Learning from Failure:
A DISCUSSION GUIDE ON HIGH SCHOOL REFORM

learn /ˈlərn/ • vb (1) acquire or gain knowl-
edge or skills by study, instruction, or experi-
ence (2) get to know or become aware of, usu-
ally accidentally; HEAR (3) commit to memo...
learn by heart (4) be a student of a certain
subject (5) impart skills or knowledge to; ...
find out or determine with certainty, usually
by making an inquiry or other effort.

SERVE
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Improving Learning through Research & Development ™

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Executive Summary

Why include the word *failure* in the title of a discussion guide on high school reform? Simply put, we need to learn from past mistakes. Too often, educators or policymakers implement "new" reforms that have already been tried and then wonder why their programs or reforms don't work.

This discussion guide is designed to provide information about what hasn't worked in the past and the lessons we have learned. It can be used by teams of practitioners, policymakers, and members of the community who are in the midst of school reform efforts at the high school level. Reading and working through this guide will help those teams engage in a dialogue about how to ensure success at their school. This document summarizes some existing literature and research on the reasons behind the failure of many school reforms. It also provides questions for people to consider as they develop or implement their own reform efforts.

The success of school reform efforts is dependent on the nature of the reform, as well as a variety of contextual factors, such as state and district policies and political forces, as well as school-level factors, including teachers and administrators. This discussion guide, which concentrates on the high school level, describes the factors affecting general efforts to implement reform, as well as some factors more specific to school-within-a-school restructuring efforts. It concludes with some questions to consider. Below is a summary of the main ideas discussed in this guide. Each idea is explored in more depth in the full guide.

The Nature of the Reform

- **A focus on structural and not instructional changes.** Reforms that focus on structural changes such as organizational structure or scheduling may be easy to implement but will not have the desired impact on student outcomes without a concomitant focus on instruction and student learning.

- **Implementation of reforms without using data.** Using reforms without a solid or promising research base can be risky. Reforms also must be evaluated as they are implemented so that necessary changes can be made. Evaluation must therefore be ongoing, occurring prior to choosing or implementing the reform, during implementation, and after implementation.

School-level Factors Affecting Implementation of Reforms

- **Lack of support and buy-in from the school staff.** Reforms fail when the school staff is not allowed input and active participation in crafting the reform.

- **Lack of skills and knowledge among school staff.** If teachers and administrators lack the skills and knowledge necessary for implementation, the reform will not succeed.

- **A school culture that values acceptance and conformity.** School culture generally supports individuals who maintain the status quo, creating an environment that is not conducive to reform.

- **Teacher and administrator exhaustion and burnout.** The extra work required to implement innovative reforms can take its toll on teachers.

- **Teacher and administrator turnover.** When staff leave, it is generally difficult to replace them with individuals with the same level of commitment to the reform.

- **Insufficient resources.** Reforms will fail if schools don't have the necessary resources, including money (generally) and time (always) for teachers and administrators to learn the ideas and work on implementing them.

Contextual Factors Affecting Implementation of Reforms

- **The systemic nature of education.** Schools are part of an interlocking system, and changes made in one part of the system that run counter to another part of the system will fail.

- **Lack of consensus on goals of schooling and how to achieve those goals.** Members of the educational community and the broader community are often unsure about what the public school is supposed to accomplish and also unsure about how to accomplish it.

- **Multiple and incompatible reforms.** States, districts, and schools often implement multiple reforms, which can be fragmentary or even contradictory.

- **"Iconic notions of high school."** Despite a lack of clarity around goals and processes, many people have traditional notions of what a "real school" is. Reforms that go against this notion often run into substantial difficulty.

- **Lack of support and buy-in from the broader community.** Many educational reforms fail because parents or other political forces are not included in the reform process from the beginning.

Factors Specific to Schools-Within-Schools (SWS)

- **Insufficient autonomy.** SWS can fail if they are not autonomous entities within the school.

- **Lack of continuity among different SWS**. In many cases, multiple SWS can conflict and compete with each other.

- **Friction and conflict between SWS and host schools.** Staff in the large school that is supporting a SWS often feels that SWS get extra benefits.

