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Going beyond high school walls



On the Road to Sustainable School Change: Stories from the Ground

How do you actually facilitate sustainable school change?

It's one thing to paint a big picture vision for school transformation, but it's another thing to translate that vision into day-to-day strategies and actions at the school and classroom level. To understand common barriers and approaches in teacher and leader behavior change, The Learning Agenda reviewed reports and case studies from multiple education initiatives, and drew from learning community conversations about shifting instructional practice. Some key themes emerged, including four common barriers to sustainable school and classroom change:

- **Attitude and Emotional Factors**, such as lack of buy-in and trust
- **Process Factors**, such as lack of coordination, planning and communications
- **Environmental Factors**, such as lack of time and resources, competing demands, policy barriers
- **Skill and Knowledge Gaps**, such as lack of experience in the change area

The Learning Agenda then took the most common barriers and questions from the learning community and asked nine Wider Learning Ecosystem community members and redesign experts to respond with their own stories of struggle and success related to their school change efforts.

“We have to change the way everyone thinks about where learning happens and their role in the process, and that includes students and outside partners. The way that you invite them in is really important to them imagining a different possibility.”

– Brian Kelahan, Common Ground

This guide shares those stories to offer concrete examples and strategies that any school can use to strengthen their change effort.

PREVIEW: THE COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF SUSTAINABLE SCHOOL CHANGE EFFORTS

This report is full of first-person stories of trials and triumphs in the school change process. Here is a sneak peek to help you find what you're looking for.

ATTITUDE AND EMOTIONAL FACTORS

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THE STORYTELLERS

To dive deeper into the key ingredients for sustainable school change, we interviewed nine Wider Learning Ecosystem community members and redesign experts. Their candid responses offer a clear view of what this challenging and rewarding work looks like in action. Thank you to our storytellers:



Matthew Brunell, Principal, Brunell Consulting

Anthony Chiariello, Chief Academic Officer, TechBoston Academy



Lindsey Cox, iLab Teacher, Winooski Schools

Barbara Crock, President, Crock Leadership Associates



Brian Kelahan, Student Opportunities Team Member, Common Ground

Superintendent Sean McMannon, Winooski Schools



Jennifer Nicol, Director of Innovation, TechBoston Academy

Matthew Pilarski, Senior Director, Springpoint Schools



Joel Tolman, Director of Impact and Engagement, Common Ground

THE STORIES

ATTITUDE AND EMOTIONAL FACTORS



Photo credit: TechBoston

All of our storytellers agreed that attitude and emotional factors are the foundation of sustainable school change efforts. No matter how exciting the idea for school transformation, if teachers and school leaders don't feel included, empowered, and equipped for the tasks at hand, they likely won't be willing partners and your efforts will be stopped or stalled in their tracks. Just as young people need opportunities to demonstrate what they know and feel a sense of belonging, remember that teachers in a school change process are first and foremost learners, too. The most successful efforts share the following common characteristics: open and honest leadership; meaningful roles for teachers; compelling data and stories to make the case; a focus on values like diversity, equity, and inclusion; and celebration and recognition.

"This is way more important than any of the other three potential barriers."

– Matthew Brunell

Encourage brave leaders

Grantees talked a lot in the breakout session about the need for bravery among leaders, which we are defining as the strength to face fears or uncertainty. We asked: **What does it look like for a leader to be honest about his/her own fears and shortcomings while still instilling confidence in the team? When is compassion needed in a school change effort?**

Invest in team building



“Six years ago, when I first got here, there had been a history of not feeling safe with the prior superintendent and the district leadership team not having a lot of trust. Everyone was focusing more on the “fires” and the reactive things and not being holders of the vision and really paying attention to the bigger picture. Now, we meet weekly as district leadership team and one thing we do is a guru activity at the beginning of each meeting—we each play the ‘guru’ for a month and come up with something for the team. It might be a mindfulness activity, a reading, or a game. People get really creative and have fun with it. Whether it’s a really emotional piece, like something about a particular student, or just something fun, it helps to build the team and build trust.”

