

Sustaining Systemic School Reform: A Look at Best Practices

*Race To The Top
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Introduction

The educational community has wholeheartedly embraced the term “sustainability”; it surfaces in school restructuring plans, mission statements, and educational publications both formal and informal. The language of sustainability, ubiquitous in environmental and economic literature, nicely captures what we’re always trying to do in schools: ensure that we’re using limited resources to make a long-lasting impact. However, to keep that language from slipping into empty rhetoric, it is important to define exactly what we’re talking about when we talk about sustainability.

The following pages contain descriptions of educational sustainability, painted in broad strokes by prominent researchers. In addition, they outline numerous practical strategies for sustaining educational change. Not all strategies will be appropriate for all districts, but together, they may convey a sense of how educational leaders in different contexts have approached new reform efforts. We hope that the various perspectives included here will spur reflection: has your district created the conditions for sustainability? Which approaches might suit your unique context?

Defining “Sustainability”

Researchers who write about sustainability focus on several different components of the concept. Sustainable reforms are variously described as having the following characteristics:

- ⌚ *Sustainable reforms honor context and complexity.* For Hargreaves and Fink (2000), sustainability requires that new initiatives are developed without compromising the development of others, now or in the future; they spread their effects in “non-intrusive but beneficial” ways (Hargreaves, 2007). Fullan (2004), too, says that reforms must attend to the complexities of continuous improvement.
- ⌚ *Sustainable reforms encourage deep learning and meaningful change.* The learning that comes from sustainable reforms and sustainable leadership should be meaningful. While breadth of adoption is important, the depth of scaling—in other words, the degree to which a reform is embedded in a school and targets core practices—is a major determinant of success (Levin, Duffy, & Devers, 2012). For Fullan (2004), sustainable change is situated in a set of deep values.
- ⌚ *Sustainable reforms are designed to last.* This may seem self-evident, as it is the effect that we’re looking for when implementing a sustainable reform, but an enduring reform is most valuable (and most possible) if it is also context-sensitive and deep. If the previous conditions are met, and if responsibility and ownership are spread across a large number of people, then reforms will be more likely to develop over time and improve outcomes for a greater number of students—especially when it leaves its original context and is implemented in subsequent schools (Levin, Duffy, & Devers, 2012).

As a general framework, these goals are worthwhile. But how do we conceive of reforms that are context-sensitive, deep, and long-lasting?

Strategies from the Literature

Taking Stock of the Context

Sanders (2012) explains that, in order to craft sustainable reforms, we must first consider characteristics of district leadership, as well as of the reform itself. There are three main reform characteristics that influence sustainability:

- ⌚ *Evidence/research base.* A strong basis in published, high-quality research helps to legitimize and build support for the reform.
- ⌚ *Costs.* Naturally, low-cost reforms are easier to sustain. Schools and districts may need to be creative when planning the reform structure. For example, when work related to a reform can be shared among a group, the effort will be more sustainable, as such designs cut down on personnel costs and other human costs (time, fatigue, etc.).
- ⌚ *Reform flexibility.* As Fullan (2004), Levin, Duffy, and Devers (2012), and others have also mentioned, it is vital that reforms are situated within a set of core values. The more flexible the reform effort, the more likely that the district will be able to address new goals without having to sacrifice its central aims.

Entwined with these three reform characteristics are the leadership qualities that affect sustainability:

- ⌚ *Reform knowledge.* In Sanders' study, sustainability was linked to reform coordinators' knowledge of the reform. A deep understanding of its processes and goals helped leaders to adapt the reform to changing district priorities.
- ⌚ *Professional influence.* Sanders differentiates between direct and indirect professional influence. For example, a central office administrator who is also the reform coordinator has direct influence on staff. If the reform coordinator's influence is indirect, his/her influence with key decision makers might be limited. While both direct and indirect professional influence are important, direct influence is linked to greater sustainability. This is one reason why guiding coalitions, made up of members from various stakeholder groups, are so important: reform leaders with indirect influence can help to shape the strategies of those whose influence is more direct.
- ⌚ *Reform focus.* The continued visibility of the reform is important for sustainability. Reform leaders may keep the reform visible by incorporating reform language and concepts into faculty meetings and professional development, giving end-of-year presentations on reform progress, and generally ensuring that employees' commitment to the reform is periodically renewed.