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"For over a century, ambitious reformers have promised to create sleek, efficient school machines 'light years' ahead of the fusty schools of their times. But in practice their reforms have often resembled shooting stars that spurted across the pedagogical heavens, leaving a meteoric trail in the media but burning up and disappearing in the everyday atmosphere of the schools."

(Tyack and Cuban, 1995, p. 111)

Consider the experience of students in an innovative high school reform program. Students participate in a series of interdisciplinary core courses that cross departmental boundaries. The eight-period day has been replaced by classes that vary in time span and in class size, according to the need of the subject. Students become actively involved in community service, artistic productions, and publications. Teachers and students together are involved in collaboratively planning the activities. Evaluation results show that students in these programs do just as well in college academic courses as students in more traditional academic programs, and they are more active in collegiate social, artistic, and political life.

This reform program sounds like the type of experience we wish all our students could have and the type of experience many educational reformers are proposing today. Yet, this reform, called the Eight-Year Study, took place 70 years ago, from 1933–1941. The program obtained agreement from colleges to free participating schools from a mandate that students study specific kinds and numbers of courses as indicated by Carnegie Units.[1] The idea was to create school environments that helped students learn what they needed to learn in the way they learned best instead of "subordinating youth to an antiquated system of academic accounting…" (Tyack and Cuban, 1995, p. 98). The program had substantial resources, including a million-plus dollar budget, curriculum developers, program evaluators, and much favorable publicity. It operated in 29 innovative, socioeconomically advantaged schools, including some schools-within-schools, chosen from over 200 nominated schools. However, in 1950, when a group of the original participants got together to assess the results of the Eight-Year Study, they agreed that the reforms had mostly faded. Participating schools had returned to the original "grammar of schooling" although some aspects of the reforms remained.

This story is important because it reminds us of something critical: educational reform is not new. Reformers have been attempting to change schools for years, but very few changes stick. Many reforms do have an incremental effect on the school experience, but dramatic changes are almost always restricted to isolated schools. Yet, drastic and comprehensive changes are exactly what education reforms are currently calling for. Why do so many educational reforms fail? And what does this mean for reforms today? This discussion guide summarizes some of the research and literature on education reform. Most of this research is descriptive in nature; nevertheless, there are trends that appear over and over in the studies and literature, allowing us to identify specific factors that appear to affect the implementation of reforms, contributing to their success or failure. These factors are grouped in three levels: the nature of the reform itself, contextual factors, and school-level factors. The guide also addresses some concerns specific to the reform movement known as schools-within-schools (SWS), which has gained in popularity at the high school level.

In addition to questions sprinkled throughout the text, the guide concludes with a series of questions to ask about your reform. Teams may want to use the worksheets at the end of the book to record their discussion.

The Nature of the Reform

The style and substance of the reform itself is a key factor affecting its success. The extent to which a reform is focused on the key priority of student learning and the extent to which a reform is based on data can determine whether it will have the desired impact. We first consider these aspects of the nature of the reform.

A focus on structural and not instructional changes

Many reforms revolve around "structural" issues, including reforms such as block-scheduling and small schools. These reforms are generally successful in so far as they are implemented; however, they rarely have the desired impact on student learning outcomes unless they are accompanied by instructional changes. In a study of significantly restructured schools, Elmore (1995) found that teachers had made little change in their instructional practices. Elmore (1996) has also argued that it is much more difficult to change what he calls "the core of educational practice" (i.e., what actually happens in the classroom between teachers and students). This core includes an understanding of how students gain knowledge, the students' role in learning, and how the ideas are represented in teaching and in the classroom. On the other hand, innovations that operate on the periphery, without changing what Tyack and Cuban (1995) called the "grammar of schooling," are much more likely to be implemented. For example, it is relatively easy to implement a dropout prevention program, an after-school tutoring program, or even block-scheduling. It is not easy, on the other hand, to change the work that happens every day in the classrooms.

Even if structural reforms are more likely to meet with success in implementation, they will likely fail in having the desired impacts on students. Noguera (2004) discussed how structural reforms had little impact on classrooms and students in most of the urban high schools he studied. High schools that were successful placed the structural reforms in the context of a focus on student learning. In a study of a city-wide initiative to create professional communities of instructional practice, Supovitz (2002) found that the organizational structure did little to improve student achievement unless it was connected to an ongoing exploration of improving student learning. He concluded, "Policy changes that modify organizational structures certainly contribute to changes in the cultures within, but they may not meaningfully transform those cultures." In their description of "Breakthrough High Schools" that were having success serving challenging student populations, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (2004) determined that changes made in the schools needed to revolve around the issue of improving student

learning and evaluating the impact of structural and instructional changes on student outcomes.