– Sup. Sean McMannon

Learn to be vulnerable

Matthew Pilarski reflected on the transition most leaders go through from leading students to leading adults, and it’s a profound one. “One of the things we find most difficult is having difficult conversations with adults. Giving people critical feedback about their practice is something we’re not great at. It took me years to be able to say to a teacher - this practice is not good and we need to change it. Teachers do want to get better and oftentimes feedback they get is tone deaf or nonexistent. I had to learn to give feedback in a way that could be heard. I found a teacher I could really trust and be vulnerable around, and I practiced with her. She would tell me - this is how I took that, this is where you were effective, this is where you were tone deaf - and it was incredibly helpful. It made me a better leader.”



Collaboratively diagnose a problem

Collaboratively diagnosing a problem is essential to shared ownership. We asked: **How have you seen this done? Is this a one-time or continual effort?**

“If the superintendent or central office has decided it’s time to do something different and it feels done to the school instead of with them, it’s probably not going to work.”

– Barbara Crock

Engage team members with meaningful assignments



Barbara found herself going back to regenerate the need for change after a district identified priority areas for change in an underperforming school without the involvement of many teachers or implementers. She brought together a team of nine teacher leaders and staff leaders. They then went to different departments and recruited for diversity of role—counselors, EL, special ed, general ed, etc.—to build an intentionally representative group.

Their goal was to make recommendations for student supports schoolwide, aligned to the promising practices for turnaround in Massachusetts. They took the following steps to get there:

1. Team members were asked to map everything the school already offered across four domains—family, health, academic, and social/emotional. They came back with 76 supports.
2. Team members read an article on promising practices for turnaround and each did a self-assessment of how they thought the school performed on those practices.
3. Then, each team member had to interview three staff members using a set protocol that aligned to the promising practices article: one person with a like mindset, one with a different mindset, and one with a different role than they had in the school.
4. Next, team members compared the interview data to their own self-assessment to look for commonalities and gaps.
5. Finally, team members observed student supports in action. Some followed the freshman team; others the joint counselor team. Some people followed a student through the process. Their goal was to see how the different services connect to support students. For chronically absent students, they wanted to know – what gets triggered when they aren't here?
6. With all of that data, they'll hold a districtwide and schoolwide collaborative meeting to identify priority problems and strategies for improvement.

Barbara said, "We have lots of challenges; the key question is - what are the three we're going to try to move forward on next year?"

Listen and let go of some control

"I'd been working with a school and they'd done a bunch of modeling and divided students into proficiencies and flexible pathways. And then the principal decided they needed to go back to the beginning and start with an understanding of our graduation expectations, grading, etc. Although that wasn't really what I wanted, I felt like I needed to listen to the teachers, and if they are saying this is what they need, then I need to let them lead and make those types of decisions. Now I see it was the right thing to do because our high school staff has such a deeper understanding of proficiencies. Teachers and students both now have a higher level of ownership in their work." – Sup. Sean McMannon



Appeal to both the rational and emotional brain

It's critical in behavior change efforts of all kinds to appeal to both the rational and emotional brain of the person whose behavior or attitude you hope to change. We asked: **What are the best uses of data and storytelling you've seen used to inspire or motivate key stakeholders?**

Explore student experiences more deeply



According to Matthew Brunell, it all starts with convincing teachers. “We spent a lot of time delving into foundational belief systems—like restorative practices and personalized education—to help folks see that our emerging model must be grounded in certain truths that educators believe but often don’t have the chance to nourish.”

In this case, change leaders took the following steps:

1. They identified a subset of lead learners who wanted to learn more about restorative practices before the extended, three-week summer professional learning began.
2. Lead learners spent time getting to know their students’ experiences in far greater depth, through an exercise of “empathy walks.”
3. Those teachers then created “stories” or profiles of the students, removing their names and identifiable characteristics.
4. Next, lead learners played the role of those students while other teachers practiced asking increasingly insightful and humane questions to get beyond the surface level and understand what was really going on in their lives.

“They weren’t putting kids in boxes. They got to a radically different vantage point of the student’s experience,” said Brunell. Still, it wasn’t perfect. “It’s important to note, again, that this is turnaround work. Not all of our teachers were able to get there right away with a changed mindset. For others, it remains really trying to maintain this mindset. For the vast majority, it’s worked out well. The small minority where it hasn’t will, at some point, have to make a choice about fit.”

Use objective, comparable data

Winooski offered a great example of appealing to both the head and the heart when seeking a change in behavior.



