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Are You Ready for This? Preparing for School Change by Assessing Readiness

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"I'm in favor of progress—it's change I don't like."

—Mark Twain

Resistance to change is the norm in education reform.[1] As in any other organization, resistance in schools reflects tension between the decision-makers who want changes and those who must implement them. Terhart refers to this tension as an "an inconvenient truth" and sees it as a central problem of all theories and strategies for organizational change.[2]

Terhart argues that education reformers assume teachers "await their programmes, proposals and new practices with bated breath," when in fact they often regard mandated changes as clumsy or clueless, and "miles apart" from their priorities and beliefs about how to improve.[2,p487] As evaluators of school reform, we witnessed this inconvenient truth through the frustrated comments from educators about new school change initiatives, for example, "It's just the flavor of the month" or "this too shall pass."

Key Findings

We interviewed and surveyed 48 school leaders implementing a new digital and personalized learning change initiative. Our findings are as follows:

- Readiness for change matters to the success of initiatives.
- Readiness for change involves
  - leadership support for the desired change and the ability to lead it;
  - shared vision and understanding of the change by school stakeholders;
  - alignment with school core values, focused on student learning and well-being;
  - a shared understanding that the initiative is a school priority;
  - a collaborative school climate with trusting, respectful relationships between leaders and teachers;
  - an implementation plan that school participants comprehend;
  - plans for building staff capacity for successful implementation; and
  - an understanding of needed and available resources, and a strategy for obtaining critical resources that are missing.
- More than half of the principals indicated that their schools were not ready for the targeted change, suggesting a low probability of success for this initiative.
- School climate, strong relationships, available resources, and leadership capacity rely and build upon each other to impact the success of change initiatives.

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Hidden beneath those comments is often useful information for those seeking change. Teachers may know that their school is not ready to make this change and fear that change leaders do not understand the challenges to doing it. But it is a mistake to assume that teachers are generally resistant to changes that yield improvements. In fact, most teachers accept that improvements are needed and possible, and that changes must be made.[2] Sometimes their resistance to reform is based on a rational assessment that mandated changes have little chance of being implemented successfully.

Instead of treating teacher resistance as something to manage top-down, education reformers are shifting to a different approach: from *change management* to *change leadership*. Change leadership assumes successful changes are not done *to* but rather *with* stakeholders, including teachers. Emphasis is placed on change leadership skills, including collaboration with teachers, students, and families to identify needs, plan and implement change, and assess progress and success. Although studies of change leadership in education are limited, there is some supporting evidence of positive effect. An empirical analysis of 40 years of research found that successful school leaders positively affect multiple outcomes in ways that closely align with change leadership practices.[3]

