

# WHY TEACHERS RESIST CHANGE (AND WHAT PRINCIPALS CAN DO ABOUT IT)

JAN RICHARDS

Since *A Nation at Risk* attacked our schools' unsatisfactory performance in 1983, educators have been scrambling to find a formula for improvement. They have tried a vast array of programs and innovations, mostly with disappointing results. Schools desperately need to change, yet many teachers are resistant to change. Have you ever asked them why?

Recently, I did just that. I asked the teachers in my graduate classes to participate in an informal survey of the reasons why teachers resist change—from a teacher's point of view. These were 75 dedicated, intelligent, and hard-working professionals, almost evenly divided between elementary and secondary school teachers. Their teaching experience ranged from two to 20 years.

I asked them three questions and found their answers enlightening.

## 1. Why are teachers resistant to innovation and change?

The most frequently cited reasons for teacher resistance to change are listed in the order of those most often mentioned.

*Skepticism.* Past failures have resulted in a lack of conviction for the need to change. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it"

was a typical comment. Also, the teachers equate change to being devalued, feeling that it discounts what they are currently doing.

*Increased burden.* The surveyed teachers felt that their lack of time is not considered. Most of them noted that they were working at capacity—teaching during the day, attending graduate classes, and balancing family responsibilities. While they were aware of the need for change, they simply lacked the time and energy for it.

*Lack of ownership.* Change often comes from outside the school, at the district, state, or federal level. As a result, the teachers have no choice or voice in the change, and feel powerless.

*Chaos.* They fear loss of control with frequent changes. They want only change that makes their professional life more manageable, not less.

*Lack of support.* They cited one-shot inservice training with no follow-up.

They also noted that many proposed changes are not based on proven research.

*Lack of perceived benefit.* They are not always convinced the change will really make things better for their students or that it will make teaching more effective and enjoyable.

In short, these teachers reported that their time and energy were "maxed," that adding more balls to those they were already juggling would not be productive, and that what may seem to be a small problem to sincere planners can be a large problem for the teacher-juggler.

Thus, teachers have little reason to "buy in." They feel that the cost is generally too great, the incentives too few. Teachers who may have spent years acquiring instructional methods and skills that have been successful in the classroom resent having their experience devalued and their methods invalidated.

## IN THE WORDS OF MICHAEL FULLAN

*Change is a highly personal experience—each and every one of the teachers who will be affected by the change must have the opportunity to work through this experience in a way in which the rewards at least equal the cost. The fact that those who advocate and develop changes get more rewards than costs, and those who are expected to implement them experience many more costs than rewards, goes a long way in explaining why the more things change, the more they remain the same. If the change works, the individual teacher gets little of the credit; if it doesn't, the teacher gets most of the blame.*

Source: *The New Meaning of Educational Change* by Michael Fullan, Teachers College Press 1991, p. 127.

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## IMPLEMENTING SUCCESSFUL CHANGE: TWO TIPS FROM TEACHERS

### DON'T

1. Present 4-5 inservices on various disconnected topics during the school year.
2. Ignore the importance of follow-up.
3. Assume teachers think the change is needed just because you do.
4. Make the decision—then announce the new policy or program.
5. Ignore making allowances for the extra time involved, assuming the desire for better educational practice is worth the time and effort involved.
6. Give the impression that the status quo has totally failed and only this new change is worthwhile. Interpretation: Teacher's strategies and practices are not working.
7. Fail to investigate the research findings on the proposed change.
8. Hit lots of "guilt buttons" that give the message that student improvement is the most important factor—even if the teacher collapses from exhaustion or burns out.
9. Fail to take the quality of the school climate into consideration.
10. Keep doing things the same old way. Maybe magically you will get a different result this time.

### DO

1. Focus on one topic for the year. Make sure it is a "felt" need and that the entire school "family" is involved.
2. Build in time for lots of follow-up.
3. Spend some time convincing teachers that a new program, book, or strategy is needed. Listen to their points of view.
4. Include teachers in the decision-making process.
5. Value and respect your teachers' time and expertise. If you know this adjustment will mean an extra two hours a week for teachers, figure out how those hours can be obtained.
6. Appreciate the teachers' efforts and their successes. Demonstrate often that you respect them as professionals before you suggest change.
7. Make sure that what you propose has research findings that back it up.
8. View your teachers as your most valuable resource—and one deserving of your respect, honor, and concern.
9. Take the school climate, population, and personnel into account.
10. Change your approach. Listen to your teachers' suggestions.