When it comes to appealing to the “head,” Sup. McMannon said, “We’ve used a number of metrics from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey with the school board and other audiences. One metric asks high school students if they feel like they matter to their community. When I first looked at it six years ago, only 25-33% felt like they mattered, and that was heartbreaking.

“And, because this is a widely used survey, we knew it was higher in other neighboring communities. It ties in with the work we’re doing around personalization and proficiencies because we’re reaching out into in the community and bringing it in to the school. Over time, we’ve seen those percentages start to turn, and that’s really motivating. Fortunately, 80% of students report that they feel supported by their teachers, so we’re using that pathway to connect the school with the community more deeply.”

He also described a more emotional appeal. “We had an audience of about 200 teachers, community partners and businesses, parents, students, administrators, and

school board members. We began with a speaker around the importance of personalized and student-centered learning, why we should get to know students so we know their passions and aspirations. Then, one-by-one, 15 students walked by the podium and introduced themselves and what they needed from the community. They said – ‘My name is Mohammed and I need you to help me get into college.’ Or, ‘I need you to help me become a nurse.’ And then people chose which students they wanted to go have discussions with in breakouts. Students were the center and adults gathered around them. It was so powerful because it literally put students at the center.”

Gather and lift up youth feedback



Matthew Pilarski said that helping schools understand how to do a focus group of kids has been an integral practice. “Getting consistent feedback from kids is part of iterating on schools, and it’s amazing how often we as school leaders forget how to ask kids what they want and what they need.

We need to make that a part of professional development—make it a part of everyday practice for teachers to ask their students how they are doing in terms of teaching.

“One question we ask is: On a scale of 1-5, how rigorous is the academic program? At a school this fall, teachers said 4, leaders said 4, and students all said 1. The next day, we presented the data back to the adults. That’s a profound way to make people think differently about what’s happening—seeing firsthand what students are saying about their environment. Having someone sit with a group of students and have them honestly talk and come to consensus on things, and then share that transcript with teachers.”

Identify and address diversity, equity, and inclusion concerns

It’s difficult to ask people to make a major change if they believe that change may reinforce or exacerbate an existing inequity. We asked: **What is a specific diversity, equity, and inclusion concern you have seen in a school change effort, and how was it resolved?**

Disrupt gender norms

Barbara Crock worked with a school to address entrenched gender disparities in career pathway programs where 96% of students selecting engineering, tech, or design were male and more than 80% selecting medical life sciences were female.



“It’s reflecting societal numbers right back into high school pipelines. The stereotypes are already so deep in ninth grade. To turn the tide, we intentionally built exploration of all four career areas into ninth grade. After students make their initial selections, we identify 10-15 students making gender-norm selections and connect them with professionals of their own gender working in the less common

sector—male nurses and healthcare practitioners, and women engineers, field scientists, and professors. We try to convince them to move to their second choice. Through that intentional mentoring, 85% of those students move by their choice. It is extremely impactful.”

Offer peer leadership opportunities

Peer leadership and mentorship can be very motivating for teachers. Instead of always bringing in outside experts, we wanted to know: **How are you using teachers with more experience in the desired change or practice as guides for others?**

Build experience through in-house programs



Lindsey shared that while schools don’t always start their change process with teachers who are experienced in the new approach, with a meaningful investment, you can build their expertise and confidence.

“One practice we use is identifying fellows—individuals with a half-time release to focus on a key change area, like proficiency-based learning, for example. Their job is to focus on building their expertise and bring those practices back to Winooski where they can help as a colleague and a peer.

“We also have a master’s level graduate course taught here at the school one day a week after school and had a group of 12 teachers in that course, doing really embedded learning in the classroom. The professor was a coach from the district, and they worked together to try things out in the classroom and then bring them back to their master’s course. Over the course of a couple of years, all teachers were able to have some sort of touch/experience in this collegial atmosphere.”

Look past stereotypes to find leaders

Matthew Brunell said that when seeding a change in a school, school leaders should not fall prey to the stereotypes that experienced teachers will struggle with change, or that younger tenured teachers do not have strong peer influence in the change process. “It’s about figuring out who the influential staff members are. Who has an openness and ability to connect with their peers and carry influence? For example, there were a few members of our team who though not in formal leadership roles were thought of by peers as the rocks of the school. They had a great rapport with students but also good influence among their peers. So, we brought them in first as leaders for our change effort.”