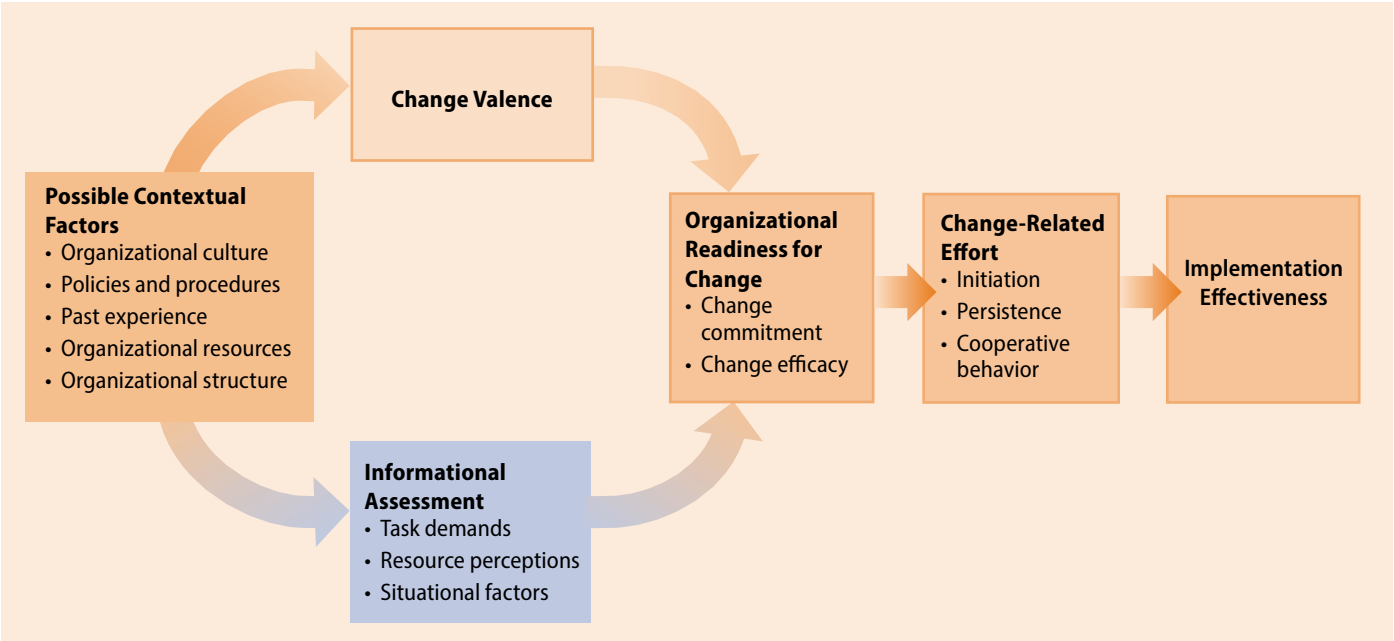
In this report, aimed at those who design or lead education change initiatives (or both), we focus on a powerful change leadership strategy: assessment of a school's readiness for change, *before* change is initiated. If a school is not ready for change, no matter how well planned and managed, mandated changes are unlikely to ever be implemented beyond a superficial level. So, what do we mean by *change readiness*?

Change Readiness

Change readiness involves two key components: shared commitment to the change and belief in the collective ability to make it, (i.e., change efficacy; see "Organizational Readiness for Change" in Figure 1).[4] When organizational readiness is high, members are more likely to initiate change, exert more effort and persistence, and behave cooperatively.[5–7] Building on a long history of research on motivation and change, Weiner posits that organizational change readiness is influenced by the extent to which the proposed change aligns with members' values (change valence) and their assessment of the task demands, availability of resources, and situational factors (see Figure 1).[4] Contextual factors such as organizational culture, policies, and procedures also play a role.

Contextual factors influence how people perceive the change initiative. Do people within the organization want this change? Does someone outside the organization require it? Changes that are wanted by those who must implement them have the highest chance of success.[4] When people feel like they "have to" or "should" make changes, they have less of a sense of control and ownership of the change, which can lead to skepticism, stress, anxiety, fear of failure, and resistance. Experts acknowledge that even at the highest levels of leadership, few leaders appreciate the difference between announcing a change and making it happen. If members do

Figure 1. Factors related to change readiness



Source: Adapted from Weiner (2009), Figure 1, which is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic (CC BY 2.0).

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not feel they own the change, chances of success are dismal at best: "You can't accomplish school reform against the will of the teachers, but only with the teachers."[2,p487]

What Principals Say About Taking on System-Wide Change

When organizations assess their readiness for change, the process can help build ownership of change. From the start, leaders can include organizational members in the change process when they investigate what members think about the change and how it aligns with their values and capabilities. In 2018, we conducted a study with principals taking a year-long course to prepare them to implement an initiative focused on personalized, digital learning. We surveyed 48 principals and conducted focus groups with 16 to understand their experiences. The surveys showed that early in the process, even with leaders who chose to receive this training, few schools were ready to make change effectively. Fifty-one percent of principals believed that the new initiative was not a priority for their school, and 57 percent believed that educators and students did not support the vision. Additionally, 62 percent disagreed that the school had the necessary resources to make the change.