Encouraging Deep Learning through the Alignment of Initiatives

In their discussion of Common Core adoption, Levin, Duffy, and Devers (2012) offer a model of sustainable change with three major components (see page 4). The first, effective leadership, has been discussed at length. However, the authors propose that two other dimensions must be present: alignment among initiatives and meaningful professional development. This

combination, when implemented properly, will bring about changes that are both broad and deep.

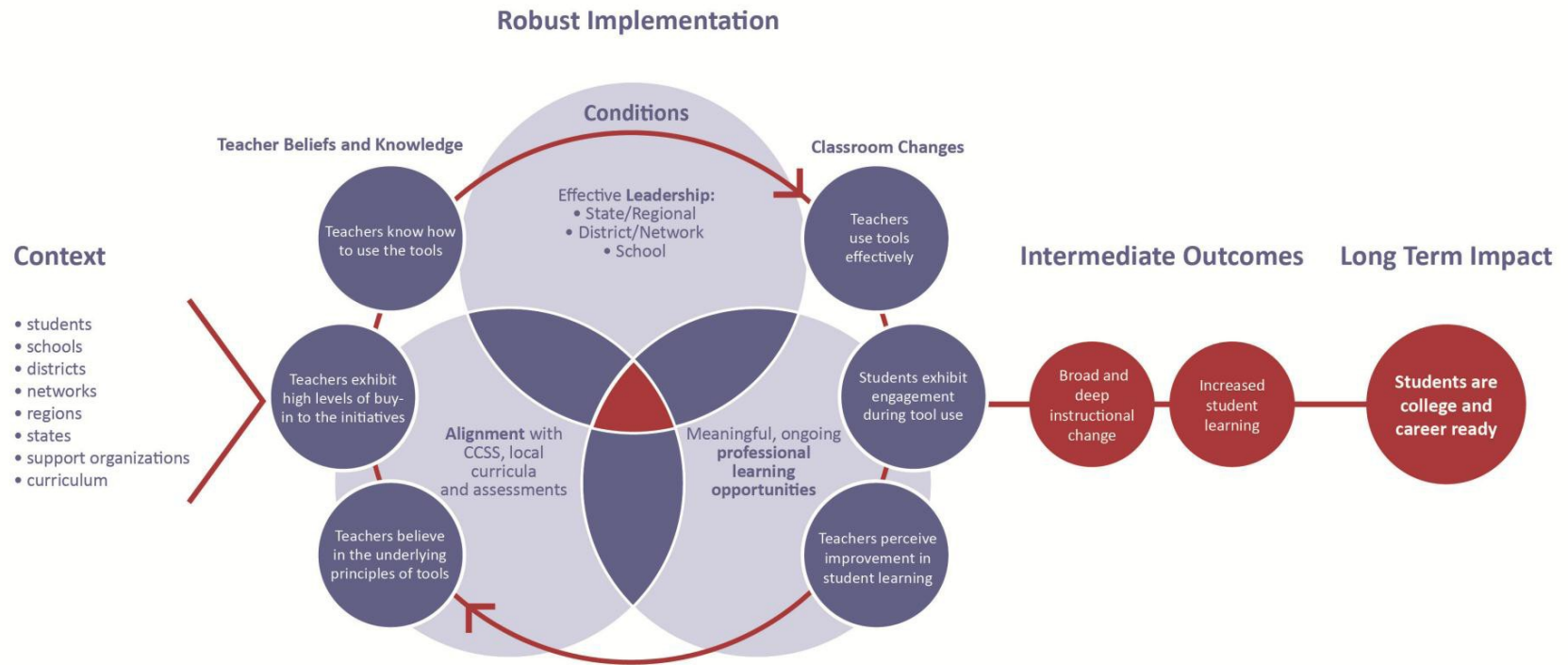
Although their focus was on one particular large-scale reform, the findings of the Levin, Duffy, and Devers report are widely applicable: “In order for a school reform to be successful, it needs to be in alignment with other policies and initiatives taking place in the school, district, and state in which the reform is being implemented” (2012, p. 5). In their multi-site longitudinal study, researchers found that teachers were less willing to use the tools they had been taught if they were not aligned with the evaluation system required by the state. This finding underscores the importance of connecting new reforms to existing school initiatives, and clearly communicating that alignment with all staff.