Recognize small wins

Another common behavior change approach is to recognize small wins (think of the vibration on your FitBit when you hit 10,000 steps). We asked: **Have you seen any fun recognitions, rewards, or incentives used to motivate teachers?**

Make time for daily affirmations



Matthew Brunell shared, "I strongly encourage folks to have a daily affirmation of small wins in their team. Carve out 10 minutes at the very start of the day or middle of the day (lunch) to bring staff together. And say - who's got a relationship improvement that they want to talk about today?"

Who's been able to see progress with a specific student in a specific area related to behavior? It's those celebrations that I wish we had done even more of that from the beginning. Even the 'sticky wickets' are overwhelmed by the small wins and take a harder look at their attitude and performance."

Acknowledge and learn from mistakes

Jennifer Nicol reflected that it's just as important to acknowledge and address failures as wins. "Having lessons or days when things really went poorly and then realizing it can be picked up the next day was really important. One of the most important things is to name the thing that didn't work. It provides clarity that everyone is on the same page and that we're going to work on another strategy, together. As a coach, if your class didn't go well when you tried a new strategy, I'll be there to physically help you put your room back together and I'll be there the next day when you regroup and try again."



PROCESS FACTORS



Photo credit: Winooski Schools

If attitude and emotional factors are the foundation for your efforts, process factors are the blueprint. They include both a clear plan for the change effort and a team or teams of builders who represent the diverse expertise needed to be successful. Strong process factors answer the questions: Where are we going? What's my role? How do I provide input? Who's in charge? and What does success look like?

Communicate a simple visual model for change

A simple visual model for change can help to get everyone on the same page with regard to key phases and timelines, key actors, and their roles and relationships. We asked: **Can you share any good examples of simple visual models?**

Kotter's 8-Step Process for Leading Change



Barbara recommended Dr. John P. Kotter's 8-Step Process for Leading Change as a good model for change managers to consider.

The eight steps include:

1. Create a sense of urgency;
2. Build a guiding coalition;
3. Form a strategic vision and initiatives;
4. Enlist a volunteer army;
5. Enable action by removing barriers;
6. Generate short-term wins;
7. Sustain acceleration; and
8. Institute change.

For more detail on each step, visit: <https://www.kotterinc.com/8-steps-process-for-leading-change/>.

Engage a representative leadership or advisory body

Many efforts start with the vision of having a representative leadership or advisory body, but they are difficult to implement in practice. We asked: **What are the essential elements of a representative leadership or advisory body? Can you share an example of one that worked? What were the key elements or differentiators?**

Include diverse views to build true consensus

Barbara talked about a bell schedule committee at one school who studied the issue, surveyed staff, and researched other bell schedules. They recommended three potential schedules and shared the pros and cons from the teacher and student perspective in a presentation to district and site leadership. Leadership then narrowed the options down to one, and next, the committee will go back and represent that decision to the whole staff.



“One unexpected thing that’s working: we have a dissenter on the committee who isn’t aligned with the process or the decision. It’s putting her in a personal quandary, but it’s providing the right tension. We selected her because we knew she had a different perspective, and that’s really important to the success of the team.”

Assign a clear leadership role



Common Ground has interdisciplinary teams in ninth and tenth grade, bringing together a teacher from every core subject with a special educator and coach. Even though the teams were small, they needed leadership.

“Ninth grade was overwhelmed by the number of people beyond their team who felt like they had a stake and ownership over what they were building for students, and there were not clearly defined avenues for people outside the team to share what they thought. So, it was a little like drinking from a firehose. The big change we made between school years was to define and stipend the role of team lead for each interdisciplinary team. We now have a much more complex school leadership structure than we did—half of the faculty is a leader of some sort—but there was a huge amount of increased openness on the ninth-grade team and access for people outside the team when they knew who to talk to. Team leads feel like they’re empowered and responsible for stepping up.” – Joel Tolman

Emphasize clear communications

A lot of frustration can come simply from a lack of clear communication. We wanted to know: **Have you seen/created any interesting internal communications tools for the initiative? Simple ways to keep everyone informed?**

Dedicate staff to key communications functions

We learned that it's okay if you don't have it all figured out from the beginning. Sup. McMannon shared about Winooski's journey to clear communications. "We identified a set of six graduation expectations or "GX" in our district, and you can now find them on our MS/HS website page called GX Resources. It clearly communicates our progressions and proficiencies and has an intro to our school and a section on our change process.