Implementation of reforms without using data

Not all reforms and practices are created equal. Some reforms have a better chance of success than others. Researchers and policymakers have highlighted the importance of making decisions based on good research or evidence (Fashola and Slavin, 1998; Whitehurst, 2002). When schools implement reforms that have a track record of success, they are much more likely to get the desired results (Slavin, 1996). When the reforms are not based on good information, they can be a waste of time, a distraction, or even harmful. "For want of evidence our schools often fail to accomplish the key tasks we expect of them. And for lack of research concerning their supposed problems and the actual effects of programs for their 'reform,' the policies we initiate in such schools are often misguided, wasteful, counterproductive or destructive" (Biddle, 1996, p. 12).

Implementing an evidence-based approach is no guarantee of success, however, due to the power of the unique context in which each reform operates. Thus, collecting ongoing information about the reform effort is necessary to its success (Elias, Zins, and Graczyk, 2003). The need for good information must be balanced with the recognition that implementing reforms takes time. Feedback that is too frequent or tied too closely to traditional practices may simply reinforce the existing situation and set the innovation up for failure (Hatch, 2000). School staff must always consider how the reform is being implemented in their school and whether any changes need to be made.

School-level Factors Affecting Implementation of Reforms

A reform can be very well designed with a sound research base, but its success or failure still depends on a host of factors at the school level. We next consider some of the factors at the school level that can cause a reform to fail.

Lack of support and buy-in from the school staff

Teachers and local administrators play a key role in implementing any reform and can play just as key a role in sabotaging reforms they find useless or harmful. "As 'street level bureaucrats,' teachers typically have

sufficient discretion, once the classroom doors close, to make decisions about pupils that add up over time to de facto policies about instruction, whatever the official regulations" (Tyack and Cuban, 1995, p. 135). Reforms that do not include teachers in the planning process or that do not address the very real challenges teachers face in their classrooms will be ignored or modified into something non-recognizable. In a study of a school-within-a school program, Greenfield and Klemm (2001) described how the principal expanded the program rapidly, mandating the participation of teachers. This resulted in resentment on behalf of teachers, which contributed to the failure of the reform.

Yet, teachers should not be seen as obstacles to reform. Instead, they are the key to improving education (Noguera, 2004). "Better schooling will result in the future—as it has in the past and does now—chiefly from the steady, reflective efforts of the practitioners who work in schools and from the contributions of the parents and citizens who support (while they criticize) public education" (Tyack and Cuban, p. 135).

TO DISCUSS:

What is the role of teachers in this reform? What do they think about it?

Lack of skills and knowledge among school staff

As highlighted above, reforms are implemented by teachers, and thus are substantially dependent on their skills and knowledge base. Reforms are much more likely to be implemented when there is a congruity between the reform and teachers' instructional practices and content knowledge (Manoucheheri, 2003). If there is a discrepancy between the reform and teachers' knowledge base, there must be technical assistance and professional development to address that discrepancy. For example, urban districts that were successful in reducing the achievement gap supported professional development centered around the reform strategies they were implementing (MDRC, 2002).

Supovitz (2002) examined the implementation of team-based schooling in Cincinnati Public Schools. He found that simply changing the organizational structure—in this case, creating teams of teachers—did not result in the desired goals of instructional change and improved student achievement. One of the reasons was that the teachers did not use the new structure to consider instructional practice. To fully implement the reform, teachers needed professional development in using the time to support the examination of effective instructional practices. Similarly, Noguera (2004) highlighted how teachers in unsuccessful schools did not consider how the reforms being implemented affected student learning. They needed assistance in making that happen.

TO DISCUSS:

What will school staff need to know and be able to do to make this reform a reality? What skills do they currently have? What do they need to learn?