In focus groups, principals described challenges in more detail. Challenges included not having a shared vision within their schools for these changes. As one noted, "*There was division in staff about what we wanted the school to look like.*" Differences in staff capacity to make the necessary changes was another key issue. Some of their teachers would need extra training and supports to successfully implement the instructional changes. Principals also noted teacher vulnerability when asked to take on new changes. One reported, "*We have to create a culture where teachers won't be fearful. Teachers need to know they will be ok.*" Principals also stressed that school leaders need the capacity to support the initiative. As one acknowledged, "*Administrators are going to have to shift because it will be hard for a teacher to shift on her own.*" In short, the survey and interview responses indicate that in at least half of the schools, stakeholders lacked ownership of the initiative they were trying to implement. As Weiner's theory (Figure 1) predicts, more than half of these schools are unlikely to be successful because of low change commitment, low change efficacy, or both.[4]

Using a Readiness Rubric for Successful Change Management

A key barrier to evaluating change readiness is a sense of urgency among the leadership. Such urgency can push organizations to jump immediately to implementation without ensuring the pieces are in place to foster successful change. To counter this tendency, we recommend that school leaders use a readiness rubric to systematically assess the school's readiness for change. The rubric encourages organizations to strategically evaluate their status on a set of key factors that impact successful school change. Status is reflected in descriptions of different levels of readiness for each component, such as "Not Ready," "Getting Ready" and "Ready." Table 1 identifies a sample of readiness components, with descriptions of the "Ready" level for illustration.

Educational leaders would use the rubric collaboratively with school stakeholders to build ownership and understand strengths and challenges for successfully implementing a new initiative. The readiness levels (e.g., "Not Ready" through

Table 1. What would a change-ready school look like?

Component	School characteristic indicating "Ready"
Leadership capacity and support	Leaders are committed to the proposed change and provide early and lasting support, including needed resources, to those implementing the change.
Shared vision for change and how it will influence the school	Leaders facilitate a shared decision-making process to co-create the change vision, goals, and implementation plan for the school.
Alignment with core values	Leaders support stakeholders (e.g., staff, students) in aligning the required changes with their core values and articulating how change will ultimately benefit students.
Collaborative school climate	Staff and students trust leaders and colleagues and work together to determine the direction of the school and to problem-solve.
Implementation plan	Co-created by stakeholders, the school's plan identifies clear roles and responsibilities, tasks, timelines, and indicators of success, all of which are aligned with the change goals and fit the unique context of the school.
Staff capacity	Staff members have the capacity to carry out the new work and are given any needed supports (e.g., professional development, materials, resources); supports are aligned with the change goals.
Resources	School has taken inventory of needed resources and identified how to get missing resources and knows how to effectively leverage what they have. In acquiring and allocating resources, school accounts for competing initiatives.

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"Ready") could be simple descriptions, informed by external experts, school stakeholders, research, or a combination of these. The intent is to understand strengths and challenges for taking on a new initiative, not to develop a rigorous scoring rubric for research. Schools would adapt the readiness rubric to fit their circumstances. The general approach of systematically evaluating key components that affect change success applies across all schools, but the details of the approach will vary depending on local contexts. Regarding readiness for change, *one size does not fit all.*

Table 2 illustrates how schools could use multiple data sources to evaluate change readiness. Schools can begin with information that is readily available, such as the school vision and change initiative requirements. Then, they could review relevant student data, such as attendance or achievement scores, and teacher professional development plans to see how this initiative will fit in the school setting. In faculty meetings, leaders could gather perceptions about the initiative and the needed resources. Schools could then collect additional data from surveys, interviews/focus groups, and observations for further insights into school readiness. Surveys could be anonymous and facilitate the collection of a breadth of feedback. Interviews and focus groups involve directly questioning stakeholders about their perceptions; therefore, participants should feel safe providing truthful information. To facilitate useful dialogue, focus groups should be somewhat small (5–8 individuals) and treated as confidential. Schools could also observe classrooms and hallway behavior to illuminate school climate, culture, and processes. Table 2 shows a sample of data sources that could inform change readiness rubric ratings, from "Not Ready" to "Ready."

Leaders should involve stakeholders—faculty, staff, students, and families—in the data collection and analysis. Organizational members should be included in the change initiative from the start to build a sense of collective ownership, which in turn positively influences change commitment and efficacy. Analysis would involve aligning data insights with the various components of the readiness rubric, to assess school strengths and challenges before implementation. The results would inform implementation planning and aligning resources with needs, thereby enhancing the likelihood of success.