"This clarity didn't happen right away, though. After we'd done the work for a number of years, we took the time to reflect and pull it all together and bring some coherence to it. We made an investment in this level of clarity—we created a proficiency-based learning coach position through Title I funds, and part of his role was to create an initial draft and then work with the MS/HS leadership team to iterate until we had an agreed upon model. It's been very helpful."

Don't sacrifice clarity for transparency



When it comes to clear communications, more is not always more. Matthew Brunell shared an experience of launching a new learning management platform.

"We wanted to be really transparent, so we just gave teachers full access to the entire platform right off the bat. We finished the training session, and while we thought some people would be nervous about trying something new, what we heard was that people were overwhelmed by how much there was to learn. We ended up dialing back and focusing first just on student goal setting. If I were to do it all over again, I would have wanted us to be a little briefer about what the learning platform did and be much more specific."

Engage students in crafting and delivering key messages

At Common Ground, students are crafting and sharing the perfect communications tools themselves. "This fall, we had a group of students who signed on to do a credit-bearing internship focused on our educational change work. They played a few different roles in the process including visual representations of the four-year pathways, which were better than what adults came up with. They did a new recruiting video (since we are a school of choice) and worked with a professional videographer to develop messages and a



shot list and identify students who wanted to be interviewed.

The result? “The video is entirely in student voice. We had rolled out a bunch of new choices and experiences over the last two years for internships, and the new video does a strong job of showing the new school experience. It was designed for prospective students and families, but it was also a really high-quality visual representation for an internal audience, too. We showed the video at a faculty meeting and a school-wide assembly, and students were sharing it like crazy on social media. It helps seal the deal that we’re committed to a new way of learning.”
– Joel Tolman

Script the critical “moves”

Sometimes a behavior change effort requires breaking big things down into to bite-sized actions. Instead of telling someone they should lose weight, a doctor might suggest they switch to 1% milk—that’s scripting a critical move. We asked: **How have you made it really simple for teachers to do something right?**

Encourage use of “fishbowl” strategy



One move Winooski scripted was fishbowls, a discussion strategy that allows an entire large group to participate in the conversation. In PD for advisories, they talked about how to participate, facilitate, and navigate thorny or emotional topics using this approach. “Through fishbowls and other activities in advisory, they’ve begun to build amazing supportive communities, both peer-to-peer and advisor-to-student.” – Lindsey Cox

Script welcoming classroom environments

Barbara shared an approach to scripting welcoming classroom environments. “First coaches talked about it in PD and then in coaching. Then they gave teachers a written guide/list of what to look for, and they took teachers in to see each other’s rooms. They spent about 15 minutes per room and went to 3-5 classrooms each. All teachers did it, and they had to provide peer feedback. The peer piece is important; it shouldn’t just be administrators providing feedback. That follow-up strategy of teacher-to-teacher has proven positive.”



ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS



Environmental factors are the context and climate in which your school change efforts are unfolding. Just as you establish a safe, welcoming, and orderly environment for students to succeed, teachers and leaders need a similarly enabling context to be successful. Akin to student behavioral expectations and compacts, teachers and leaders are often bound by policies or norms that limit their flexibility. The most successful school change efforts address these factors head-on through creative approaches that maximize their time and talents.

Address district or state policies that limit flexibility

In the October 2018 breakout session on “Shifting Instructional Practice,” participants talked about district or state policies that limit their flexibility with curriculum and instruction—things like requiring them to all teach the same thing at the same time. We asked: **What are some common policy barriers you’ve seen in school change efforts, and how have schools identified and addressed them?**

Focus on customizing highly scripted curriculum



Scripted daily curricula with a tight scope and sequence can make teachers feel like their hands are tied when it comes to innovative practices. Sometimes, it’s needed to set clear expectations for content and instruction. Barbara described one experience she had with a scripted curriculum.

