



IT WORKED WHEN I STARTED SMALL, EXPANDED GRADUALLY

BY JIM SLOSSON

I've had some experience with systemic change — and you probably have, too. You did everything right. You communicated information based on research through your network of informal leaders. You looked at a lot of ideas and pulled together a plan. You involved all the stakeholders in conversations. You carefully piloted the new materials with building leaders. You hired a top-notch guest speaker to kick off your summit; the media was there. The supe expressed the whole district's commitment. You worked with the building principals on a follow-up plan. You spent a ton of money for new materials and bucks more on professional development.

Two years later, test scores are about the same, and the teachers can give you long lists of reasons why it isn't their fault that things didn't work better. You weren't looking for fault; you were looking for results, and you didn't get it. Who's to blame?

Nobody! There were huge odds against you from the beginning — you went head-on against a system evolved to resist new ideas and methods. Schools are the perfect equilibrium engine; they can absorb without noticeable change any new input despite any effort, time, or money you expend.

So how can an instructional leader overcome organizational inertia and create a genuine systemic change?

What if we started small — really small — got good results, grudgingly expanded, and finally reached the point where the rest of the system was demanding to be allowed to convert to the new methods?

We would need some things to get started.

- We would need one or two mav-

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erick staff members who had good ideas, a huge work ethic, and a compulsive need to be successful teachers. They would need to be the kind of folks who connect with kids and form relationships.

- They would need a powerful idea that is driven by instruction and results more than content and tradition.
- They would need a sponsor who could provide them with some resources, although money is seldom the real problem. The sponsor needs sufficient power to suspend, modify, bend, or ignore — but not break — some of the rules.
- We would need to expect good results that could be demonstrated in an objective way. Higher test scores, better grades, and fewer discipline referrals could be three ways.
- Then we would need to put them

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to work off in a corner, but inside the school, and let them work it out for a couple of years.

When the change was working, we would need to do some other things.

- We would need an informal leader to spread the news about the new system without belittling the old system. We just give it less attention and resources.
- We would need to find one or two staff willing to try the change, get good results, who will become our cheerleaders.
- We would need leaders who can integrate the new methods into their building schedule with minimal coercion.

Finally, when the system is proven and widely accepted, the leaders will need the courage to announce, “That’s how we do it here. If that’s not how you want to do it, you will probably need to do something else somewhere else.”

Here’s how it worked in our district.

CASE STUDY

An eccentric, retired principal, a former shop teacher, had an idea that we could improve math scores for struggling students if we used a different style of instruction. He wrote his own materials so he could teach math like a shop teacher.

With a little luck, he connected with our superintendent. We already had low math test scores that were very stable, and we didn’t have much to lose by trying something new. The lucky thing was that the superintendent once taught General Math to kids with the lowest

scores. He had some intuition that this approach would work. His sponsorship made it possible to change the way we graded, gave credit, and funded new ideas. After the initial hiring and course approval, his involvement was minimal, but important. He did drop in now and then to see how things were going.

The rest of the math department wasn’t impressed. They gave the new teacher a room with lousy furniture, no computer, and difficult kids they had been stacking up for three years. During the first year, the rest of the math department let the new guy know that he wasn’t teaching math correctly. He was wasting valuable time by letting kids play games. Letting them work together was foolish because they helped each other. His handwritten lessons were not as good as the book. He spent too much time reviewing 6th-, 7th- and 8th-grade math. The labs, activities, and experiments were a waste of time. He wasn’t covering enough. What was he thinking, making kids get 100% on tests? Their list of complaints was endless, tempered only by the acknowledgement that he was working with kids nobody else wanted anyway, and it was nice that he gave his overhead projector to another teacher.

At the end of the first year, the new guy had results. His kids had increased skills by 2.5 years. More of them passed the state test than the kids in Pre-Algebra, and they tied the kids in Algebra I, and, as a class, they had completed 88% of all assigned work — with 100% accuracy. He kept working to improve the program.

The change probably would have stopped with him, except that the principal had to create two more sections with difficult kids. After one quarter of using traditional methods, those two teachers asked if they could start using the new system. They, too,

had vastly improved results.

After three years, the principal and superintendent met with the math department. Their question was simple. “How come our least capable students continue to outscore our more capable students?”

Some of the teachers had long lists of reasons, many of them true. They blamed the kids and their lousy work ethic, their parents who didn’t value the work and enforce homework rules, their previous teachers who didn’t ensure that they knew the material, and society at large. They didn’t blame the grandparents, but they were working on short notice.

The supe held his ground: “I want better results.” Two teachers suggested that they would like to try the new method. That would make five out of 14.

The others argued more. He answered, “Maybe I wasn’t clear. I want better results.”

They argued some more. He replied, “Maybe I wasn’t clear. If you want to keep working here, we’ll get better results.” (The superintendent claims he didn’t say it that way. He probably didn’t, but that’s what the teachers heard — only because they were ready.)

He left, and some of the other teachers asked the principal if they might begin using the new program.

Epilogue: About half our students now use our homegrown math program. The results are not as dramatic as they were in the pilot phase, but they’re substantially better than what we had for the eight previous years using conventional programs.

Real change takes years, and it starts small. Change is almost invisible. You will know change is working if you hear the cynics asking a tentative question like, “Do things feel different? It seems like things have changed, but I can’t really put my finger on it.” ■

For a big change:

- Find the right staff and a powerful idea.
- Provide a sponsor.
- Start small.
- Get results.
- Find a cheerleader.
- Expand gradually.
- Implement systemwide when the time is right.