A school culture that values acceptance and conformity

Schools have distinct cultures that many researchers have argued reinforce existing social mores (Apple, 1996), including "respect for hierarchy, competitive individualization, a receptivity to being ranked and judged, and the division of the world into discreet units and categories susceptible to mastery" (Hodas, 1993, p. 3). Hodas argued that individuals who continue working in schools are ones who are comfortable with this set of values, ones who have no other professional options, or those who believe strongly enough in the mission of the organization that they are willing to work through the other, less positive aspects. Elmore (1996) made a related argument: that our school culture views good teaching as an individual attribute possessed by a limited number of exceptional individuals instead of a skill that can be learned. Many educational reforms support that idea by grouping reform-minded individuals in the same school or environment, thereby separating them from other teachers and reinforcing the idea that effective instructional practices can only be used by a precious few. This can result in isolated pockets of success that will be difficult to sustain.

TO DISCUSS:

What happens to teachers or administrators who come up with new ideas in your school (district/state)? How can you create a learning community?

Teacher and administrator exhaustion and burnout

Implementing school reform is a time-consuming process requiring energy and commitment on behalf of those doing the work. Such an intense process can "overload" the staff (Fullan, 2000), resulting in staff exhaustion and correspondingly, teacher and administrator turnover (Tyack and Cuban, 1995). Wasley et al., (2000) in their study of small schools in Chicago, found that implementing such substantial change required an equally substantial investment of time and energy on behalf of the staff of these schools. Many of the teachers in the study wondered if they would be able to keep up the pace. Closely tied to this problem is the issue of time. Reform requires time to implement, and when teachers are given time, they can improve their instruction and their school, as described in a site visit to a successful high school (Badiali & Rousmaniere, 1996).

TO DISCUSS:

How are you going to keep teachers and administrators from wearing themselves out?

Teacher and administrator turnover

When teachers and administrators leave, whether from burnout or from other factors, the staff changes can negatively affect the reform process. Mac Iver & Legters (2002) found that frequent change of principals and the change of superintendent at the district level generally had a detrimental effect on the ability to implement reforms. In

discussing school-within-a-school programs, Raywid (2002) argued that administrative turnover by itself can spell the end of thriving programs. Hargreaves & Fink (2000) described two innovative schools whose reforms were not maintained, and they identified several reasons for failure including problems with leadership succession and with staff recruitment and retention. Initial staff members in schools implementing reforms were often hand-picked because of their belief in the specific reforms; therefore, replacing them was difficult. This exact result was also found in the study of small schools in Chicago (Wasley et al., 2000).

TO DISCUSS:

What systems or structures do you have in place to help new staff understand and buy into the reform?

Insufficient resources

Any reform requires resources in addition to those normally in the school, even if it is just additional time to make the reforms happen. Odden (2000) used commonalities among comprehensive school reform programs[2] to create an estimate of what the professional educational elements of a highly successful school would cost. He concluded that schools could reallocate existing resources to cover many of the costs of school reform efforts, although there would be approximately $250,000/year in additional costs for instructional coordinators, professional development, and technology. Additional resources might be needed to provide support for struggling students (up to $400,000 depending on the needs of the school), although much of this could be covered by Title I or other categorical funds. If schools or districts do not dedicate the resources to make the reform happen, the reform is very likely to fail as schools cannot continue to depend on the extra efforts of dedicated staff (Wasley et al., 2000).

Resources don't only refer to money. Time is one of the most precious resources needed for reforms, and it is the one often in shortest supply. Staff need time to plan, to gain needed skills, and to reflect on work that is being implemented. Schools engaged in reform also need time to see how things work (Borko, Wolf, Simone, and Uchiyama, 2003). Too often, reforms are given a year or two and then discarded because they aren't working, when in fact, they may be just gaining momentum.

TO DISCUSS:

What are you willing to dedicate in terms of money? In terms of time?
How long are you willing to wait to see success?

Contextual Factors Affecting Implementation of Reforms

Schools do not operate in a vacuum. Instead, they are part of a broader system that brings to bear external policies and procedures. In addition, schools are central in the community, and parents and community members can also play extremely powerful roles in what

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happens in schools. Let us consider some of these contextual factors in turn.