The distrustful sentiments of most of the surveyed teachers were echoed in this comment:

"Teachers who have taught for several years are resistant to change because they have seen 90 percent of the 'innovations' presented before with different names...There's always something new coming down the pike and everyone knows it's just the 'flavor of the week' and will soon be

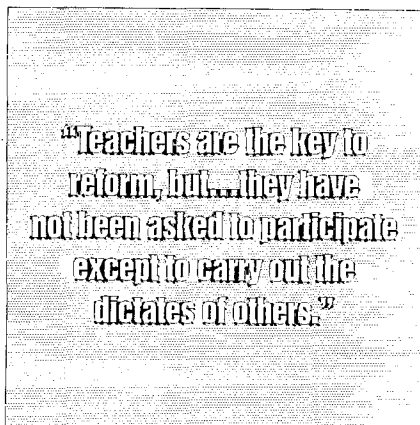
replaced with something else. Why waste time and effort creating materials, forming lessons, and attending workshops when it will all be old hat in a year or two?"

### 2. How does impending change make you feel?

On this question, the teachers gave about equal positive and negative responses. Many said they welcome

change "as long as it is well-thought-out," "as long as there is some sound reason or research to warrant it," or "as long as time is given to adapt and support it." They generally agreed that we "need to change constantly to keep up with the demands from society."

While these teachers were willing to learn something new, others shared more negative feelings. "District offices



and principals are out of touch with what goes on in classrooms, so the changes they make rarely benefit students or teachers"; "Why don't they stick with one thing long enough to see if it really works?" or "Many times the changes are presented in such a way that I feel like we're dumping all the 'old' in favor of the new. As if all we've done in the past is wrong, ineffective, and stupid."

### 3. What can principals do to make teachers more willing to change?

Most responses to this question centered on "including teachers in the decision-making." Other suggestions included spending more time in classrooms to keep in touch with teaching strategies, and including experienced teachers in developing and making changes. As one elementary school teacher commented: "Since teachers are the catalyst for successful change, principals should discuss the impending change with the appropriate parties. Together they need to decide if the change is workable at their particular school."

### Reflecting on the Results

Teachers are the key to reform, but for the most part they have not been asked to participate except to carry out the dictates of others. To be effective, reform must come from within the school and be implemented by the teachers in that school. Teachers who feel a sense of ownership are likely to embrace a reform they view as needed

and valuable. So if we want genuine reform, the following teachers' suggestions need to be taken seriously:

*Focus on the local school rather than the district (or state). Reflect together on the needs of the school, agreeing on needed change that the school community can support.*

*Maintain a climate of respect and collegiality with all who make the school function, including not only teachers but parents, office personnel, cafeteria workers, and custodians.*

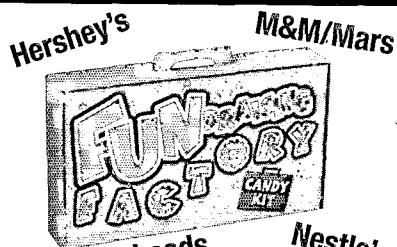
*Make time during the school day for needed planning, inservices, reflection, and collaboration. After school is nearly always a poor time for in-depth thinking and planning. Teachers are tired, and they have lesson plans to make and papers to grade.*

*Teachers must see the change as one that will make the school better. For example, if the students' behavior is out of control and excessive referrals and suspensions affect the level of academic success (as well as morale), the number one felt need will be for a change in the school's emotional climate. Character education and conflict management will be embraced and supported.*

Schools may have many areas of needed improvement, but attempting to focus on all needed changes simultaneously results in resistance, exhaustion, and frustration. It's better to meet the needs one at a time. Once the first change has been implemented successfully and is part of the school culture, teachers are more likely to be willing to take on the next one.

I feel confident that reform is possible, school by school, when teachers are asked to participate in the process and are given the needed research findings, training, and time to reflect and collaborate. Our best hope for genuine reform must come through the dedicated people who actually touch the lives of our students: the teachers. They need to be valued and respected for the professionals they are. □

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