Sustaining Reforms

Center on Innovation & Improvement

Districts and schools that have implemented change efforts and begun witnessing a positive trajectory in student achievement and other reform goals must implement structures and engage in processes and behaviors that produce a continuous improvement orientation (Redding, 2006). After a typical three-year implementation, "the deterioration of research-based practices adopted during the implementation period is often rapid or immediate" (Redding, 2006, p. 28). To prevent such deterioration, successful reform must not be viewed as the attainment of some plateau that is simply an improvement over what existed before, but as a point in ongoing adjustments aimed at achieving still higher goals. In many low-performing schools, some improvement, while laudable, still leaves many or most students academically disadvantaged. Also, the educational environment is always in flux: Leadership, teachers, staff, students, state-mandated academic standards, school and community demographics, and availability of community resources are subject to change. It is critical that these do not result in a reduction in student achievement.

Sustainability should be considered in the initial planning for the reform. During the planning, school leaders must communicate the need for the reform, identify resources and capabilities (including community partners) for sustaining it, and convey to the school community the appropriateness and the effectiveness of the (research-based) efforts. Further, leaders must anticipate changes in personnel, contraction of resources, or revisions to policy that would threaten the practices, structures, and attitudes that resulted in improved achievement. The reform plan should provide for contingencies that respond to such threats. From the beginning, the purpose and workings of the reform must be well understood by and have the support of school faculty and of the community and its leaders, including political leaders and the school board, in order to be sustained (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2007; Murphy, 2007; Wong, 2007). Engaging a wide representation of the community in the planning process is one way to help ensure long-term viability of the reform.

Given these multiple variables, leadership must take a "systems orientation" (Redding, 2007b) to maintaining positive outcomes. Given some change, leaders must ask what in the system can respond to or compensate for that change. In addition, in order to make good decisions about what needs to change, effective collection and use of data are key to sustaining improvement. Consequently, time dedicated to data analysis and planning by teams at the district and school levels should be sufficient, routine, and non-negotiable.

Behavioral change is the key to school improvement. Regulation can change organizations, but an effective change agent must also offer incentives, build capacities, and provide opportunities for the people in the system to learn and change (Redding, 2007a). To be fully realized and lasting, reform efforts must be accompanied by a fundamental cultural shift throughout the local education community, a shift that results in new mindsets and accompanying behaviors among administrators, teachers, and students. Such cultural changes will require ongoing support (CCSRI, 2009), and a degree of accountability, with incentives for positive change.

Action Principles

For State

1. Develop means to identify reforms worth sustaining (i.e., differentiate substantial progress leading to changes in outcomes from incremental process changes).

2. Allocate resources—human and fiscal—to support sustainability of reforms beyond years two and three.

3. Develop systems to document and codify successful and sustainable reforms.

4. Disseminate lessons learned from successful reforms.

For District and School

1. Invite faculty and community input in the planning stage and subsequently seek continued support and involvement of all stakeholders to ensure continuity of the reform effort.

2. Create contingency plans to address possible changes in staffing and resources.

3. Ensure that new staff is committed to adopting the reform measures.

4. Provide dedicated time and space for teams of educators to seek ways to maintain reforms and identify strategies for further improvement.

5. Provide professional development to educators on how to engage in ongoing problem solving, thereby establishing a culture geared toward continuous improvement.

References and Resources

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