The systemic nature of education

Schools are part of an interlocking system, and changes in one area must be supported by other parts of the system. The Eight-Year Study, described in the introduction, provides a powerful example of the restrictions placed by external forces. One of the reasons that the reforms did not stick was because the colleges, who had granted waivers to participating schools from the normal admission requirements, returned to their original policies of admitting students who had taken the Carnegie Unit courses. Part of this shift was due to the end of World War II and the glut of veterans returning from the war and going to college, which meant that colleges could again be more selective. In another example, Bracey (1996) described a de-tracking program that failed because it was operating in a system that rewarded and depended on differentiation, including college admission.

The state and district play crucial roles in supporting or not supporting reforms in schools. The impact of their policies is highlighted in a recent study of the Coalition Campus Schools Project in New York City. The Project replaced two comprehensive high schools with 11 small schools, redesigning the campuses to include small elementary and high schools and other service agencies. The study found that the program initially succeeded because they operated through "policy by exception" where small schools received waivers from district policies that otherwise would have limited their flexibility. A policy of exception does not always last, as the study reported that New York was considering requiring the small schools to take the New York Regents exam, when previously they had been granted waivers so they could use portfolio-based exams. Teachers believed that this policy shift would threaten the purpose and integrity of the schools (Darling-Hammond, Ancess, and Ort, 2002). In another study, Hargreaves and Fink (2000) described an innovative school that had received special support and waivers for staffing. When the regional government tightened these rules, the school lost some of its special character: "Innovative schools may begin as islands in the stream of broader district and policy priorities, but the incoming tides of policy change eventually drown out their uniqueness" (p. 32).

TO DISCUSS:

Does your reform rely on waivers or "policies of exception" for its success? If so, what are the chances of these waivers resulting in institutionalized changes in policies?

Lack of consensus on goals of schooling and how to achieve those goals

Although the goals of schooling may seem a particularly esoteric topic of interest only to educational researchers, the lack of clear and agreed-upon goals underlies most of the conflict over educational reforms (Cuban, 1998). Labaree (1997) argued that the "central problems with

American education are not pedagogical or organizational or social or cultural in nature but are fundamentally political. That is, the problem is not that we do not know how to make schools better but that we are fighting among ourselves about what goals schools should pursue" (p. 40). Some people see the goal of schools as preparing citizens and promoting equality; some see it as training workers; and some see it as preparing individuals for personal advancement. For Labaree, the differing educational goals result from a tension inherent in American culture, the tension between public and private rights, between majority control and individual liberty, and between political equality and social inequality. One clear example of these conflicting goals is the existence of vocational programs, designed to make schools more relevant and economically productive. Yet, this has resulted in tracking many, often minority, students into programs that give them job-specific skills but not the broader academic preparation needed for full participation in life in the United States. Another example is the debate that has occurred over whether the curriculum should be focused on thinking skills or on specific concepts and content.

This confusion over goals is often manifested by the lack of a coherent vision for school reform. Mac Iver and Legters (2002) found that the failure of high school reform could at least be partially attributed to the lack of a cohesive reform process in the district. Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (2002) described something very similar in its examination of urban school systems. They found that districts that were unsuccessful at improving student achievement "lacked a clear consensus among key stakeholders about district priorities or an overall strategy for reform" (p. 6). These districts were also unable to develop a role for themselves as supporting improvement in teaching and learning.

TO DISCUSS:

What are your goals for high school? Why do students go to high school? What goals does your community have for high school? Are the goals different for different types of students?

Multiple and incompatible reforms

Partly arising out of this conflict of goals and the lack of a cohesive reform agenda, states and districts frequently mandate multiple reforms. These reforms are often contradictory and, at the very least, can distract individuals in their efforts to implement them. Allen, Almeida, and Steinberg (2001) described how high schools in Boston that were implementing small learning communities struggled with statewide testing mandates at the same time they were attempting to implement a more inquiry-focused curriculum. The teachers and administrators saw these reforms, accurately or not, as being in direct conflict with each other, requiring them to make choices about what they would do. Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (2002), in its study of urban districts that were both successful

and unsuccessful at decreasing the achievement gap, found that unsuccessful districts often presented schools with contradictory reforms or curricula to implement. Another example is an urban district implementing a Career Initiative program that built on existing school-within-a-school academy structures. This initiative resulted in limited change partly because of a "double-minded State Department of Education" whose accountability standards often meant schools needed to focus on short-term test gains instead of the long-term changes needed to ensure success (Mac Iver & Legters, 2002).

