Stephanie Hirsh

What it takes to make a great start

One of the most frequent questions I have been asked over the years is: What are the essential conditions for launching a new initiative? Often what people want to know is whether they should kick off their new program with volunteers or should they mandate total involvement.

I typically answer with the following advice.

Decide who should be involved at the start. If you don't have a choice about whether to implement and time is short, then bring everyone on board immediately. Opting out isn't an option, so don't sugarcoat it. And be prepared to support everyone on your team through the change process.

On the other hand, if you have some control over how quickly to implement a new initiative, then beginning with those most willing to go first makes sense. That way you can work out the early bugs often associated with new initiatives. This gives time to build credibility with the skeptics who have raised concerns or questions about the initiative.

Finally, if you don't know from the start when or if a particular initiative will be implemented at full scale, then start with those who are excited and interested in participating in a pilot. Encourage some skeptics to join in because, if results are favorable, you will need the skeptics to help if you decide to recommend full participation.

Once you've figured out the people

who should be on board to ensure the success of any new initiative, these next two steps will create conditions for a great start that leads to successful outcomes.

Do your homework. Everyone has experienced this example in one way or another: A district administrator goes to a conference and hears about a great program. She is so excited by what she has experienced that she decides it would be perfect for her system or

school. When she tries to sell everyone at home on the idea, it's tough going. So many of these wonderful ideas have been introduced over the years and few have produced the results promised by their advocates, leaving educators skeptical of their merits.

Rather than introducing an idea because the presentation was compelling, conduct the most thorough investigation you can about the program. In doing so, you will gather the information necessary to affirm a decision to launch as well as conditions that led to success.

Before initiating any change, pose the questions that give you the confidence you need to begin. Here are some questions to consider while you collect data on the initiative:

- What does research say about the initiative/program?
- Is there evidence about the impact of the program in a range of settings?
- Has it worked in settings similar to yours?
- What can you learn about the conditions that were present when it was most successful?
- Are those conditions present in your system and/or school?
- What are the essential knowledge and skills teachers and administrators need to produce successful outcomes?

Find a school or system similar to your own where the outcomes

Challenges include constant change of leadership, ambiguous role definitions and expectations, difficulty creating shared responsibility with all stakeholders, and difficulty collecting sufficient data and evidence of progress to inform changes.

As we work with and learn from our awardees, it is a critical balance to value the context of learning in each school, district, and region and, at the same time, create deep understanding that builds the conditions for professional learning documented in the standards.

SYNTHESIZING FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

This living laboratory of learning is committed to synthesis, analysis, and reflection. We have found that these key elements support continuous improvement in learning and leading:

- Nurturing and supporting awardees through reflective processes and cross-role engagement in the learning process becomes evident over time.
- Enhancing professional relationships creates an

Together, it is our time to inquire, to question, to create, and to act.

environment in which shared responsibility and mutual accountability for student learning thrive.

- Building professional learning networks allows awardees continued advancement in knowledge and practice.
- Increasing systemic thinking promotes the ability to connect the dots for focus, clarity, and coherence toward meeting intended outcomes.

As we work to refine and enhance the foundation awardee experience, we are focusing on:

- Data collection and documentation of impact; and
- Knowledge production: What new learning is being produced and how it contributes to the advancement of Learning Forward and Learning Forward Foundation vision and mission.

Looking ahead, our collaboration

will focus on increasing documentation of impact and sharing that evidence in formal reports, as well as identifying the enabling conditions that allow professional learning to grow in a system.

Together, Learning Forward and Learning Forward Foundation are aligned in our commitment to transform learning across systems and support the development of educators' capacity to improve student learning.

Together, it is our time to inquire, to question, to create, and to act.

Together, it is our opportunity to pivot toward the positive and the power of us.

Together, let's shine the light of professional learning on the students, educators, and learners of the world.

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were similar to those you are seeking. Interview or, even better, visit educators at that site to learn what contributed to the success. This will provide essential background to promoting success.

Create a strong communication plan. Even if you opt for the pilot approach, many people will be critical to the ultimate institutionalization of a program. Consider their role and what they will want to know.

For example, if the program results in a change to the school schedule, parents may be interested to know how something that initially appears to be an

inconvenience to them will ultimately result in something that benefits their children.

If the program requires substantive professional learning to implement successfully, what information will district administrators need if their support and resources are essential to effective implementation? Consider these questions as the foundation for building a successful communication plan.

- Who needs to know?
- Why do they need to know?
- What information do they need?
- How will you provide it?
- Who else can help you

communicate meaningfully to various audiences concerned with the change?

- How will you share successes and challenges as the program continues to build support?

To what degree do these three areas for consideration resonate with your own experiences? What else have you found is essential to a great start? Please share so we can all benefit from your insights.

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