Carefully planned professional learning opportunities can also facilitate the successful scaling and longevity of reform efforts. Levin, Duffy, and Devers (2012) found that teachers were most satisfied with professional learning opportunities that were progressive and specific. The opportunities perceived as most effective were those that built upon one another, and taught concrete skills with increasing depth.

Sustainable Leadership

Hargreaves and colleagues (Hargreaves, 2007; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006) have laid out a plan for sustainable leadership, which includes the following seven principles:

- ⌚ **Depth.** Sustainable leadership matters. It persists, guards, and furthers deep, broad, and lifelong learning.
- ⌚ **Endurance.** Sustainable leadership lasts. It furthers the most influential and valuable aspects of change from year to year and leader to leader. For enduring change, leaders must plan for as many future possibilities as they can, and must make sure that the plans are known by as many other people as possible.
- ⌚ **Breadth.** Sustainable leadership spreads. It is distributed among many people, and incorporates multiple players and individuals at all levels. The success of the reform depends on the successful interactions and participation of all involved parties.
- ⌚ **Justice.** Sustainable leadership not only actively improves but also conscientiously does not harm the surrounding environment. It unselfishly shares knowledge across communities and learns from others, rather than simply taking resources or information.
- ⌚ **Diversity.** Sustainable leadership promotes cohesive diversity. Standardization weakens learning, adaptability, and resilience. Diversity, on the other hand, allows for new ideas and moves things forward by creating cohesion among various components.
- ⌚ **Resourcefulness.** Sustainable leadership does not deplete resources but promotes and renews the energy of others. It is realistic about goals and does not waste money or intellectual capacity.
- ⌚ **Conservation.** Sustainable leadership honors and learns from the past. Rather than repeating past mistakes, leaders acknowledge the wisdom of the past and couple it with new innovations to create a progressive and sustainable future.



From Levin, Duffy, & Dever (2012, p. 4)

The responsibilities of superintendents, who have direct influence on district staff, are unique and merit consideration. Michael Fullan (2005) has proposed eight key elements or qualities for superintendents that align with the definition of sustainability:

- ⌚ **Public service with moral purpose.** A commitment to public service and equitable opportunity is a laudable quality for any teacher or administrator, but when superintendents display such commitment, it becomes a systemic goal. Superintendents should spread the message that all staff are working toward a common moral purpose and shared principles.
- ⌚ **Commitment to changing context at all levels.** Effective superintendents integrate reforms, considering unique and overlapping needs at the school and community level, the district level, and the state/federal policy level.
- ⌚ **Lateral capacity building through networks.** Superintendents must build structures for fostering peer relations across schools in order to share knowledge of best practices and generate a sense of mutual commitment.
- ⌚ **Intelligent accountability and vertical relationships.** District and state accountability frameworks need to be transparent in order to strengthen the capacity of schools to engage in self-review.
- ⌚ **Deep learning.** Superintendents must demonstrate their commitment to learning experiences in which students understand the meaning behind their work and are able to connect it to prior experiences. They must also support educators in assessing the learning process in order to monitor implementation and form action plans.
- ⌚ **Dual commitment to short-term and long-term goals.** While short-term successes are necessary, superintendents must also keep the long-term sustainability goals as a priority.
- ⌚ **Cyclical energizing.** Sustainability is not lateral, but cyclical. Full engagement and sustained high performance require physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual energy; a balance between energy expenditure and renewal; pushing beyond normal limits; and highly specific routines for managing energy.
- ⌚ **The long lever of leadership.** Superintendents must be able to train the new crop of influential leaders – those that can take over the mission of sustainability

Building Lasting Reforms through Distributed Leadership

While a charismatic leader can help a reform find purchase within a district or school context, no reform will succeed without widespread ownership. To encourage such ownership, both formal and informal restructuring efforts can be effective. Drawing from international research, the OECD (Pont, Nusche, & Moorman, 2008) proposes four policy levers that can contribute to sustainable leadership:

1. (Re)defining school leadership responsibilities
2. Distributing school leadership
3. Developing skills for effective school leadership
4. Making school leadership an attractive profession

(Re)defining school leadership responsibilities. As discussed above, certain leadership characteristics are conducive to reform. Strong leaders combine a sense of moral purpose, an understanding of the dynamics of change, an emotional intelligence as they build relationships, a commitment to developing and sharing new knowledge, and a capacity for coherence making (Fullan, 2002).