“The energy was really negative. Teachers were not happy. A key strategy they used was to move from how to implement it to how to customize it. Teachers spent time notating lesson plans in their common planning work. They’d say - let’s look at day five for this week together. Let’s anticipate where our students will struggle. Where should we use groups? What additional questions should we ask? They didn’t try to change the content or pacing, but they still were able to tailor it to their students. You might hear a teacher say - my kids won’t have background knowledge for this. How can I change the warmup activity to help them? At the end, everyone’s curriculum book is all marked up and used differently. They are definitely not reading it like a script.”

Use your judgment to sequence new reforms

Sup. McMannon described the policy climate in Vermont and how Winooski has chosen to navigate a steady stream of new programs and mandates from the state. “We have a very reactive legislature. In the past 5-6 years, a ton of significant legislation has been passed down to us to implement—early learning and preschool, school mergers and consolidation, personalized learning plans, proficiencies and flexible pathways like dual enrollments and early college. You feel coerced to do all of these things at once, and you can’t do them all well. That is a real barrier to meaningful and sustainable school change.



“Some of us have decided that we’re not going to do that. We’re going to focus on proficiencies and not personalized learning plans at the moment. We decide what’s best for our schools and focus there. Now we’re ahead of most schools in the state on proficiencies and we’re able to incorporate that learning into personalized learning plans.”

Limit distractions or extra responsibilities

Teachers in the breakout session also spoke of a lack of time and too many regular distractions or extra responsibilities throughout their days. We wanted to know: **Have you seen any examples of school leaders or teachers intentionally working to simplify a teacher’s day to provide more space for innovation?**

Schedule regular, recurring developmental conversations



It turns out that limiting distractions isn’t just important for teachers. The way a school leader uses his/her time sets a tone for the entire school. Matthew Pilarski shared his experience working with school leaders to more effectively use their time. “It’s a difficult transition, going from being in a classroom that’s defined by bells and meeting schedules to an administrative role where you have this wide swath of time (all day). Leaders often ask – what do I do with it? Often, we see that they end up spending their time on things that are more reactive and supervisory than developmental and instructional in nature. A lot of this is because these are easier—answering emails, compliance checklists.

“In reality, you know you need to be spending time in classrooms, helping teachers be better practitioners. We shadow leaders for an entire day and track what they do every five minutes. Then we use that data as a coaching jumping off point to develop a schedule that’s more supportive of teachers. If a leader has 12 weeks and 7 teachers, what are the touchpoints? What time will you devote to instruction, to one-on-one meetings? How will you make people feel heard and move beyond just compliance-based conversations? When you have a culture where a teacher knows that every few weeks they’ll have a 30-minute conversation with the leader, the teacher feels comfortable sharing what’s going well and not going well. It’s developmental, not evaluative, and you get better results.”

Find and protect extra time for teachers

Finding and protecting extra time for teachers to learn and change their practice requires a schoolwide effort, and often, a schedule change.

Consider block schedules

"This year, students dismissed at 12:20 every Wednesday, and teachers had a three-hour block to meet. Next year, thoughts are already going to a four-block schedule where teachers teach three 90-minute periods per day and the fourth is an elective. So, teachers would have about 90 minutes each day to focus on building the required knowledge and skills, including the learning platform and competency-based model of grading." – Matthew Brunell



Brunell advocates for concentrated blocks of time, though he acknowledges a four-block schedule comes with challenges like a big ramp up for 90-minute classes and less diversity in classes overall. Still, he says, "If we can help support teachers moving in the direction of an extended period, we can probably get them to a place where that lesson is more successful and they'll have more time outside if it. So many schools struggle because they're trying to layer major changes in 35 minutes at a time at the end of the day, or just at faculty meetings when staff are toast. From my experience, it doesn't work without consolidated time."

Concentrate core classes in one part of the day



Common Ground also rebuilt their school schedule to allow for more concentrated teacher planning time. Now, their ninth-grade core meets in the first four out of eight periods per day—five of the eight core classes meet per day, meaning each core class meets three times per week. Each teacher has one other class during the other half of the day, but it still leaves extra flexible time for group planning and meetings.

Look beyond the school day for extra time

Barbara shared ideas for looking beyond the school day to find and protect extra time for teachers. She also recommended setting really clear expectations around time commitment and duration of commitment from the beginning. "People need a sense that it begins and ends. Tell them - we're going to meet for eight meetings for 90 minutes each. There will be an hour of work or independent work between each one. You will have a substitute for one day."