Policy Implications

Like all organizations, schools regularly make changes to develop and improve. As public entities, those changes are often mandated from outside the organization by people who do not have to implement them. Change requires additional work and a new, deliberate focus on the part of leaders and school staff, which can create stress, anxiety, resentment, and pushback. **Change will not succeed unless those implementing it see its value, are confident in their ability to implement it, and "own" the change.** When schools are ready for change, new initiatives have a higher success rate. When they are not, there can be significant material, emotional, and opportunity costs. This finding has important implications for education policymakers and school leaders.

For those determining and developing change initiatives for schools/districts:

- **Initiatives are more likely to succeed when schools are ready for change, as opposed to jumping into implementation.** Build in time and resources for schools to determine change readiness, separate from the actual implementation. Consider phasing the work, starting with assessing and fostering readiness before phasing in or funding implementation. *As research indicates, the up-front investment will improve the chance of success.*

Table 2. What information can we use to learn whether a school is ready for change?

Dimension	Sample data sources
Leadership capacity and support	Staff surveys, interviews, observations of staff interactions, principal evaluation data
Shared vision for students	Student, faculty, and leadership focus groups; change policy documents; vision statement; school-wide surveys (including families and communities as co-creators and supporters of change)
Alignment with core values	Core value documents, surveys, focus groups
Collaborative school culture	School culture surveys, interviews, focus groups, classroom and hallway observations
Implementation plan	Review of plan for key components, such as identified roles and responsibilities, timelines, lists of resources, etc.; interviews and focus groups with leadership and staff
Staff capacity	Classroom and school building observations, interviews and focus groups, surveys, teacher or staff evaluation data if relevant
Resources	Inventory of required resources, interviews with knowledgeable staff, observations, document reviews

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- **As part of assessing readiness, encourage schools to align the change with their priorities, values, and unique contexts.** Emphasize collective responsibility for implementation and outcomes and build in supports for collaborative processes to co-create change.
- **Use the readiness rubric to identify which schools and people should "lead the charge" for a given initiative.** Schools that score well on the readiness rubric are ready to start and more likely to succeed: their work can inspire others who are more reluctant and/or unsure of how to proceed, and create the momentum needed for initiatives to spread. Enthusiasm and support from early adopters can help to ignite interest and energy in others. Our experience with this approach in one of the largest school districts in the United States showed it to be a successful strategy for introducing and sustaining change initiatives mandated from the district.
- **Support the ongoing study of factors related to change readiness to inform future change initiatives and increase the success rate of school change efforts.** Data from change readiness rubrics can be leveraged for this purpose.

For those leading change in schools/districts:

- **Make assessment of change readiness a priority before developing implementation plans.** Start by gathering stakeholders to identify how proposed changes align with their core values. Include faculty, staff, students, families, and the community, and build collective ownership of the work.
- **Regard stakeholders as co-creators of change rather than imposing it on them.** Help the school move from change they "have to" implement to change they want to implement.
- **Allow time for stakeholders to understand the expected changes, what they need to do, and what successful implementation will look like.** Treat this as the first step of implementation to reduce the pressure to do something before people are ready.
- **Use a readiness rubric to strategically assess readiness for change.** Help stakeholders identify their readiness and their needs for support and resources. Use results to inform implementation planning.
- **Regularly monitor change readiness as part of the implementation plan.** Readiness ebbs and flows as other factors are introduced or changed, such as the introduction of new priorities or changes in staff, resources, or both. Monitoring fluctuations in change readiness will help address issues before they harm implementation.

Lessons learned from those who study change leadership and our work in schools indicates that the successful implementation of change is difficult and fragmented. To avoid the costs of wavering change efforts, school leaders and education policymakers would benefit from implementing successful change leadership practices, starting with a systematic assessment of readiness for change. By systematically assessing a school's readiness for change along key dimensions, leaders can be strategic in preparing for change and in fostering success.

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