In addition to potentially contradictory messages, multiple reforms can also keep participants from focusing and accomplishing the reforms. Fullan (2000) suggested one of the main enemies of reform is extreme fragmentation. Mac Iver and Legters (2002) also found that schools in their study were "tempted" by a variety of funding streams to pursue multiple initiatives, resulting in a counter-productive effort to accomplish too many things at once.

TO DISCUSS:

What other reforms are happening in your state? In your district? In your school? Are any incompatible? If so, how are you going to resolve that?

"Iconic notions of high school" (McRobbie, 2001)

Interestingly enough, although there may be no clear consensus on the goals of high school, many people have a clear idea of what a high school should look like. Reforms that disturb this vision of a "real school" often have very little chance of succeeding in the long-term. Tyack and Cuban (1995) described these features of school as "the grammar of schooling" and argue that they help teachers "discharge their duties in a predictable fashion and to cope with the everyday tasks that school boards, principals, and parents expect them to perform: controlling student behavior, instructing heterogeneous pupils, and sorting people for future roles in school and later life" (p. 86). The features of schooling at the high school level include: students shifting among teachers, teachers organized by departments and teaching specialized subjects, the awarding of credit (Carnegie Units) when courses are completed, and some student choice in what to study. These features have become so institutionalized that they are extremely difficult to change in any widespread way, and most reforms that attempt to restructure them fail.

In addition to these organizational features, the community may also consider components such as sports and other extracurricular activities as part of a "real school." Metz, quoted in Hargreaves & Fink (2000) wrote that professional images of a "'good school' are often at odds with the community's notion of a 'real school'."

TO DISCUSS:

What does a "real" high school look like? Which aspects of a "real" high school would you be willing to give up? Which would you absolutely have to keep in place?

Lack of support and buy-in from the broader community

Many reforms fail because they become "too intramural" and don't try to convince broader society of the benefits (Tyack and Cuban, 1995). In a discussion of the spectacular failure of a Connecticut reform effort to implement new academic learning goals in the early 1990s, Frahm (1994) indicated that one primary reason was the lack of involvement of parents and educators during the planning process, which led to mistrust. As a result, a particularly vocal group of parents was able to derail a process that had been developed by a group of esteemed educators, businessman, and government officials.

Lack of support from the community can be particularly problematic when reforms result in a perceived loss of privilege for a particular group. Oakes and Wells (1998) described a study on de-tracking reforms that encountered serious resistance from parents of high-performing students. In another study of a school-within-a-school program, the program declined after protests by the parents when a de-tracking program was expanded to include gifted students (Greenfield and Klemm, 2001). Frahm (1994) also indicated how the loss of privilege played a significant role in parents rising up against the Connecticut program. As Ouchi (2003) wrote, "School reform isn't partly politics—it's all politics!"

TO DISCUSS:

Who is involved in the reform discussions? Who needs to be involved?

Factors Specific to Schools-Within-Schools (SWS)

The factors described above apply to most educational reforms. Schools-within-schools are specific reform efforts focused on developing smaller learning communities within larger, more comprehensive high schools (often called "host schools"). The idea is to create a setting that permits students to receive many of the benefits that accompany smaller schools—including increased personalization and increased student involvement—while also benefiting from the economies of scale with larger schools. Because of their somewhat unique structure, schools implementing SWS reforms face particular challenges in addition to the ones already considered.

Insufficient autonomy

Small learning communities are most successful when they are autonomous entities with all the powers inherent in a school. Many SWS don't achieve that level of autonomy for a variety of reasons (Gregory, 2001). The SWS often cannot develop their own identities

because the traditions of the big school (including sports, etc.) remain, and many of the services, such as the library and the cafeteria, also remain centralized. Raywid (2002) highlighted that principals' responsibility for keeping the school as a cohesive unit may run counter to creating SWS. In addition, she also pointed out that the host schools and SWS may keep traditional power structures, such as departmental chairs, which can interfere with the freedom needed to run SWS. Being located within a large school may also require that SWS adopt the same class schedules and restrictions on student movement as the host schools, inhibiting the amount of instructional change that SWS can implement (Gregory, 2001).

