceived limits of these recourses to derail the change process is to fail before you have begun. Rather, measure the availability and quality of these resources. Robert Slavin in his article “Sand, Bricks, and Seeds: School Change Strategies and Readiness for Reform” highlights the importance of matching the readiness of a school faculty for embracing change to specific types of organizational school reform. He states that those involved in comprehensive school reform must be able to determine which faculties simply need to be nurtured to success, which are able to follow and implement a model, and which are in such a state of unreadiness that no effective change can take place.

The drive for data cannot stop in your own school and can no longer be limited to superficial looks at what is working in other districts. Federal legislation and US Department of Education initiatives all support a drive for accepting research-based, approved models for school change. CSRD, New American High Schools and other efforts all lay out frameworks and benchmarks by which to set and measure success. And while it is true that many schools are taking pieces of approved programs and strategies and incorporating them into a program of reform they feel is tailored to their own needs, the general funding and ongoing research is currently centered around specific approved models. As the school leader you must be able to access this information. Equipped with that data school leaders can then move to the most difficult step in the change process, that of creating a passion in all of their stakeholders around the need for change that allows for risk, further exploration, and the adoption of a reform model.

The Dance of Change, by Peter Senge puts the process in perspective. He highlights that there are six key steps in any change process and he makes it clear that the leader of the organization is responsible for creating a climate for successful change. First, there must be an investment in the need for change. Secondly, professional development must be extensive, on going, and focused on personal results. Individual teachers must be able to see direct benefits to them and their students, and see increases in the areas defined by the change process as needing improvement. This practice leads to what Senge identifies as the third step in the process, personal investment and an upward spiral of results, which naturally leads to the subsequent steps of an enthusiasm and willingness to commit, an institutionalization of change practices, and measured results.

Making a difference in the lives of our students is the outcome we seek in any reform. Joseph Johnson at The University of Texas at Austin’s STAR Center highlights three factors or practices regarding the change process. The factors support the best of what we know about organizational change: principals must adopt and encourage an attitude of increased expectations; must allow for comprehensive and meaningful planning; and commit to a process of continual improvement. He states that the manner in which principals, teachers, parents and other school leaders address these factors may substantially influence whether their schoolwide programs will bring focus and power to academic reform efforts or bring another mirage of change in a desert of educational stagnation.

If this sounds overly simplistic it is not meant to be. Real change comes hard. Indeed, as individuals we call for change in all aspects of our society. We do not want to bring our car to a mechanic who does not have the latest computer diagnostic equipment, entrust ourselves to a medical practice that does not have access to the latest information and techniques in health care, or even return to conventional over microwave ovens. However, when it comes to changing the way we operate in our own professional lives we do not see the need for it. In fact, most of us react, according to Price Pritchett in his Executive Library on Organizational Change, by engaging in the old fight or flight phenomena. We disengage from the process or

undermine it. We miss entirely a third option of choosing to embrace change and thereby open opportunities for success where we have previously met with failure.

Try this simple activity. Choose a time to introduce the topic of change at an upcoming staff meeting. Ask staff to pair off, face each other, and observe each other for 10 seconds. Instruct them to then turn their backs to each other and to change five things about themselves. Give them just 10 seconds to do this. Have the pairs turn and face each other and document any noticed changes. Give them just a minute to do this. Repeat the process. Undoubtedly you will find a range of reactions. Let the process play out. Tell the group they can sit down and debrief the activity. What did they observe about change? “It’s fun, it’s easy, it’s creative, it’s observable” are all likely comments on the upside of change. The challenges will come in the reactions of “it’s hard, it didn’t make sense, I was willing to do it once but not twice, I liked the way I was – why did I have to change”. And then there will be those that won’t comment on the activity at all because they chose from the outset not to engage in it. At the conclusion of debriefing the activity, ask your team how many people returned themselves back to exactly the way they were prior to the request for change. It has never failed, 100% of the participants will have reverted.

Your own observations about the process will likely reinforce what you intrinsically know about your team. There are a third that are eager to make the changes necessary for children to succeed. There are a third that will make the change once they see and understand the how and why of change, and there are a third that listen to those four teachers who just wouldn’t engage in the activity and thus get disenfranchised before they begin. Regardless of where they are on the continuum, however, the activity will highlight for all that even when change is effected the call to return to “school as usual” will always be there.

Leadership will be the defining factor in successful change. As a leader you must understand that as individuals we shy away from the idea of having to change, and react even more strongly at the idea of continued change. You should also understand, however, that as individuals we embrace the idea of personal growth. Perhaps the entire movement around school reform and organizational change would have been made easier had the entire discussion been framed around the opportunity to grow and to increase outcomes rather than to change behaviors. Your mission is to be the leader that encourages a desire for growth.

Daggett, Pritchett, Senge and others all identify strong leadership as not only the key to initiating change but critical to sustaining the gains won by the process. This means developing a sustained leadership structure that can create and communicate a vision for growth and translate that vision into action steps that can be adopted and embraced by a community of stakeholders. It entails the ability to forge true linkages and partnerships between organizations committed to the success of the organization. And, it requires that a climate be created that reduces barriers to innovation and risk and institutionalizes policies geared at sustaining the effort.

In life, the old adage goes, we can be certain of only two things, death and taxes. Indeed, we can also be assured of a third, change. As a nation we will constantly be addressing the educational needs of children; we can look forward to new legislation that will drive new initiatives and to continued research on current efforts such as the effects of the standards movement. As a society we will continually turn to our school leaders to keep a focus on increased, measurable growth in our schools. So, celebrate your successes, identify your areas of greatest need, find

supportive partners, and take a deep breath; your mission is clear and we are looking to you to accept it.

Where to Look for Change:

Creating School-wide Programs that Make a Difference, Joseph F. Johnson, Jr., Ph.D., STAR Center at the Charles A. Dana Center, The University of Texas at Austin

Dance of Change, Peter Senge

Executive Library for Organizational Change, Pritchett & Associates

Is It Too Late to Run Away and Join the Circus: A Guide for the Second Half of Your Life, Marti Smye, Ph.D

Sand, Bricks, and Seeds: School Change Strategies and Readiness For Reform, Robert E. Slavin , Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk, Johns Hopkins University, April, 1997

[Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration: http://www.csrweb.net/](http://www.csrweb.net/)

[International Center for Leadership in Education: http://www.daggett.com/](http://www.daggett.com/)

[Comprehensive School Reform Program: http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/compreform/](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/compreform/)

[Marysville Public Schools: http://www.marysville.k12.mi.us/](http://www.marysville.k12.mi.us/)

[The National Education Goals Panel: http://www.negp.gov/](http://www.negp.gov/)

[Southwest Educational Development Laboratory: http://www.sedl.org/csr/](http://www.sedl.org/csr/)

[Creating Schoolwide Programs that Make a Difference: http://www.starcenter.org/promise/schppromise.htm](http://www.starcenter.org/promise/schppromise.htm)

[Comprehensive Center-Region VI: http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/ccvi/](http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/ccvi/)