Barbara said Saturdays and holiday breaks have not worked well from her experience. "Unless you can get ahead by six months to plan, those don't work well. Two-week summer protected time is better—you get a bustling sense of people being involved all at once. Concentrate the time; groups should see each other and sense that they're all in it together."

SKILL AND KNOWLEDGE GAPS



School change efforts often require teachers, coaches, and administrators to build new skills and competencies or strengthen those they already have. Oftentimes, these are wholly new ways of doing things, requiring an overhaul in curriculum and instruction that can be quite uncomfortable for some, if not most, teachers. Remember that teachers and leaders were likely trained in different ways and have varying experiences to draw from. To get everyone on the same page, the most successful efforts seem to strike a balance between accessing internal and external expertise to identify strengths and weaknesses and build capacity for new teaching and learning strategies.

Identify bright spots in practice

Building on strength is a great way to approach change, and to do so, schools must find ways to identify bright spots in practice and lift them up so others can be successful, too. We asked: **How is this happening at your school?**

Hold a school development institute



Lindsey discussed an approach to seeding the ground for more bright spots to grow. "At the end of every school year we have a one-week school development institute that's designed by the school leadership team.

Teachers can opt in and receive a stipend or graduate credit. Our last theme was about incorporating more community-based and work-based learning opportunities into our offerings. Throughout that week, teachers work on a personal project to enhance their curriculum, often collaboratively. They start with foundational theory and best practices, and then there are consultancies to give advice, feedback, and support.

"That has been one of the greatest PD opportunities for teachers to then integrate into their classrooms. And, those projects feed right into the next year's bright spots. The following school year, we ask teachers to identify a bright spot in their practice,

and we do a science-fair style showcase where teachers select where they go and who they learn from. It's important to allow our people to be experts and not always bring in outside experts for PD."

Encourage and compensate innovative ideas

Barbara shared a similar approach to encouraging deeper learning and creativity in the classroom. "Through the Invitation to Innovate program, we invite and stipend 4-5 teachers to delve into a new area of innovation in their classroom. It's an open application process, and we invite people we think would be really good. They receive \$750 for their time and \$400 for classroom supplies or field trips.



"Last spring, we ran three groups: problem-based learning, student choice and voice, and integrating tech. Each group met for 15 hours outside the school day in their small group with a facilitator and an anchor text. They also get 4-5 sessions with a facilitator for one-on-one work. They took video along the way to show what they were learning and shared it out to the entire staff. The expectation is they will produce a unit to anchor future work in that area in the school."

Co-create new curriculum

It is often a common goal for teachers to co-create a new curriculum related to school transformation, but a variety of barriers can limit their success. Our stories about co-creating curriculum share a common theme—while teachers should be part of the process, it really shouldn't be solely up to them to create new curriculum. Here are three different takes on the "co" in co-create.

Partner with graduate students



"We tried to create curriculum. After five months of work on Understanding by Design and facilitated design work, we found that half of our teachers were struggling. They didn't have the design ability because they were missing the content. They didn't know what new, 21st Century learning was. So, we partnered teachers with graduate students at Westfield State University, who is also one of our partner early college schools. We paid \$21/hour for them to work on creating curriculum content, about 20-30 hours per graduate student.

"We found that master's students brought much more youth-based, relevant content and strategies—much more connected to our community. They also brought a deeper sense of research because they were in it themselves. They made the college connection and content relevant because their experiences mirrored those of our students. It's a strategy we're trying to repeat, and we're finding that master's students are very interested in this work because it pays well and allows them to tap into their interest in social justice." – Barbara Crook

Narrow it down at the leadership level first

"This past year, we just ripped off the band-aid all together and said, we're moving to a standards-aligned curriculum and have done research and narrowed it down to three options. Then teachers could weigh in, but creating curricula is not where teachers should be spending their time. The future of the educator is amplifying and tailoring the curricula that has been developed, not finding an article they read. We thought - we don't want to invest time to get teachers to think of themselves as composers of curricula, we want them to be conductors. They can bring flourish, and we want them to bring new instruments every now and then." – Matthew Brunell



Engage youth as co-creators



"Part of our co-creative work has been about engaging non-teachers as co-creators, and that has both big upsides and potential downsides. It can either inspire and motivate teachers, or, if we under communicate, it can make teachers feel like they don't have real power in the process. Each spring, we bring in an environmental leader in residence for a week of intensive work. Two years ago, we brought in Hiram Rivera, former head of the Philadelphia Student Union, who has a background in youth development and youth organizing.