Lack of continuity among different SWS

SWS often serve specific populations, which can result in fragmenting the school and creating more—not fewer—transitions for students (Gregory, 2001). For example, SWS often include specialized programs for new students, those about to graduate, or those in between. This results in separation among students. A case study of a school-to-work initiative in a district also found that schools often implemented different SWS that conflicted with each other. For example, one host school had a ninth-grade academy for all ninth-graders. However, there were other academies in the same school, such as Junior ROTC, which depended on starting with ninth-graders (Mac Iver & Legters, 2002).

Friction and conflict between SWS and host schools

If a SWS is the only one of its kind in the host school, that can cause faculty divisiveness and conflicts (McQuillan & Muncey, 1998; Wasley et al., 2000). At a number of SWS sites implementing Coalition of Essential Schools reform, SWS generated such tension that faculty left the program or even left teaching altogether (McQuillan & Muncey, 1998). This problem can be mitigated when there are several schools-within-schools and everyone is involved in the reform in some way (Raywid, 1999).

TO DISCUSS:

If you are going to implement a school-within-a-school or a small learning community, what will you do to mitigate the concerns listed above?

Learning from Failure: Asking Questions

Writing about why educational reform fails virtually necessitates a negative perspective, a list of seemingly insurmountable barriers designed to discourage even the most die-hard reformer.

Why even try?

Yet, thinking about the barriers that face many educational reforms can actually help, as reformers learn from the mistakes of the past. Thus, it is worthwhile to think about the implications of these factors,

(or perhaps we can consider them "lessons learned") for future reform efforts. We have framed these implications in the form of questions to ask about the reform you are considering implementing.

To what extent does your reform focus on improving student learning?

Reforms that are structural in nature must be accompanied by a "laserlike focus on teaching and learning" (Noguera, 2004, p. 29) to have the desired impact. If the focus remains on structural aspects of education, without taking into account what happens in the classroom, the reform will be tinkering around the edges.

To what extent does your reform take into account the systemic nature of education?

In order for reforms to last, one of two things must happen: either the system must be changed to support the reforms, or the reform must be designed to work within the system. Although the former may hold the best possibility for long-term, dramatic change, the research summarized above shows it is extremely difficult to do. Therefore, reformers operating within individual schools may want to seriously consider the latter option.

But wait! How can we make the dramatic changes needed by just tinkering around the edges?

One possibility is to identify the key educational structures that appear so problematic (Tyack and Cuban's stubborn "grammar of schooling") and design reforms that recognize those realities. At the very least, education reformers should have an awareness of the systemic issues that might prove problematic to long-term implementation of their projects. If a reform's success depends too much on "policy by exception," that may prove to be unsustainable.

To what extent is your reform targeted and coherent, building as much as possible on a consensus of the goals of schooling?

Whether reforms occur at the school level, at the district level, or at the state or federal level, it is vital that different efforts are consistent and come out of an agreed-upon vision. This vision would include agreement on the role the high school plays in the community, an identification of the needs driving the reform, and an identification of how different aspects of the reform will work together to support student learning. A mish-mash of "good ideas" is not a cohesive reform plan.

To what extent does your reform involve all stakeholders, including government officials, administrators, teachers, parents, and community members?

Research shows how critical it is to include all educational stakeholders in a reform process, particularly if the reform can be seen as threatening to certain groups. Schools or districts can create advisory committees or implementation teams composed of representatives of different interested parties, even those most likely to oppose the efforts.

The initial planning process may be long and drawn out, but once the reforms begin, they will have a better chance of being implemented.

To what extent is your reform open to and able to benefit from adaptation by schools and educators?

Whether reformers like it or not, schools and educators will modify reforms, "hybridize" them by combining the parts they find valuable with their own knowledge and experiences (Tyack and Cuban, 1995). "Unless reformers work with educators to adopt changes, and unless those who work in the school feel an ownership of and responsibility for their work, even the best ideas are sabotaged or become unworkable" (Noguera, 2002, p. 61).

To what extent is your reform accompanied by technical assistance and support for its implementation?

To what extent is there ongoing support to mitigate burnout and compensate for turnover? Any reform programs will require accompanying technical assistance and staff development as well as adequate time and resources to facilitate its success. In addition, reformers should acknowledge the extra work required to implement reform and incorporate structural supports (planning time, compensation, etc.) to minimize the possibility that teachers and administrators will get burned out. Ongoing support can also minimize burnout as well as provide new teachers and administrators with an understanding of the reform.