Distributing school leadership. The team structure is helpful in building broad ownership of a reform, provided that the team is genuine, has a clear and compelling direction for its work, has a structure that facilitates teamwork, operates within a supportive school system, and has expert coaching available when needed (Fullan, 2002).

Developing skills for effective school leadership. Successful reform leaders build the capacity for change. They identify people at all levels who know what to do, develop the capacity of those in the organization to learn what to do, and create settings in which people who know what to do teach those who don't (Fullan & Quinn, 2010).

Making school leadership an attractive profession. We tend to rely on talented leaders to self-select, but it is important to provide encouragement and create structures through which rising leaders may be identified and encouraged to pursue leadership opportunities.

This step is especially important as district leaders and reform leaders make plans for leadership succession. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) identify four major factors in leadership succession: *succession planning* (appointing or preparing a new leader before a leadership position becomes vacant), *succession management* (creating large pools of potential future leaders), *succession frequency and turnover* (tenure should be long enough to establish shared cultural commitment to the mission, but not so long as to encourage complacency), and *succession and the self* (a leader's choice to leave a legacy by developing leadership capacities in others).

To demonstrate its idea of distributed leadership, the OECD offers an example from Finland in which leadership was restructured on multiple levels: every principal and central office administrator took on a broader set of responsibilities, necessitating the intentional sharing of authority among all staff. This restructuring and resulting interdependence had multiple positive outcomes, according to the authors:

Principals start to consider and address broader community needs rather than fiercely and competitively defending the interests of their own organization. This interaction across schools opens new windows for mutual learning. In addition, as they devote less time and energy to their own school, they are obliged to delegate various management tasks to other staff, which leads to more open lateral leadership within the school, stronger development of distributed leadership capacity and a more constructive approach to leadership succession and sustainability. (Pont, Nusche, & Moorman, 2008, page 80)

A Focus on Culture

Communities for Excellent Public Schools (CEP) identifies three necessary components for sustaining comprehensive school reform in turnaround schools:

- ⌚ A strong focus on school culture, curriculum, and staffing
- ⌚ Wrap-around supports for students
- ⌚ Collaboration to ensure local ownership and accountability

The organization's call for wrap-around services deserves special mention. Naturally, much of the literature focuses on changes that can be made within the school environment itself, but CEP argues that reforms can only be sustainable if students' out-of-school needs are met (CEP, 2010). While CEP believes strongly in the importance of distributed leadership within the school, it also aims to distribute the reform ownership (and reform effects) among the broader community.

Questions for Reflection

- ⌚ What are some of the contextual factors that make your district unique? How will these factors affect your reform's sustainability?
- ⌚ What factors inherent to the reform itself (e.g. basis in research, cost, flexibility) might affect the reform's sustainability?
- ⌚ Do any of the reform's leaders have direct influence on staff? If not, how can you make sure that those with direct influence are involved in the reform effort?
- ⌚ How are you ensuring that the reform remains visible to all staff, even after the initial implementation period is over?
- ⌚ Is the reform well-aligned with other district initiatives? Is that alignment made clear to all staff?
- ⌚ Revisit Hargreaves and Fink's principles of sustainable leadership (p. 4) and Fullan's list of qualities of effective superintendents (p. 6). In which of them is your district particularly strong? Which represent areas for improvement?
- ⌚ Does your district have a strong plan for leadership succession? How are you working to develop the skills of potential leaders?
- ⌚ How will your reform impact the broader community? How can you make that impact known?¹

¹ Compiled by Keridan Doyle, WGEE Pilot Project Associate. Thanks to Francesca Longo for her help with research.

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