"He supported four of our students to go to every advisory group in the school and facilitate student-led discussions about where students felt like their educational experience had delivered what they signed up for, and where it was falling short of their expectations. Then, one of those students presented the results to all faculty. We also brought the results into evening/dinner conversations where teachers, students, alums, community partners, and families all sat down to develop prototypes for units of study for new integrated curriculum. Having students' presence in those significant ways at the start of the process motivated teachers and felt like a key part of building our collective energy." – Joel Tolman

Bonus tips from Common Ground on co-creating curriculum

- 1. Start early:** The process worked better when they started 7-8 months before the start of the curriculum than when they only gave the co-creators 4 months.
- 2. Create feedback loops:** At the end of the integrated units in 9th and 10th grade, they built in significant time for student reflection. Students spend time reflecting on how they've learned and grown and complete a written reflection for their leadership portfolio. They also send feedback directly to teachers via surveys built by older students.

Build capacity in specific competencies, like inquiry-based learning and coaching

WLE community members expressed a need for some specific training modules, including inquiry-based learning, dialogue/competency, and coaching/facilitation strategies. We asked: **Do you have any tips on where to procure or how to develop and deliver such training modules?**

Get help from outside experts

Jennifer shared, "Project-based learning is a skill gap we've identified, and we've brought in outside expertise and identified internal expertise through teacher self-assessment and observation. We realized recently that we need to do more. One of the things that has been most useful is seeing other schools; we've sent many teachers and administrators to California to see project-based learning in action in the Vista Unified School District."



Several of Jennifer's colleagues, administrators and teachers, have gone to the three-day PBL 101 training by PBL Works (formerly known as the Buck Institute for Education). Teachers said they loved having three dedicated days to work on their PBL units without the usual distractions. They appreciated having an outside PBL expert to review their work and boost their confidence in a new approach.

We heard several recommendations for commercially available trainings. Below are recommendations and descriptions from their respective websites.

- 🔄 **Adaptive Schools Foundation Seminar:** The Adaptive Schools Foundation and Advanced Seminars present a productive, practical set of ideas and tools for developing collaborative groups in becoming effective and better equipped to resolve complex issues around student learning.
- 🔄 **SRI training on critical friendship protocols:** Participants develop the habits and skills to facilitate and coach a professional learning community based on the School Reform Initiative critical friendship model. The SRI critical friendship model for professional learning communities leads to transformational growth for adult participants and enhances student learning and school culture.
- 🔄 **Relay Graduate School for Education:** Relay's mission is to teach teachers and school leaders to develop in all students the academic skills and strength of character needed to succeed in college and life.
- 🔄 **Teach Like a Champion:** Teach Like a Champion is about the belief that the solutions to education challenges exist in the classrooms of real-life teachers, that exceptional practitioners of the art of teaching are the true experts. They offer train-the-trainer, plug-and-play, and online training modules.
- 🔄 **Together Group:** Effective teaching and leadership require strong planning, sharp time and task management skills, and durable organizational systems. Without a clear method to sort through the daily deluge, it's easy to lose sight of what you need to accomplish in your classroom or office. Together Group workshops focus on the purpose, process, and usage of critical tools, skills, and habits.

RESOURCES

The Learning Agenda team took inspiration from the following sources in creating the four-part framework and interview questions:

- Michael Fullan's six-step school change model: <http://michaelfullan.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/2008SixSecretsofChangeKeynoteA4.pdf>
- Linda MacRae Campbell's article, "Facilitating Change in our Schools": http://archive.education.jhu.edu/PD/newhorizons/future/creating_the_future/crfut_campbell.cfm
- Chip and Dan Heath's book "Switch": <https://heathbrothers.com/books/switch/>
- Richard T. Pascale and Jerry Sternin's article, "Your Company's Secret Change Agents" in the Harvard Business Review: <https://hbr.org/2005/05/your-companys-secret-change-agents>