Conclusion

Educational reform is a complicated process. As the reform literature shows, the barriers are many and not inconsequential. Yet, there is also hope inherent in the list described above. The barriers to reform suggest that successful reforms must be coherent, inclusive, and accompanied by adequate and appropriate resources—characteristics that should be welcomed by any individual seeking to improve a public institution.

Learning from Failure: Discussion Guide Worksheet

FACTORS	QUESTIONS	YOUR TEAM'S ANSWERS AND THOUGHTS
A focus on structural and not instructional changes	Is the reform you are considering structural, instructional, or both? How is your reform going to improve student learning?	
Implementation of reforms without using data	What does research say about your reform? If your reform is new, what does research say about the principles in the reform? What data will you collect on your reform? How will you know whether things need to be changed?	
Lack of support and buy-in from the school staff	What will school staff need to know and be able to do to make this reform a reality? What skills do they currently have? What do they need to learn?	
A school culture that values acceptance and conformity	What happens to teachers or administrators who come up with new ideas in your school (district/state)? How can you create a learning community?	

FACTORS	QUESTIONS	YOUR TEAM'S ANSWERS AND THOUGHTS
Teacher and administrator exhaustion and burnout	How are you going to keep teachers and administrators from wearing themselves out?	
Teacher and administrator turnover	What systems or structures do you have in place to help new staff understand and buy into the reform?	
Insufficient resources	What are you willing to dedicate in terms of money? In terms of time? How long are you willing to wait to see success?	
The systemic nature of education	Does your reform rely on waivers or "policies of exception" for its success? If so, what are the chances of these waivers resulting in institutionalized changes in policies?	
Lack of consensus on goals of schooling and how to achieve those goals	What are your goals for high school? Why do students go to high school? What goals does your community have for high school? Are the goals different for different types of students?	

Learning from Failure: A Discussion Guide on High School Reform

FACTORS	QUESTIONS	YOUR TEAM'S ANSWERS AND THOUGHTS
Multiple and incompatible reforms	What other reforms are happening in your state? In your district? In your school? Are any incompatible? If so, how are you going to resolve that?	
"Iconic notions of high school"	What does a "real" high school look like? Which aspects of a "real" high school would you be willing to give up? Which would you absolutely have to keep in place?	
Lack of support and buy-in from the broader community	Who is involved in the reform discussions? Who needs to be involved?	
Issues specific to schools-within-schools	If you are going to implement a school-within-a-school or a small learning community, what will you do to mitigate concerns connected to autonomy, lack of continuity, and conflict?	

Learning from Failure: Asking Questions Worksheet

1. To what extent does your reform focus on improving student learning?

2. To what extent does your reform take into account the systemic nature of education?

3. To what extent is your reform targeted and coherent, building as much as possible on a consensus of the goals of schooling?

Learning from Failure: Asking Questions Worksheet (continued)

4. To what extent does your reform involve all stakeholders, including government officials, administrators, teachers, parents, and community members?

5. To what extent is your reform open to and able to benefit from adaptation by schools and educators?

6. To what extent is your reform accompanied by technical assistance and support for its implementation? To what extent is there ongoing support to mitigate burnout and compensate for turnover?

Endnotes

[1] Developed in 1906, Carnegie Units serve as a measure of the time a student has spent studying specific subjects.

[2] Odden's analysis included comprehensive school reform designs in elementary school only because the number of comprehensive school reform programs targeted at high school are very small. Because his numbers assume a school of 500 students with 20 teachers and one principal, the costs would likely be similar to those associated with a small high school.

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Learning from Failure:
A DISCUSSION GUIDE ON HIGH SCHOOL REFORM

Why include the word *failure* in the title of a discussion guide on high school reform? Simply put, we need to learn from past mistakes. Too often, educators or policymakers implement "new" reforms that have already been tried and then wonder why their programs or reforms don't work.

This discussion guide is designed to provide information about what hasn't worked in the past and the lessons we have learned. It can be used by teams of practitioners, policymakers, and members of the community who are in the midst of school reform efforts at the high school level. Reading and working through this guide will help those teams engage in a dialogue about how to ensure success at their school.

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