10 STEPS TO MANAGING CHANGE IN SCHOOLS

How do we take initiatives from goals to actions?

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Introduction

In my work as a consultant and workshop presenter, I help schools and districts improve their program initiatives. Over the years, I've helped educators find ways to hold more effective IEP meetings, help staff work better as a team, increase the use of authentic assessments, use literature for developing social skills, and any number of other objectives. Unfortunately, even when teachers and administrators give me high marks, I find that any changes I may have helped to bring about are rarely robust and lasting. Although workshops and presentations provide schools with a common language, inspiration, and skills, these are too often adopted piecemeal and at *random* by educators who don't have a set approach to implementing change. In the pages that follow, I offer a change model that can be successfully adapted to almost all program initiatives, so you don't have to exert time and energy to reinvent the wheel with every new improvement campaign.

Reality is never as predictable as we might think. Formulas exist in the absence of emotions, uncertainties, and shifting forces. As a mentor of mine once put it, "Be nimble in your leadership." By the same token, I would encourage you to be nimble in adapting to your circumstances the model I offer here. Use it as a touchstone, not as a millstone. Remember that change is a process, not an event; it's never completely

"done." You will have many opportunities to identify and celebrate successes big and small. There will come a time when your change initiative is no longer the focus of your energies and resources—at which point you can begin the process of implementing another improvement campaign.

All administrators are middle managers, with authority over some people and under the scrutiny and authority of others—a reality that my model takes into account. I share the conventional wisdom that empowering staff and students benefits schools, and that a dynamic leadership team is critical to a school's success. In the pages that follow, I use the pronoun "you" when referring to school leadership to mean a single administrator or a leadership team. The authority granted to you by the organizational hierarchy is an invaluable resource towards meeting your school's mission. My change model should help you to use that authority thoroughly and wisely.

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Step 1: Understand the Catalysts for Change

There are three general catalysts for school change:

1. Regulatory directives. These demands come every year. Some have very high stakes and must be accomplished in what seems like an unreasonably short time. Though you

may be angry and overwhelmed, you are still responsible for rallying your team to do the work well.

2. A crisis that exposes a problem. A break-in reveals how poorly the school is secured each evening, your students' subpar standardized test scores are published in the local newspaper, a group of prominent students cheat on an important exam: In each of these cases, everyone looks to you for direction.

3. A need or desire for improvement is identified. There are always elements of the school that can improve if given sustained attention, and stakeholders—leaders, teachers, students, parents, and members of the community—may bring a particular area into focus. You probably don't have the time or the resources to improve everything at once, but sometimes conditions may allow you to choose one area for robust improvement.

Good school leadership requires you to prioritize opportunities for change.

Change is hard, and people vary in their capacity to handle it. They also vary in their perceptions of what risks are worth taking—though there are always risks to both leaving the status quo as it is and taking action to implement change. Risk raises fears, which can in turn distort an objective analysis of a given situation. The following questionnaire is intended to help you avoid such distortion and to ensure that you neither overlook areas in need of change or jump to fix areas that should not be a priority.